

## **Culture of Tobacco Smoking in Mughal India: A Historical Analysis**

**Palash Dey\***

Tobacco smoking was introduced in India during the Mughal period particularly, during the reign of Akbar. The culture of tobacco smoking more or less affected the human health during 1526-1757. The ill effects of tobacco smoking has manifested with the breaking out of some dangerous diseases like Berger, bronchitis, pneumonia and lung cancer. Several anti-smoking measures have been taken by the colonial as well as post-colonial Indian government like prohibition of smoking in public places. In this work our aim is to shed light on the various issues of tobacco smoking in Mughal society.

### **Introduction**

It is said that the tobacco smoking was introduced in some parts of American continent. Columbus was the first person who introduced it in European countries. However it was the Portuguese merchants who introduced it in Indian subcontinent during the reign of Akbar, the great Mughal emperor. From that time it became gradually a common practice in Mughal society. The ill effects of smoking were realized by the next emperor Jahangir. The custom (smoking) was prohibited by issuing several official orders. In spite of this, the custom became very popular among all the people of various statuses. With these the cultivation of tobacco and trade and commercial activities relating tobacco were also expanded. It is very familiar to us that disease and medicine or in a broader sense the public health condition perform an important role in forming the course of history of human being. The culture of tobacco smoking more or less affected the human health of the period under review. Hence a humble attempt is taken to examine the various issues of tobacco smoking in Mughal society.

### **A Brief History of the Origin of Tobacco Smoking**

In search for the history of the origin and spread of tobacco, a good number of scholars have already done their researches. It is necessary to mention here the two trends among the scholars. According to the first one (who think that tobacco is American), the history of tobacco is actually begins with the discovery of new world in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Count Corti is one of the earliest scholars in this field of research. He has opined that with the permission and active cooperation by the ruler of Spain, Columbus set for with the crews and one hundred twenty attendants (August 3, 1492). By October, they had reached to an island which was named as San Salvador. The

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Govt. Degree College, Kamalpur, Dhalai, Tripura.  
Email: p\_dey01@yahoo.com

inhabitants of that place presented them the strange fruits, wooden javelins, balls of cotton as well as the dried leaves of some plant. In the following month, he came forward to Cuba and sent his two followers, Rodrigo de Jerez and Luis de Tovres. They had noticed there that the people carried in their hands certain dried leaves which they kindled at the glowing coals and with which they apparently perfumed themselves. In order to keep the leaves a light they repeatedly held them in their mouths, alternatively blowing on them and inhaling the smoke<sup>1</sup>. The other scholars of this trend are Herbert Joseph Spinden, J.H. Manas, KrikBekholm, and Ernest L. Wynder. All of them deal with the various arguments to establish the fact that tobacco is American<sup>2</sup>.

The second trend of scholars thinks that the tobacco smoking was practiced in China and Mongolia long before the discovery of America. According to their opinion, there must have a probability that the American Indians originated in Asia and then migrated to North America across an Alaskan Land bridge that disappeared during the ice age, and for that reason they came to South America taking seeds of tobacco with them.

From the above mentioned, we may say that the argument that tobacco is American is accepted by most of the scholars till this date. There are many arguments against the views of the second trend. One of them is the travelogue accounts. None of the early travellers in Asia, among whom Marco Polo is perhaps the best known, mentioned tobacco. In 1269, he travelled through Armenia, Persia, India, China and Mongolia and talked about the addiction like the fermented milk by Tartars, palm wine by the Arabians, betel nuts by the Indians. Another argument is that tobacco is anti-Islam and so that it is impossible to address tobacco as a native crop of Asia. The next one is that if the tobacco is used by the Asians, then it should have some mention in early writings of Sanskrit works. But it is not to be. Therefore finally we may draw the conclusion that tobacco is American.

So far as the introduction of the tobacco in Europe is concerned *N. tabacum* was brought to Angouleme, France in 1556 by Andre Thevet for the very first time. In 1561 Jean Nicot presented the seed of *N. Rustica* to the queen Catherine. From there it spreaded the various parts of the European subcontinent. In 1612 six years after the settlement of James Town, John Rolfe was credited as the first settler to successfully raise tobacco as a cash crop. The demand quickly grew as tobacco referred to as 'golden weed' revived the Virginia joint stock company. It is said that the cured tobacco was sent to Spain and Portugal from where a small part was distributed to England and others European countries. In this way the trade of tobacco was started. Later on or most probably in the early years of Seventeenth century, tobacco was produced in Virginia as well as to the various places of the European subcontinent for commercial purpose. Thus day by day the culture of smoking became very common among the people of Europe.

### **Smoking History in Mughal India**

There is a debate about when the tobacco plant was launched in the Indian subcontinent. The great court chronicler of the Akbar's reign, Abul Fazl (1550-1602) was silent in 'Ain-I - Akbari'. According to W.H. Moreland, Tobacco manufacture had started in India during Akbar's reign<sup>3</sup>. The plant was unknown to his revenue officers and consequently cannot have been grown in any extent during the sixteenth century. It is

believed that tobacco smoking had reached in the Indian subcontinent through the Portuguese and established first in the province of Gujarat where the leaf was obtained. Irfan Habib has observed that within a decade of the compilation of the 'Ain-I-Akbari'(1590), pious pilgrims returning from Mecca had brought news to the Mughal court about the prevalence of the culture of smoking in Mecca region.<sup>4</sup> Asad Beg, an imperial envoy coming back from Bijapur presented Akbar the great a Hookah(Chillum) which was properly made in every respect. He described the new leaves to the Mughal emperor that it was tobacco which was well known in Mecca and Medina. Beside that he (Asad Beg) sent some tobacco to several of the Nobels.<sup>5</sup>

Akbar inquired of his Druggist about the peculiar qualities of the new plant and was informed that it was an 'untried medicine' in India. From this view point, we may come to the conclusion that the tobacco plant and its related smoking were introduced in the subcontinent during the reign of Akbar the great. During the next Mughal emperor, Jahangir this custom (culture of tobacco smoking) became more popular. From Jahangirnama, we come to know that Khan -Alam (ambassador to Persia) and Yadgir Ali sultan (ambassador of the ruler of Persia) were very much addicted with tobacco smoking<sup>6</sup>. During the reign of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb smoking was adopted by the every people of Mughal society. N.Manucchi (1639-1717) a Venetian traveler to India during the reign of Aurangzeb, observed that the Mughal emperor had withdrawn the tobacco tax. During the period of study, the Travellers and Beggars who took shelter in Inns were not allowed to cook their food. They were served cooked food with tobacco according to the position in life by the servants 'from the public store-houses. It was very common during the Sahib-i-Barat or fair.

### **Tobacco Cultivation and Tobacco Trade**

The introduction and rapid extension of the cultivation of tobacco was a notable feature of the agricultural history of Mughal India<sup>7</sup>. William Methwold (1590-1653), the English East India company's agent in the kingdom of Golconda from 1618 to 1622, said that the cultivation of tobacco in the coromandal coast was begun not only for the local consumption, but also for export to Burma and Red sea as well as Persian gulf areas before 1622. If the tobacco became a prominent crop before 1605 then it is predictable that the tobacco plant was introduced at least by 1595 and not before than that. From this argument it may be said that the cultivation of tobacco was begun on the coromandal coast after two decades from the time of first growth of tobacco in India. These two sets of evidences refer that tobacco cultivation was started in Gujarat (Surat-Broach area) and AndhraPrades (Masulipattanam and interior area) before 1600. The Portuguese Friar Sebastian Monique saw tobacco cultivation in Bengal. The English physician John Fryer travelled India during the period 1672-1681, saw many cultivated fields of tobacco at Broach near Surat. Thomas Bowery a traveler to India Mentioned that tobacco was given as a gift to the Fauquier (holy men) in North India and on the coromondal coast it was served with leaf of betel vine, areca nut (pan and supari) at all Hindu weddings.

Beside this we get much information about tobacco plantation and trade from the records of the English East India Company perhaps the earliest record of tobacco. In the English record is dated 1612 when one Robert Clarkson was employed by the Surat factory for curing tobacco. From this evidence, it may be assumed that a good quantity of

tobacco was available for export in the hands of English East India Company. Edward Terry noticed the production and export of tobacco on his way from Surat to Agra. From 1619 to 1669 there are a good number of references which indicate that the buying and exporting of tobacco by the English East India Company. To Gombroon and other centers in Persian Gulf and Red sea areas, the company exported tobacco from western India. On the Eastern coast they used to send tobacco to the various parts of South-East Asia, like Java, Arakan through the famous port of Masulipattanam. Tobacco was exported on Indian trading ships<sup>8</sup>. We get evidence of the cost of tobacco from Mysore Revenue Regulations that tobacco was 1 ditto.

### **Culture of Tobacco Smoking and Social Recreation**

Tobacco smoking works as a significant means of recreation. Rosalind O'Hanlon has mentioned that smoking played a key role in entertainment in Mughal society and it was a big sign of manliness in Mughal India<sup>9</sup>. From that time, a new concept was grown up that smoking was related with the 'symbol of masculinity'. In other words, smoking and manliness were both interrelated with each other. For, the culture of tobacco smoking gained an important room in the Mughal Indian society. P.J. Marshall pointed out that smoking was common among the Britishers lived in Indian subcontinent<sup>10</sup>.

### **Opposition against Tobacco Smoking**

Soon after the introduction of tobacco smoking to the old world, this custom came under frequent opposition from the States as well as Religious Leaders. Murad-IV, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1623-1640) was among the first to attempt a smoking ban by claiming it was a threat to public health and morality. The Chinese emperor, Chongzhen issued an edict banning smoking<sup>11</sup>. Later the Manchu of the Qing dynasty opposed smoking in more severe way. In Japan, during the Edo reign banned tobacco cultivation. James-I of England enforced 4000% tax on tobacco<sup>12</sup>. We come to know from Jahangirnama that Saha Abbas had also become aware of the bad effects of smoking and ordered that in Persia no one should smoke. Beside these; in 1634 the Patriarch of Moscow stopped the sale of tobacco. The Western Church leader Urban VII criticized tobacco smoking.

In case of Mughal India, the first opposition was raised during the reign of Jahangir and the credit mostly goes to the Mughal emperor himself. As the smoking of tobacco had taken very bad effects upon health as well as mind of many persons, he ordered that no one should practice the habit of tobacco smoking<sup>13</sup>. In case of Muslims he was imprisoned and worried for some days and then set at liberty. When the travelers passed in and their baggage was examined for the custom duties, no leniency was shown if any tobacco was found. Because there were regular licensed sellers of tobacco and a traveler must not carry more than enough for his own use. So far as the army is concerned the common soldiers were not allowed to use tobacco. They (common soldiers) used to drink spirit and smoke bhang (the leaves of hemp)<sup>14</sup>.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In the concluding paragraph we may say that tobacco smoking was introduced in India during the Mughal period (particularly, during the reign of Akbar the Great), the

bad effects of this custom (culture of tobacco smoking) was also realized during this period. This inspired Jahangir to issue some royal proclamations for the prohibition of tobacco smoking. In spite of that, this practice as well as tobacco cultivation and tobacco trade were increased day by day. Thus this custom touched every corner of Mughal Indian society by the end of seventeenth century. The culture of smoking became more popular in colonial and post-colonial India. The ill effects of tobacco smoking has manifested with the breaking out of some dangerous diseases like Berger, bronchitis, pneumonia and lung cancer. Several anti-smoking measures have been taken by the colonial as well as post-colonial Indian government like prohibition of smoking in public places viz. railway stations and the use of pamphlets "Cigarette smoking is injurious to health" in the advertisement, on cigarette packets and recently in scenes of commercial movies related to smoking. In spite of all, we must remember that there is no more effective way to stop this dangerous culture of tobacco smoking without the honest interest and sincere effort spontaneously by the people.

### **Acknowledgement**

*I am really thankful to Prof. I. Sarkar (University of North Bengal) for his constant encouragement. This Article could not be completed without active cooperation of Dr. Debraj Chakraborty. I convey my sincere thanks to all for their kind support.*

### **References**

1. Count Corti, *A history of smoking*, London, 1996 (Reprint), p.18-20.
2. L. Dyner, D. Hoffman, *Tobacco and Tobacco smoke*, London, 1956, p.78-80.
3. W. H. Moreland, *From Akbar to Aurangzeb*, Delhi, 1972, p.34-35.
4. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, New Delhi, p.55.
5. Elliot and Dowson, *The history of India Vol.6*, p.254.
6. Alexander Rogers and Henry Beveridge, *Jahangirnama* (Translated in English), London, 1909
7. Irfan Hbib, *ibid*, p.50
8. Irfan Habib, *ibid*, p.78
9. Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and imperial service in Mughal North India' in the Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol 42, No.1, 1999, p.47-93.
10. P. J. Marshal, 'The British Society in India under the English Company' in Modern Asian Studies, Vol 31, No. 1, 1997, p.89-108.
11. Sander Gilman and Zhou Xun, 'Introduction' in "Smoke: A Global history of smoking", 2004, p.15-16.
12. Timon Screech, "Tobacco in Edo period Japan", in "Smoke: A Global history of smoking" edited by Sander Gilman and Zhou Xun, 2004, p.92-99.
13. Alexander Rogers and H. Bevridge, *Jahangirnama* (Translated in English) p.34.
14. Major. J. Browne, *History of the origin and progress of the Sicks*, p.69.