

## Bidi – A short history

*Pranay Lal*

Bidi is a leaf-rolled cigarette made of coarse, uncured tobacco, tied with a string at one end. Bidis (beedis or biris) dominate the smoking market of India – for every cigarette ten bidis are smoked<sup>1</sup>. The word bidi is derived from ‘*beeda*’ (a word in Marwari – a dialect of Hindi predominantly spoken by the trader caste from Marwar of Gujarat and Rajasthan), which is a betel leaf-wrapped offering of betel nuts, herbs and condiments<sup>2</sup>. The *beeda* is a symbol of esteem, and display of respect and reverence across the Indian subcontinent<sup>3</sup>, and the bidi gradually started being equated with it. The Indian medicinal systems, especially Ayurveda, also prescribe inhalation of the fumes of medicinal herbs, rolled in leaves. The myth of tobacco’s medicinal properties along with parallels in Ayurveda, led to easy acceptance of the bidi in sub-cultures.

### Birth of bidi and the industry

There is no historical record of the exact period during which the practice of smoking tobacco rolled in leaves started in India. The cultivation of tobacco started in southern Gujarat in the late 17th century. Hookah (see details in an article by Ray and Gupta, in this issue) smoking was popular among local people. Men of the same caste or sub-caste gathered around in the evenings to share a common hookah. Because the hookah was tedious to carry around, a cheaper and portable form of the hookah was developed, called the *chillum*. Bidis were developed soon after, possibly around the Kheda and Panchmahal districts of Gujarat, where cultivation of tobacco was high. Labourers would roll leftover tobacco in leaves of the astra tree (*Bauhinia variegata*) and smoke at leisure. Communities across India experimented using leaves of mango (*Mangifera* spp.), jackfruit (*Artocarpus* spp.), banana, sal (*Shorea robusta*), pandanus (*Pandanus odoratissimus*, kewda) and palash (*Butea monosperma*)<sup>4</sup>. Initially, communities in Gujarat made bidis only for their own consumption, but their increasing popularity inspired some to make it into a

home-grown business. Soon bidis made locally became more popular than hookahs, largely because bidis overcame the obstacle of sharing the hookah, as individuals could smoke without hurting caste and religious sentiments, and also because they were portable and did not require assembling and extensive preparation to light up<sup>4</sup>. The early business model of the bidi industry in Gujarat involved the businessmen and their workers rolling their own bidis, putting them in a ‘*thali*’ (tray) and selling them along with tobacco and matches in local ‘*haats*’ (weekly markets). Gujarati families that had settled down in Bombay saw the potential of the bidi business and soon started manufacturing bidis on a larger scale. Bidis penetrated into other parts of the country outside of Bombay, but until 1900 bidi manufacturing was largely restricted to Bombay and southern Gujarat.

It was during the severe drought of 1899 in Gujarat, which compelled many families to migrate in search of a livelihood, that the bidi became a small-scale industry. The father of the modern bidi and the industry is possibly Mohanlal Patel of Gontipur District, Ahmedabad, who migrated from Gujarat to Jabalpur. Patel worked as an agent of small contracts in Bineki and Bargi towns on the Bengal–Nagpur Railway (BNR). Soon his cousin Hargovindas joined him. Mohanlal and Hargovindas would visit Jabalpur to get contracts and also traded in petty goods. During these visits to Jabalpur, they noticed that bidis were only available in the general-purpose shop of Bhatia Morarji (another Marwari expatriate who had escaped the famine). Morarji obtained bidis from Bombay and sold them at a premium to the gentry in Jabalpur. The Patel brothers saw an opportunity of making bidis in Jabalpur<sup>5</sup>. Raw materials – tobacco and astra leaves were initially obtained from Ahmedabad, and soon bidis made by the brothers gained acceptance.

The secret of their phenomenal success however, came when Mohanlal and Hargovindas made the significant discovery

that leaves of the tendu tree are the best for making bidis. Tendu was found abundantly around the degraded forests of Jabalpur, and was far better than astra leaves. The tendu tree (*Diospyros melanoxylon*, family Ebenaceae, or the black or East Indian ebony) grows in the degraded deciduous forests of peninsular India. Tendu flourished, once the forests which had been stripped of sal trees (used to make railway sleepers) and other precious tropical timber trees. More importantly, tendu leaves were widely available soon after the tobacco crop was ready and cured, when most other trees had shed their leaves. The tendu leaves have all the characteristics of an excellent wrapper material – they are large and pliable, and do not crack on rolling when dry; their leathery texture was more acceptable than the veins and rough textures of other leaves; and they matched well with the taste of tobacco, without interfering with the tobacco flavour. Bidis rolled in tendu leaf soon found wide consumer acceptance.

The rapid expansion of the railways in Central India in 1899 opened new tobacco markets to this region, which made it cheaper for Mohanlal and Hargovindas to source tobacco and sell bidis more efficiently. Bidis had no brands before this. The first trademark was registered by Haribhai Desai of Bombay (using astra leaves) in 1901, while Mohanlal and Hargovindas obtained their brand trademark in 1902. In 1903, the BNR opened its link westwards towards the Nagpur sector, which led to the creation of another important bidi-manufacturing cluster in Gondia. Between 1912 and 1918, the rapid expansion of the railways established more such clusters in Vidharba, Telangana, Hyderabad, Mangalore and Madras. The bidi cult rapidly spread to all parts of the country, gaining a strong foothold in the informal urban and rural economies. The habit of smoking trickled down from cities and towns to remote villages with the development of the railways.

The ‘*Swadeshi andolan*’ (a civil disobedience movement to boycott Imperial

goods) which was started by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 as an anti-British movement, uplifted the prestige of the Indian cottage industries<sup>7</sup>. The bidi received a further impetus when the educated class started smoking it instead of cigarettes, to show solidarity to the Swadeshi movement. Several Muslim leaders like Hassan Imam openly supported the bidi and said, 'Foreign cigarettes are *haraam* (illicit), use bidis instead of cigarettes'<sup>8</sup>.

Around World War II, the bidi industry became an important and widespread cottage industry in urban shanties and rural areas<sup>9</sup>. It was a part of the rations of the Indian jawan when he went to fight in foreign soils. The outbreak of World War II saw an increase in the production of bidis, which also accompanied the Indian soldiers. The demand for bidis increased at such a fast rate that the opening of new production centres became an everyday activity for bidi manufacturers. Bidi gained widespread social acceptance in a short period and the industry became a role model for small Indian businesses.

Apart from human skill, there is little or no processing technique required in making the bidi. In the early 1940s, the engine of growth for the bidi industry was the urban shanties in the textile cities of western India. Migrants and their families came to Bombay, Surat, Bhiwandi and Sholapur, and would roll bidis through the day, to supplement the income of the weavers and loom opera-

tors. By the 1960s, with the coming of the powerloom, many weavers were left without jobs and were forced to migrate back from these textile centres. Many of them found employment in the bidi industry in the Telangana region, Andhra Pradesh. More than 60% of the bidi workers in this region hail from the displaced weaver community (the *Padmashalis*), while the others are Dalits and Muslims<sup>10</sup>.

By the 1950s and 1960s, there were so many brands that strong competition emerged among bidi manufacturers. Companies focused on building and consolidating their brands to establish brand loyalty, just as cigarette companies did in the West. They extolled the medicinal properties of tobacco (*Jeevan chhap*); aroused patriotism *Hindmata* (see Figure 1); named brands after gods and deities (*Ganesh*); lured youth using modern names (with brand names like Telephone, Train, Telegram) and endorsement of film actors, sportsmen and even wrestlers. Bidis became so popular that the more powerful cigarette industry became wary of them.

Quality became an important factor for bidis and products were defined by their provenance and quality of their inputs. For example, tendu leaves of Orissa are better than those in many other states. Similarly, tobacco based on origin, coarseness and curing techniques had its own followers. The industry also got boosts from creation of tobacco cultivation in-

stitutes (one specifically for bidi tobacco in Anand, Gujarat), and national and state policies to exploit tendu.

Bidi tobacco growing is concentrated in Kaira in Gujarat, and Belgaum and Nipani in Karnataka, while most manufacturing clusters are in Mangalore, Mysore and Nipani (Karnataka); Pune and Nashik (Maharashtra); Jabalpur, Damoh and Sagar (Madhya Pradesh; MP), Raipur (Chhattisgarh), Tirunelveli and Chennai (Tamil Nadu); Cannore (Kerala), and Nizamabad, Karimnagar, and Warangal (Andhra Pradesh)<sup>11</sup>. By the mid-1970s, production of bidis had reached nearly the same level as of today, between 800 billion and 1.2 trillion bidis<sup>12</sup>. While new clusters were being created rapidly, several old clusters like Vidharba dissipated. Even strongholds like Madhya Pradesh, which accounted for more than half the bidis produced till the 1980s, have lost out to new epicentres of bidi rolling like West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, where labour is cheaper<sup>13</sup>. The bidi industry has been affected by forces of sustained competition and new legislations (like restrictions in child labour), but has been more or less stable since the mid-1980s. The industry wields an immense local and national political clout and resists any modernization efforts like mechanization, contributing revenues through taxes and adopting better labour standards.

## Conclusion

There is nothing traditional or historical about the use of tobacco and its forms of consumption like the bidi. The invention and the phenomenal commercial success of the bidi has been spurred by a series of fortuitous events. Coupled with these, the creation of institutions, favourable government policies and little regulation have helped the bidi (industry) to endure. In about 140 years since its invention and less than a century since its mass production, the bidi has become a leading agent of death among adults in the Indian subcontinent. The true success of the bidi, however, has to be the consummate ease with which it has been accepted by local communities and how it has permeated into folklore, cultures and tradition in a short span of time.



**Figure 1.** Bidi brands like Hindmata made the most of Mahatma Gandhi's call to quit British goods like cigarettes during the Swadeshi Andolan. It was commonplace to use symbols like Mother India tending to a lion, Gandhi and the tricolour, to arouse nationalistic feelings.

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*Pranay Lal works with the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, New Delhi 110 016, India.  
e-mail: plal@theunion.org*