

2

Historical Overview of Tobacco in India

2.1 Historical records and anecdotes: From the Middle Ages to modern times	7
2.2 Economic history of tobacco production: From colonial origins to contemporary trends	19
2.3 Sociocultural aspects of tobacco use	33

The history of global tobacco trade is integrally linked with the history of India. It was to discover a sea route to this fabled land, reputed for its spices, silk and gems, that Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492. His wayward journey took him instead to America. This ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’ was accompanied by the discovery of tobacco by Portuguese sailors. This plant, treasured by the American ‘Indians’ for its presumed medicinal and obvious stimulant properties, was eagerly embraced by the Portuguese who then moved it to the ‘Old World’ of Europe. Even though their quest for easy access to Indian spices was delayed by some years, the Europeans did not fail to recognize the commercial value of this new botanical acquisition.

When the Portuguese eventually did land on India’s shores, they brought in tobacco. They introduced it initially in the royal courts where it soon found favour. It became a valuable commodity of barter trade, being used by the Portuguese for purchasing Indian textiles. The taste for tobacco, first acquired by the Indian royals, soon spread to the commoners and, in the seventeenth century, tobacco began to take firm roots in India. Thus, tobacco travelled to the ‘real’ Indians from their curiously named American cousins, through the medium of European mariners and merchants who sailed the seas and spanned the continents in search of new markets and colonies.

It was with the establishment of British colonial rule, however, that the commercial dimensions of India’s tobacco production and consumption

grew to be greatly magnified. Initially, the British traders imported American tobacco into India to finance the purchase of Indian commodities. When the American colonies declared independence in 1776, the British East India Company began growing tobacco in India as a cash crop. Attempts were made, under the colonial rule, both to increase the land under tobacco cultivation and to enhance the quality of the leaves produced. The British East India Company and its successor, the British Raj, used tobacco as an important cash crop, both for domestic consumption and foreign trade. The manufacturing industry was, however, not established till much later, as the British believed in exporting the leaf to Britain and re-importing cigarettes to India, with considerable value addition in the process. As domestic consumption of cigarettes rose, the Imperial Tobacco Company commenced production within India, retaining control and repatriating the profits.

In the late nineteenth century, the *beedi* industry began to grow in India. The oldest *beedi* manufacturing firm was established around 1887 and by 1930 the *beedi* industry had spread across the country. The price differential from cigarettes favoured the use of *beedis* by the working classes and this domestic product soon supplanted cigarettes as the major form of tobacco consumption. The tax policies adopted by the Indian Government after Independence also favoured the *beedi* in comparison to cigarettes. This further fostered a growth in *beedi* consumption.

While tobacco chewing was practised for many centuries, commercial production and marketing have been markedly upscaled recently, with the introduction of the *gutka*. The rate of growth

of consumption of *gutka* has overtaken that of smoking forms of tobacco. As a result, oral tobacco consumption has opened a new and broader front in the battle between commercial tobacco and public health in India.

The economics of tobacco, which introduced it into India and entrenched it during the colonial rule, also provided a compelling reason for continued state patronage to the tobacco trade, even in free India. The ready revenues that bolster the annual budgets, the ability to export to a tobacco-hungry world market and the employment opportunities offered to millions provided the rationale for encouraging tobacco, both as a crop and as an industry.

While economics may have been the principal force propelling the seemingly inexorable advance of tobacco in India, there are also a multitude of social and cultural factors which need to be recognized, so that the variations in its use across social, religious and ethnic subgroups can be comprehended. Such factors have operated since the time tobacco entered India, though the nature of the sociocultural determinants that influence individual and community responses to tobacco may have varied over time, region, religious denomination and social class.

It is this tapestry of international linkages, powerful economic factors and distinctive cultural influences which make the history of tobacco in India a fascinating study. This chapter attempts to profile some of these in a brief narrative. Interested readers are advised to seek more detailed information from the referenced publications, even as they are exhorted to join a collective effort to permanently confine tobacco in India to the pages of history.