

## 2.3

### Sociocultural Aspects of Tobacco Use

The advent of tobacco in the early seventeenth century in India evoked mixed responses from a traditional society. While the curiosity to experiment with a novel product aroused interest in its use, the taboos that forbade the use of a culturally alien and potentially noxious substance resisted its acceptance among many sections of the people. The widespread uptake of the tobacco habit over the next four centuries represented a victory for commercial forces which aggressively created a mass market through engineered addiction. There was also a complex interplay of sociocultural factors which influenced not only the acceptance or rejection of tobacco by sections of society but also determined the patterns of use. Some of these factors, especially the ethnographic features, are described in this section. Others, such as the effect of education and socioeconomic status on tobacco use, are discussed elsewhere in this report.

#### Tobacco as a system of relations

One aspect common to all forms of tobacco consumption across all societies is the infusion of symbolic and often moral overtones. Just as the symbolic nature of consumption is not identical among different individuals, groups or cultures, similarly the morality intrinsic to tobacco consumption varies. Even the most private, individual act of consumption has social and cultural aspects. This section examines the symbolic aspect of tobacco consumption, or the meanings and codes underlying its use.

The acceptance or rejection of tobacco consumption as a practice must be viewed in

the context of the Indian value system which has traditionally emphasized social hierarchies based on factors such as age, gender, caste, wealth, education, professional standing or celebrity status. The use of psychotropic drugs is set in an atmosphere of social values and expectations. The drug may be used to improve social relationships by bringing an individual's behaviour in line with an ideal of 'normal' behaviour. However, a critical aspect of tobacco consumption is that normality is not uniform over different social settings or groups. For example, in a traditional family setting, smoking may be perceived as illicit, immoral or 'bad'. To smoke in such an atmosphere would be to deviate from the norm. However, the same individual, when with friends in a pub, may smoke to keep to the norm.

Patently, sociocultural factors are crucial in determining who consumes tobacco, when, where, how and why. Furthermore, the consumption of tobacco has a symbolic aspect that must be explored in terms of the individual's lifestyle, self-image and social relationships. For instance, a younger person putting out a cigarette on seeing a senior is understood (conveyed and received) as a mark of respect and modesty. The gesture communicates that juniors are expected to behave in a certain way in the presence of seniors. It is accepted that comportment is arranged on the axis of authority by age and kinship. In this example are conflated both the manner of consumption of tobacco as well as authority structures.

In traditional Indian joint family structures, smoking at home was initially taboo. Later, as the addictive nature of tobacco compelled the user to smoke frequently, the use of tobacco at home became more common. Here too, it was restricted to the dominant male members of the family. The younger members of the family would desist from using it in the presence of the elders and even the 'master of the house' would not use it when an elderly relative, especially an aged parent, was around. The conviviality of members of different generations smoking together, in a home setting, is rare even today,

through modernity has led to some relaxation of these rules. The increasing replacement of the joint family by nuclear families, especially in the urban setting, has provided a more permissive atmosphere to use tobacco at home.

### Ritual aspects of tobacco use

Tobacco use, though perceived as an individual habit, often acquires a ritualistic character involving group behaviour. This is true of India, in both rural and urban settings.

An emphatic example of the ritual aspect of tobacco consumption would be the use of the *hookah*. The habit of rural north Indian men, usually assembled in caste-based or social class-based groups, sharing a *hookah* in daily gatherings, is a common example of fellowship, solidarity and the consultative process. In some areas, this extends to the women too. In the Nindana village in Haryana, for example, women go out in groups to fetch water late in the afternoon. During this time, away from the men and the immediacy of household responsibilities, they settle down for gossip, rest and the commensality and community of the *hookah*.<sup>57</sup>

In urban cultures, young professionals (who have their own 'yuppie culture') are often characterized by specific rituals of bonding and sharing. These include visiting pubs, meeting particular groups of friends, sharing a few drinks and smokes, and generally unwinding. Such rituals, for example, have become part of the group identity of young professionals from the information technology industry which is burgeoning in India.

Similarly, a prohibition of certain caste groups from sharing a *hookah*, or a proscription of women from tobacco use in traditional Indian contexts further illustrates the establishment of ritual or social superiority through the manipulation and control of objects of material culture. The consumption of tobacco and thereby construction of a certain kind of

community identity can be found in the consumption behaviour of the Muria Gonds of the north-central part of Bastar district in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>58</sup> For them, consumption is basically a demonstration of the ability to come up to the collective mark, be it in case of fashion, jewellery, or display on social occasions. In this case, therefore, the construction of identity through consumption is not to be different, but to be same. Hence, both men and women consume tobacco and alcohol, not as a mark of distinction, or indulgence, but as a part of the Muria tradition of commensality. Furthermore, borrowing from Douglas and Isherwood's notion of code, it becomes evident that the Muria only accept those goods to which they can relate and thereby assign certain values that form a part of Muria Weltanschauung. Therefore, while they consider tobacco leaf as a precious item, they reject cigarettes, which are more popular among the local Hindus and project a modern image.

The above example implies that as the process of consumption is a social phenomenon, the consumption of tobacco is not devoid of it. The idea of smoking a cigarette or chewing tobacco, to project a certain kind of identity, however depends upon the culture to which one belongs. Hence, in one situation it may be an act of rebellion against the traditional notions of morality, while in another situation, it is an act of conformity. The diversity of Indian society and the complexity of its social evolution have seen the use of tobacco symbolizing both of these, in different social and temporal settings.

### Tobacco consumption and social status

Status is constituted through power, prestige and wealth and maintained by shared cultural practices in terms of material culture, possession of wealth and acquisition of the paraphernalia required to display status (wherein wealth is the underlying precondition). Having tobacco and a *hookah* is one thing; however, being surrounded by a group of men and having someone to fill and light it to be shared by the

group, is quite another. This, in turn, is likely to create, enhance or maintain one's prestige and ability to exercise power over others, especially other groups. This was typical of the rural Indian scene, where the large farm owners or former zamindars had stylistic and ritualistic methods of tobacco consumption. In that feudal set up, the power of being served extended to the privilege of the serfs or bonded men offering and refilling tobacco to the master and his friends. Such traditions continue to linger in rural areas, as evidence of persisting social inequality.

Commensality is an act of solidarity and, in India, where there are ritual rules around eating and drinking, commensality acquires an even more significant hue.<sup>59</sup> Such being the case, the consumption of tobacco then acquires a whole range of symbolic connotations. Louis Dumont, when referring to the notion of pollution and purity, avers that sharing of a pipe among individuals depends upon the caste (or subcaste) to which one belongs.<sup>60</sup> According to him, ranking of castes includes the notion of contact and is therefore based on certain criteria; one of them is that of sharing of a pipe, which he equates to that of acceptance of water from only certain castes. Citing the example of the Uttar Pradesh region, he states that men smoke only with the members of their own caste.

Adrian Mayer's study of a village in Southern Malwa, in Central India, elaborates how among the 23 castes in this village, sharing of the same pipe defines, along with other rules of commensality such as food and water, their ranking.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, higher castes share the pipe with almost all castes, apart from the 'untouchables', such as weavers, tanners, sweepers and so on. Among these socially discriminated groups as well, there are well-defined rules regarding with whom one can smoke a pipe. So while on the one hand, individuals become a part of an 'in-group' by coming together on various occasions to smoke a pipe as a sign of brotherhood, on the other, they also define the 'out-group' with whom they cannot do the same. Even if different caste

members sit together to smoke a common pipe, distinct caste status is maintained wherein a separate cloth is used by each individual to cover the mouthpiece. In fact, Dumont also points out that in the case of south Indians, who are even more conservative about the caste rules, even this sharing of the tobacco pipe with other castes cannot be conceived of. When it is only with people of one's own caste that one believes in sharing of the pipe, it establishes as well as maintains caste solidarity and caste differentiation.

The inclusionary aspect of tobacco use may be most clearly depicted through the exclusionary aspect, clearly exemplified in the statement of '*hookah-pani band*' (temporary exclusion). Literally, this means stopping of *hookah* and water, i.e. barring someone from sharing social life with other equals. In most cases, this implies designating a person—and his family—as an outcaste, by refusing to share a *hookah* with him or accepting or giving him water. Consequently, the commensal aspect, not only of tobacco, but also of village life, is denied to him and his family.<sup>62</sup> They are, effectively, excommunicated. J.H. Hutton equates the cessation of commensality, which includes prohibition of pipe and water, upon an individual, to cessation of the specialized services provided by that individual.<sup>63</sup> However, Dube mentions that there has been a weakening of commensal rules.<sup>64</sup> Ostracism or excommunication from one's caste is rarely affected these days if commensal restrictions are broken.

Inclusion and exclusion of individuals or castes, communities or classes from shared consumption, be it smoking, drinking or eating together, act to maintain equality or inequality. Tobacco has been a consumption good consistently associated with this kind of symbolic value. During the heyday of caste-based discrimination, Dalits who were designated as 'low caste' persons by the socially dominant caste groups, were not allowed to smoke in the presence of a 'high caste' person. They, therefore consumed tobacco only in the privacy of their homes or in the presence of members of their own caste. As Dalits liberated themselves from social oppression and

began to assert their equality, they began to smoke openly in front of other caste groups.

### Tobacco consumption and gender

Across the world, more and more women are taking to tobacco. In India, while the number of women using tobacco may be a small fraction of the total, it is nevertheless a large absolute number. The use of tobacco by women is often considered, by different sections of society, in different ways from that of men.

Till quite recently tobacco use among women was rare, especially in traditional households. Though rural women consumed tobacco, in some parts of India, tobacco use by women was not socially sanctioned. Even in the early decades after Independence, Indian films portrayed the occasional women smoker only in the role of vamp or 'bad woman'. However, advertising and alternate image creation by the tobacco industry has, in recent years, changed those perceptions among sections of urban women.

For example, among urban women, smoking is now more often seen as a symbol of the emancipated, 'modern' woman. Amos suggests that two images, that of the woman smoker and the emancipated woman, have been linked in popular perception through advertising.<sup>65</sup> She states that while smoking among women has declined in many developed countries, she predicts an increase in smoking rates in developing regions as women achieve greater spending power, and sociocultural and religious constraints decrease. Such a picture is currently emerging in urban India.

Smoking habits, which might have their origins in rebellion, or the thrill of illicit experimentation, become linked with freedom, equality and the overcoming of subjection. In many cases, smoking is a defiant act, a rejection of cultural restraints and an affirmation of a woman's identity as a free person with control over her decisions.

Further, women and men smokers are viewed

differently. In most cases, male smokers do not evoke specific comment. Smoking is acceptable, seen as 'normal' and therefore not something that specifically strikes the eye. Women smokers, however, do get noticed and are viewed in different ways. From overwhelmingly negative perceptions of women smokers as 'loose women', the associations are changing to a 'cool' or 'modern' image as educated young women and attractive models 'light up'. Women smokers view

#### Box 2.5 Women as generators of 'tobacco water'

In the traditional Mizo society, in northeast India, tobacco and women have been associated as part of a social custom which requires the housewife to serve 'tobacco water' to the husband as well as to visitors.

Tobacco water has been in use since the nineteenth century; definite recording of its use is available since 1907. Men and women alike sip tobacco water although in the past it was said to be predominantly used by women.

Traditionally, tobacco water was offered to guests/visitors both at family and social levels and it was considered very rude to omit this greeting. Tobacco water was one of the essential items especially in rural parties. A family generally owned three tobacco water flasks, one carried by the husband, one by the wife and a spare one kept in the house. No grown man or woman went around without a flask. This was common feature among the Lakhers (tribal community in Mizoram) in both urban and rural areas. Men as well as women smoke tobacco using different types of pipes (*vaibel* and *tuibur*, respectively). The *tuibur* has a water receptacle, through which smoke is drawn. The nicotine-rich 'tobacco water' that remains in the bowl after a woman smokes her pipe is used as a favoured beverage to serve family members and visitors. The women are, therefore, expected to smoke frequently and produce sufficient quantities of the tobacco water. This is stored in a hollow gourd and offered as sips to others.

The reputation of a woman as a housewife and as a hostess is often dependent on her ability to serve adequate amounts of nicotine water. During the process of courting, the girl offers tobacco water to the boy. If the boy refuses, it is understood that he has no interest in the girl.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the ability of a young woman to make and serve tobacco water has been an important criterion during bride selection. For that reason, even young girls are taught to smoke to attain a desired level of proficiency in making and serving tobacco water. Education among the Mizos, now a highly literate society, and the commercial availability of bottled tobacco water are making this custom less common now.

other women smokers as part of a sisterhood of sorts, as 'someone like me'. This suggests the creation of a particular group identity around smokers, not just as a group who share a common activity, but also in terms of a small subgroup, that of women smokers. This group is always aware of itself and its tenuous identity.

The cultural baggage associated with tobacco use also tends to affect where and when women use it. Most women smokers tend to smoke in atmospheres in which they feel 'safe', in pubs, in *zenana* areas (where only women are permitted), among friends, in anonymous surroundings. For example, smoking is usually avoided in front of the family, elders, or in areas where it may invite comment. On the contrary, some women smokers make a defiant point of lighting up wherever and whenever they feel like, as an expression of their independent self-identity.

The rules are a little less stringent for smokeless tobacco, perhaps because it is relatively odourless and less perceptible, less stigmatized for women and easier to conceal. Tobacco use, which among younger groups and women is nearly always a covert activity, is in its smokeless form rendered even more covert by the very nature of smokeless tobacco. These factors, perhaps, contribute to the greater use of smokeless tobacco by women.

The betel leaf is a particularly acceptable vehicle for tobacco consumption. The advent of *paan masala* as a readily edible powder, sold in conveniently sized sachets, has made it especially easy for the addition of tobacco. Many women, even in traditional middle class households, became quickly habituated to consuming *paan masala* and some of them also made the transition to the tobacco-added form. Carrying a *paan masala* tin has even become a status symbol, and offering *paan masala* is accepted as implying hospitality and equality.

The availability of *gutka* has also made it easier for women to chew tobacco without attracting social sanction.

For many years in Indian society, the reference point for evolving social norms, for both women and young persons, remains the image of the dominant adult male. So long as tobacco use was seen as a pattern of acceptable or even desirable male behaviour, the urge to attain the same social status made tobacco use attractive to women as well as to young persons. Whether as a symbol of emulation or as a gesture of rebellion, tobacco use became associated with gaining or challenging the power status of the adult male. Such images have been cleverly exploited by the tobacco industry to gain customers among new target groups such as women and children.

### Changing mores and values

Values, which influence conduct, change over time as the social milieu is re-configured by social, economic and cultural shifts that occur over time, both within and across societies. This holds true of tobacco consumption as well. As traditional values slacken their stranglehold in rural societies and are rapidly substituted by increasingly modern codes of behaviour in urban societies, the sociocultural influences that encourage or discourage tobacco use are altering. These require to be studied and tracked by advocates of tobacco control who must not only identify but also influence these processes to curb tobacco consumption. Otherwise, they would leave the field open to the tobacco industry which avidly studies these sociocultural indicators and their determinants to manipulate them to its advantage. The paucity of studies in this area is a cause for concern but should also be stimulus for concerted action by social scientists and health professionals.

## 2.3 SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS OF TOBACCO USE

### KEY MESSAGES

- Historically, tobacco consumption has been linked with social status and commensality.
- Tobacco consumption is associated with different symbolic and often moral overtones across all societies.
- The habit of rural men, usually assembled in caste-based or social class-based groups, sharing a *hookah* in daily gatherings, is an example of fellowship, solidarity and the consultative process.
- The use of tobacco by women is often considered, by different sections of society, in ways different from that of men. Among urban women, smoking is often seen as a symbol of emancipation and modernity.
- Smoking habits, which might have their origins in rebellion or the thrill of illicit experimentation, have become linked with freedom and equality among those who have suffered social or gender inequality.
- The greater use of smokeless tobacco by women is associated with less stigma compared to smoking.
- As traditional values slacken their stranglehold in rural societies and are rapidly substituted by modern codes of behaviour in urban societies, the sociocultural influences that encourage or discourage tobacco use are altering. These need to be studied carefully to control tobacco consumption.

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