

From Hookah to Cigarettes: A Historical Journey of Tobacco Culture in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *The most widely distributed and commonly used intoxicant in the world is Tobacco. Today, India is the world's second-largest tobacco producer and major consumer. The tobacco problem in India is more complex than in any other country due to the numerous ways people consume tobacco. Although tobacco has a relatively recent history in India, it was introduced in Bengal in the seventeenth century. In the 1920s, Bengal was the most important tobacco-producing and consuming region in British India. Before colonial times tobacco was traditionally consumed in the form of hookah and chewed with betel leaf. In colonial times, tobacco became an essential part of Bengali culture, and people used it in many different ways. To figure out why tobacco was so popular, we need to look at the Bengali culture of the late 19th century and early 20th century, as well as how culture spread. Explain how the colonized Bengali people became involved with the various tobacco consumption patterns and the relationships between colonial authorities and the Bengali tobacco consumption society.*

Keywords: Bengali Culture, Cigar, Cigarette, Hookah, Tobacco

Introduction

The generally accepted theory is that the Portuguese are widely credited with introducing tobacco to India in the 17th century, specifically for use in the country's royal courts.¹ The taste for tobacco, which was initially developed by members of the Indian royal family, quickly spread to the common people, and by the seventeenth century, tobacco had begun to establish a solid foothold in the Indian subcontinent. It became a valuable commodity in barter trade, being used by the Portuguese to purchase Indian goods.² A New World plant quickly flourished in Indian agricultural conditions and became a major cash crop. Hookahs and tobacco chewing were popularised in Bengal by Mughal officials. The Portuguese, who were trading in the Bay of Bengal between Chittagong and Mallacc, were the first ones to bring the crop to Bengal. The Portuguese friar Sebastian Manrique (1587–1669) described tobacco cultivation in Bengal, with some of the crops being sold in the markets of Arakan in coastal Burma during the first half of the seventeenth century.³ In the Bengali epic poems of Chandimongal by Mukunduram, which depict the merchant Dhanapati travelling to Ceylon (Sinhala) with several goods, including tobacco, it is shown that tobacco became a prized commodity.⁴ As tobacco spread quickly and became more popular among Bengalis, many different kinds of tobacco products and ways to use them were made over time. Colonialism was a factor in how tobacco spread all over Bengal and became a part of the culture there. The luxury products of the rich became the poor man's comfort. Colonialism brought economic, cultural, psychological, and habitual changes to Bengali society. The British East India Company began growing tobacco in India after the American colonies declared independence in 1776. Under colonial rule, the government tried to increase tobacco production and improve leaf quality. Midnapore was an unusual site for the first tobacco plants grown by the British East India Company in 1760; by the 1920s, Bengal was home to the country's largest tobacco farms.⁵

Methodology

The study is mostly based on primary sources and historical data, like yearly reports from the government's finance and revenue departments. Along with archive resources, indigenous sources such as periodicals, contemporary books, and journals written in Bengal are included. This is a comprehensive analysis of the topic that draws on a wide range of resources.

Influence Factor

There is a wide range of consumption styles within each nation.⁶ There has also been a complicated interaction between socio-cultural factors that have affected not only who accepts or rejects tobacco but also how it is used. In contrast, a notable shift occurred in the tobacco consumption habits of Bengali society. In pre-colonial Bengali culture, smoking hookahs and chewing tobacco were once the only acceptable ways to

use tobacco. However, colonisation and cultural changes have made it necessary to use other methods. Smoking, chewing, applying, sucking, gargling, etc. are just some of the ways we found that tobacco was consumed. The most common forms of tobacco consumption in colonial Bengal were smoking tobacco and smokeless tobacco, both of which can be classified into two categories. Hookahs, Cigars, Cheroots, Cigarettes and Bidies were all forms of tobacco that could be smoked. Smokeless tobacco included Snuff, Khaini, Zarda Surti, Gudakhu, Dokta, Gundi, etc. A significant portion of the population in colonial Bengal is addicted to tobacco. This is due to many factors, including its international connections, strong economic factors, and unique cultural influences. Even the most individualistic acts of consumption have social and cultural ramifications. As a social system, tobacco eventually turned into a tool that made it easier for people to connect with each other. In Indian culture, giving and receiving tobacco is a common way to show friendship, solidarity, and the consultative process.⁷ Tobacco was used to bribe colonial Bengali people into serving it to guests. The acceptance or rejection of tobacco use must be viewed in the context of the Indian value system, which emphasises social hierarchies based on age, gender, caste, wealth, education, professional standing, or social status.⁸ The foundations of status are power, prestige, and wealth, and it is maintained through cultural practises involving material culture, wealth, and the acquisition of accessories needed to display status. This, in turn, is likely to build, keep, or increase one's reputation and power over others, especially other groups. This was a typical scene in the countryside of Bengal, where the Zamindars and Daroghas smoked tobacco in a way that was both aesthetically pleasing and important for rituals. In that feudal system, serfs or men in debt had the power to serve the master and his friends by giving them tobacco and refilling their pipes. For people who have been discriminated against because of their gender or social status, smoking has come to symbolise freedom and equality, even if it may have begun as a form of rebellion or the thrill of illegal experimentation.

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Before the development of toxicology, many people, including some physicians, considered tobacco to have medicinal properties. The tobacco smoke was said to be good for treating colic, nephritis, hysteria, hernias, and dysentery. As a remedial agent, it relaxes muscular fibres. The Indian system of Ayurveda also based on the concepts of heat and cold, and balance, never formally recommended the medicinal use of tobacco.⁹ Inhaling and smoking aromatic herbs was practised in India as early as the seventh century. Thus, when tobacco was introduced as a smoking substance, it was naturally considered a medicinal herb but not recommended by Ayurveda. However, the belief that smokeless tobacco has a protective effect on teeth and is a pain killer is widely held in many parts of rural India.¹⁰

Tobacco's popularity in colonial Bengal was also due to other factors. As a result of colonisation, a new set of Bengali aristocrats emerged that favoured the tobacco subculture. The spread of different cultures is another important factor. Colonial Bengal's status as both an imperial hub and an industrial area drew a large number of non-Bengali ethnic groups to come here in search of employment. They brought their regional tobacco cultures to Bengal, like Khaini, Jorda, and Gudakhu, mainly through the hands of Bihari and Gundi through the hands of Odia. The rise in popularity of the bidi among the Bengali lower class was aided by the development of railways. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, tobacco products such as cigars, cheroot, and cigarettes were introduced into Bengali society as a part of colonial culture. In the early 20th century, these tobacco products achieved widespread popularity. However, these products' success is largely attributable to major Western farms and companies. There is no doubt that the Swadeshi movement acted as a stimulant to increase the popularity of Swadeshi-made tobacco products like cigarettes and bidis.¹¹ Because of these factors, Bengal has become a major epicentre of the tobacco product epidemic.

Patterns of Consumption

The use of hookahs for tobacco smoking originated in the court of Emperor Akbar as a way of reducing potential harm from smoking, on the suggestion of royal physicians, as tobacco was then an unknown substance.¹² The Arabic word "hukka," from which the word "hookah" is derived, means "round cut special." Terry also deserves credit for being the first person to describe the Indian hubble-bubble, also known as a hookah.¹³ Water is contained within an oval metal container with a hollow interior. This container splits into two tubes: the mouthpiece tube and the chillum tube. The chillum is made of clay and holds the tobacco. When this pipe is used, the foul vapours are carried along with the water. As different ingredients made the tobacco more aromatic and bitter-free, the hookah became more beautiful. Sometimes, illegal hashish is added. Oils of different kinds are often added to the dry ingredients. The last step in making the mixture is to

add enough black strap molasses to make a thick paste. There are no standard brands or packaging for hookah tobacco.¹⁴

During the colonial period, hookah not only became an important part of everyday life in Bengali society, but it also became something that the ruler admired. When the British came to India with the East India Company, some of them adopted the practice of social acceptance, as it was a new fashion in this country. The company's employees found comfort in life and peace of mind by coming into contact with hookah culture. The hookah-bardar, or hookah bearer, had an important function in every household and also had some status. Even when visiting European dignitaries went for a stroll or palki ride, the hookah bardar would accompany them, complete with a magnificent hookah.¹⁵

Hookah culture became an expression of identity, aristocracy, mood, the ultimate love-offering medium, and the banquet's consonance in Calcutta European society at the time. The hookah was a symbol of prestige, and the hookah pipe was kept very carefully because it was considered insulting if someone stepped on another person's hookah pipe. The sahibs of the time produced a large number of hookah bowls.¹⁶ Not only did European men like hookah culture, but European women were also interested in it.¹⁷ In Bengal, the use of hookahs rose to prominence during the early years of British colonial rule. Bengali society's social position has changed as a result of colonial rule, a neo-rich class emerged in Bengal, which elevated hookah to a new level of luxury. The wealthy Babu community of Calcutta welcomed the hookah and compared it to the British in how much they loved the hookah's beauty, how it boldly showed love, and how it was used, which quickly spread among them and turned into a competition. Hookah was the subject of numerous experiments. Rich people in the upper classes displayed elegance in the way they used and smoked tobacco, giving birth to various types of hookah, such as Gargara, Farshi, and Albola.¹⁸ Hookah became Babu's fashion statement of the day. Albola was the most popular and widely used of all hookah varieties. The Albola tube was named "snake" by the Europeans; this tube was made of different colours and ornaments. Some of the tube mouths were tied with silver, some were tied with gold, and some were made with diamonds. The lowest-priced hookahs in the upper classes of society back then were 135 rupees, and they were made of ruby glass and silver.¹⁹ A nice-looking porcelain and emerald-made hookah would have cost around 500 rupees, and the one we had was worth 350.²⁰ However, the price would rise to 3,000 rupees if the hookah were made entirely of silver and emerald. In 1866, a well-known jeweller made a Badshahi hookah that cost 15500 rupees and was advertised as "a magnificent solid gold hookah set with diamonds, rubies, and large emeralds inlaid with flowers in small diamonds and rubies, one of the most sophisticated timepieces ever created; this is also India's sole example of its kind."²¹ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay praised Albola in his novel *Bishabrikhya*, saying, "Oh hookah, oh Albola! Your smoking lightens the labour, nurtures the lazy, and makes your reign in my house inexhaustible; may your fragrance increase day by day, and may my lips never part with you." Tobacco was listed separately in the expense lists of the Zamindari houses because it was such a common addiction back then. The hookah was an essential part of Bengali society and Boithoki culture. Hookahs are associated with good vibes and cheerfulness; the rumble of a hookah and the aroma of tobacco have accompanied majlis and lively conversations. Amritlal Basu wrote a song about tobacco consumption that glorified tobacco: "Tobacco is nothing compared to you in Bengal; how much sweetness is mixed in your black organ?"²² In colonial Bengal, the hookah was more than just a method of smoking tobacco; it also served as a symbol of one's social standing, a device of caste discrimination, and a measure of one's financial position. This elite-type hookah, like the Albola, Farshi, and Gorgora, is a home furnishing enhancer and companion of comfort and luxury in the household of a wealthy society. On the other hand, cheap hookahs made of coconut shells or clay were used by poor people to smoke tobacco. The cheap category-type hookah made of coconut shell or clay smells like sweat and the rest of a weary man, in contrast. Hookah was an important part of Bengali society's hospitality. The lower caste would face the hookah drawn by the upper caste, or the caste would go to the upper caste, so householders had different hookahs for different castes, and that was the social custom.²³

Cigars, cigarettes, and bidis are generally acknowledged to be significant factors in the decline in hookah popularity. Hookah addiction was time-consuming, and the procurement of materials was laborious and costly.²⁴ The practice of hookah is a symbol of patience and steadiness, witnessing slow and serene times with simultaneous moments of serenity and deep concentration. Compared to hookah cigarettes, these are portable smoking devices that can be used almost anywhere. And the second half of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of new technology, such as railroads and telegraphs, so Bengali life began faster. As the taste of Bengali society changed due to Western education, he had to scramble for a livelihood. The demands of the times in this busy, speedy Bengali life can be seen in the disinterest in hookah consumption. Matches were invented to make the use of hookah easier, but they also helped in the spread of cigarettes, cheroot, cigars, and bidis. Despite the decline in popularity of hookah in European society beginning in 1840, it remained popular in Bengali society until the end of the nineteenth century.²⁵

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Also, it's important to keep in mind that smokeless tobacco was very popular in colonial Bengal. Snuff is indeed popular throughout the country, India, but the fact that its overall consumption is relatively low. Snuff is a tobacco powder made from tobacco leaves and other spices that is used in the nose.²⁶ It appears that the Portuguese were responsible for introducing snuff to India. Brahmin Pandits in Bengal are more likely to use snuff, but it was not until the late 19th century that college students began to do so as well. When a group of five young people gathers, they show politeness or sociability by exchanging gestures while inhaling snuff, which became popular among young people during colonial times.²⁷ Colonial Bengali women also used snuff frequently. Snuffing reached such widespread popularity during the colonial era that it was now included in customs lists for major social events like weddings and funerals.²⁸ Bengali women didn't usually smoke tobacco, but it was often used with betel in the forms of dokta, zarda, gundi, surti, etc. Dokta Box went wherever they went for two to four hours before being tied up and left behind. Not much was known about the history of khaini or gutka, but it was common knowledge that it was widely practised in India. Gutka may have evolved from the Indian practice of chewing paan, a roll of tobacco with spices and granulated almonds used as a mouth freshener after meals. The word "gutka" comes from the Sanskrit word "gutika," which means "granules." The Muslim nobility of the Mughal era, ever in search of new ways to enhance their sensual and satiating experiences, improvised the paan roll by adding flavouring tobacco particles. This practice, which originated in the homes of wealthy Muslims, quickly spread throughout the community and was widely adopted. While khaini was widely practised in India, its origins remained a mystery. Although it is believed that Khaini came to Bengal through the Biharis, The word "khaini" comes from the Hindi word for "quid of tobacco." Zarda is a semi-processed tobacco product used as an addendum to betel leaf. We don't know how much zarda was manufactured and consumed, but most betel leaf chewers bought zarda as an addendum, and their number was large. Several companies, including *Messrs. Mokbul & Co.* in Calcutta, made perfumed zarda that smelled sweet. Women in colonial Bengal chewed paan mixed with zarda, dokta, surti, and gutka for cosmetic reasons, as the bright red juice it produced coloured their mouths and lips. Old women frequently used gudakhu on the roots of their teeth at specific times. Although gudakhu was not used in the city of colonial Calcutta, it is used by lower-class wives in rural Bengal.

In the second half of the 19th century, tobacco culture in colonial Bengal changed from using traditional methods to using Western ones. The word "cheroot," or "roll of tobacco," probably comes from Portuguese. Cheroot originated in India, and its name is derived from the Tamil word "curuttu." Most consumers of Cheroot are Europeans and Anglo-Indians who live in urban areas. However, Cheroot was not so popular with the common people of Bengali society. Its popularity was accepted by one section of Bengali society, which was accustomed to Western manners. The other smoking tobacco form is cigars, which originated in the Caribbean Islands. The Spanish word "cigaral," meaning grasshopper, is thought to be the root of the English word "cigar." Before the British Raj, there were no cigars in India. They were probably brought there around 1850,²⁹ though some sources say it was as early as 1670.³⁰ According to Jamini Kumar Biswas, one of the first persons to realise the top commercial possibilities of Indian cigars was Captain E. A. Cambell, who, in 1876, started a company at Dindigul. However, the company failed, and it was not until around 1888 that it was discovered that by importing wrapper leaves from Java and Sumatra, excellent cigars could be manufactured. There are very few companies in the country that make cigars. To prevent cigar importation and make cigars profitable, the colonial Bengal government began the cultivation and experimentation of tobacco suitable for cigars at the Rangpur tobacco farm, as well as teaching the cigar-making process. In Bengal, both Cheroot cigars are entirely produced by hand. Some come in boxes of five to one hundred with

the manufacturer's logo, brand, and name. Stores receive them either directly from the manufacturer or through wholesale distributors. Four cigars per person per year is the average consumption in Bengal.

Bonshak's cigarette-making machine revolutionised the way people smoked tobacco all over the world. But smoking cigarettes was almost unheard of until 1890 in India. Sporadic attempts to export this potential had already begun by the end of the 19th century, and one hears of a certain Mr Crowder, who was granted \$150 by Wills in 1881 for a year's travel in India with the promise of a 12 per cent commission on any sales he made there, but Will's higher authorities stopped this mission.³¹ Recorded history suggests that cigarettes were first appearing in Calcutta around 1895³² and in Dhaka around 1899.³³ Numerous firms from the United Kingdom, the United States, Egypt, and Turkey have recently begun supplying India with cigarettes. However, cigarette use was initially below that of other tobacco products. Cigarettes are a Westernised tobacco product, and its major problem in Bengal was creating a market. The phenomenal rise in cigarette smoking in the twentieth century was largely influenced by six distinct factors: war, advertising, colonial force, modernity, the Swadeshi movement, and the movie industry. The first five factors were responsible for the popularity of cigarettes in Bengal. There is a significant demand for cigarettes among military personnel. Cigarettes were regarded as a "must have" item in soldiers' rations, and Red Cross Society volunteers and nurses frequently brought packs of cigarettes as well as lit cigarettes to the injured. Several European cigarette companies introduced cigarettes to the people of Bengal through a variety of marketing campaigns. Advertising for tobacco, which was a big reason for the rise in cigarette use, was mostly an unintended result of the industry itself. At first, making sales was primarily an issue for the pioneers, who set out to convert Indians to the cause of smoking cigarettes. They accomplished this primarily by giving away millions of samples of cigarettes. The usual practice was to rent a horse-drawn gharry from the nearest bazaar and plaster it with placards advertising free cigarettes, so the curious would gather around and a district salesman would throw cigarettes to everyone inside the carriage.³⁴ On such occasions, cigarette salesmen would set up stalls and organise events such as lucky dips and cigarette sales at haats and melas, where the villagers could be counted on to gather in large numbers. After that, the cigarette brands were marketed with the help of "Indian regional images" and an attention-grabbing slogan. The 20th century saw a shift in smoking culture and the assertive propagation of bunnies in advertising. In the early 20th century, posters replaced calendars and show cards at point-of-purchase processes as the most popular form of advertising. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the trend in cigarette consumption was upward. Side by side, cigars and cigarettes began to be imported to India in increasing quantities. In 1905-06, 1040 crores of cigarettes were imported into India.³⁵ It is also known that from 1901-02 to 1903-06, cigarettes and cigars valued at over RS 103 lakh were imported into Bengal alone, while in 1905-06, RS 45 lakhs worth of cigarettes—an increase of 255 on that of 2004—were imported into Bengal.³⁶ Cigarettes have become so accepted by the Bengali youth society that it is seen that students living in dormitories always have one cigarette in their mouths, as a symbol of modernity and thrill. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was common to see people in Bengal smoking cigarettes in their mouths. But the journey to this culture of cigarette consumption is not a simple one. When it was realised that cigarettes could have secured a good market in Bengal, different foreign companies, notably British, American, and Egyptian, began to export their products in large quantities. With the increase in the import of foreign cigarettes, the habit of smoking among the Indians grew as well, and foreign companies started investing their capital in the tobacco plantation industry. Since BAT started doing business in India, its operations have grown to include making cigarettes buying and processing tobacco, and setting up a full-fledged sales organization. Also, the result of this gradual increase in the importation of foreign cigarettes was the growth of the smoking habit among the Bengalis and a rise in the demand for imported cigarettes and cigars, resulting in a drain of wealth from the country. That was the tide of the Swadeshi movement, and something needed to be done to stop the drain.³⁷ Some people are against smoking for health reasons. The Swadeshi movement popularised cigarettes and bidis in Bengal and helped indigenous tobacco businesses grow. Quite several factories—owned and managed entirely by Indians—were started for the manufacture of cigarettes, and these attained a fair measure of prosperity. These factories belonged to the *Globe Cigarette Co.*, the *Bengal Cigarette Mfg. Co.*, the *Calcutta Cigarette Co.*, the *Swadeshi Cigarette Co.*, the *Naidu Cigarette Co.*, and the *Rangpur Tobacco Co.* The *Indian Cigarettes Mfg. Co. Ltd.* of Jiagan, Murshidabad, made some varieties of cigarettes.³⁸ Then there was *National Tobacco Co., Ltd.*, which manufactured cigarettes and tobacco mixtures made from Indian leaf. Its *Kohinoor* brand cigarettes and *Bengal Club* brand tobacco mixtures were particularly appreciated for their richness of quality and flavour. Advertisements for the cigarettes made by the Bengal Cigarette Manufacturing Company, like

the Apple, the Cricketer, and others, said that they were "unmatched in excellence" and "better than those made abroad." East India Cigarette Manufacturing Co. promoted Kali cigarettes. Its advertisement says Kali cigarettes' paper contains a novel substance that doesn't cause coughing when smoked.³⁹ In the centre of a large leaflet was printed a photo of goddess Kali, and below it was written, "Get rid of attacks of asthma, etc. using pure Swadeshi cigarettes; use this "marked" cigarette." A similar advertisement was written for the popular Mohini Bidi. As a result of the Swadeshi movement, bidi became widely popular in Bengal. Bidi is not a product of Bengal; it originated in Gujrat and entered Bengal from Madhya Pradesh due to the expansion of the railways. It became very popular among the lower castes and poor people because of its low price.

Conclusion

Under colonial rule, tobacco transformed from a mere medium of exchange into a major economic commodity. Throughout colonial Bengal, the demand for tobacco also increased. As demand for their product went up, the colonial government kept trying out different ways to grow quality tobacco. In 1934–35, in India, the total quantity of cigarette consumption was 20,016,358 lb and per capita was 0057 lb; in Bengal, it was 2,741,506 lb and per capita was 0034 lb, Bidis consumption was 68,687,924 lb per capita and 1,974 lb, while Bengal consumed 6,796.980 lb and 133 lb.⁴⁰ In India, other tobacco consumption such as hookah, snuff, and chewing tobacco consumption was 835,069,130 lb, while in Bengal it was 142,795,374 lb.⁴¹ This data indicates that Bengal was one of the highest tobacco consumption zones in India. Tobacco was highly demanded in domestic consumption in Bengal. Different sectors of society want to involve more land in the cultivation and production of tobacco to meet market demand. From 1929–30 to 1935–36, the average area for tobacco production in Bengal was 293 acres (thousand acres), whereas the percentage of the total area in British India was 278.⁴² The most intriguing truth is that tobacco was not subject to the authority of India's excise department until 1943 because colonial administrations saw it as a crucial economic crop, that is why it is not classified as an intoxicant. This fact revealed the entire colonial government's mentality.

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