

Triumph of Tobacco: The Tamil Experience

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Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [tobacco] conquered the whole world, and enjoyed even greater popularity than tea or coffee, which was no mean achievement.

Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 261.

Tobacco, along with pineapple, cashew nut, papaya, guava, chillies and potatoes, came with the Portuguese to India in the sixteenth century. But tobacco has become so much a part of Indian society, that, following Ashis Nandy on cricket, one could almost say that tobacco was an Indian crop accidentally discovered by the Europeans! In this paper, I attempt to show how tobacco, an entirely new crop, with no apparent nutritive value, came to Tamilnadu and got entrenched into Tamil society.

Tobacco being what it is and what it became — a sign of good life, relaxation, cultural attainment, etc. — it is not surprising that antiquaries take great delight in tracing its origins. Though some believe that it is indigenous to Asia by now there is a consensus that tobacco is a “New World” crop that came to be known to Europeans when they “discovered” it for themselves.¹ As Victor Kiernan observes, “The great carriers of new things round the coasts of Asia and Africa were the Portuguese”.²

Tobacco is said to have been introduced to India during Akbar’s reign about the year 1605.³ Fernand Braudel too states that tobacco was cultivated in India and Sri Lanka by 1605-1610.⁴ Citing Bernier, however, Ahsan Jan Qaisar states that “it is clear that tobacco reached Bijapur by the end of the sixteenth century”. By 1618, tobacco is said to have been cultivated on a large scale in the vicinity of Surat. It is said to have spread to Sambhal by mid-seventeenth century, by which time, it had spread to Bijapur and Golconda as well.⁵

However, the spread of tobacco in the south seems to have followed its own trajectory. The fortunes of tobacco and chillies were closely tied to Portuguese coastal trade and their competition with the Dutch, alliance and

¹ J.E. O’Connor, *Report on the Production of Tobacco in India*, Department of Agriculture, Revenue and Commerce, Government of India, 1873, p. 1; also see Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, p. 45; Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 260-65.

² V.G.Kiernan, *Tobacco: A History*, Hutchinson Radius, London, 1991, p. 25.

³ J.E. O’Connor, *Report on the Production of Tobacco in India*, p. 9.

⁴ Braudel, *Structures of Everyday Life*, p. 262.

⁵ Ahsan Jan Qaisar, *The Indian Response to European Technology and Culture (A.D. 1498-1707)*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 118. Also see Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p. 45.

collaboration with the Nayaks of Madurai and the Maravars of Ramanathapuram.⁶ Villages under the control of the Portuguese were farmed out for cultivating tobacco and chillies over whose sale they had complete rights. Thus by the end of the seventeenth century south Tamilnadu had substantial land under tobacco.

Arasaratnam observes that, in the eighteenth century, there was an active tobacco trade between Jaffna and Malabar and that the tobacco grown in Jaffna was in great demand in Travancore and that its monarch acquired a monopoly over it, which was carried on his behalf by the merchants of Quilon.⁷

By the first years for the nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan on “a journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Kanara and Malabar”, noticed the widespread cultivation of tobacco in the Carnatic, Malabar and the Coimbatore region.⁸ The author of *Pukaiyilai Viṭu Tūtu*, which we shall consider in detail below, mentions Alagankulam, Parathaivayal, Kangeyam and Jaffna as important centres of tobacco cultivation. Dindigul tobacco was to become legendary and Angu Vilas Pugaiyilai (produced in Dindigul), a major brand name (in the twentieth century).

Newcomers always do indeed face resistance from existing crops and consumption habits. But as K.N. Chaudhuri observes, tobacco (and maize), unlike potato, was readily accepted from which he surmises that it found “an immediate opening in the economic and social surface of existing farming practices”.⁹ Irfan Habib calls the rapid extension of the cultivation of tobacco “one of the most remarkable changes in the crop pattern that occurred within the course of the seventeenth century” and, contrary to received wisdom about peasant traditionalism, sees in this a “remarkable readiness” on the part of peasants to cultivate anything which could sell better.¹⁰

The spread of tobacco cultivation also seems to have been linked with the commercialisation of agriculture under the British, with monetary dues being imposed on the peasants. By the first half of the nineteenth century, the British imposed — in the Madras Presidency — various systems of government monopoly in Kanara and Malabar. In other districts, “revenue from tobacco was raised by means of land customs and in some important towns by means of town duties and the farming system”.¹¹ Under the monopoly system, duty was

⁶ S.Kadhirvel, “Portuguese Colonial Impact on Agriculture and Trade: The Tamil Coast”, in N.R.Ray (ed.), *Western Colonial Policy, Vol. II*, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1983, p. 322. Also see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 28, 55.

⁷ S.Arasaratnam, “Ceylon in the Indian Ocean Trade: 1500-1800” in Ashin Das Gupta and M.N.Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1984, p. 237.

⁸ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, 1807 (AES reprint), Vol. I, p. 52.

⁹ K.N.Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 221.

¹⁰ Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, pp. 45, 81.

¹¹ B.S.Baliga, “History of Tobacco Revenue”, *Studies in Madras Administration*, Vol. I, Madras, 1960, pp. 271.

levied on all tobacco imports and distribution was through licensed vendors. Inflation of prices was the result. Prices went up by some 300 to 800 percent. Not surprisingly, this led to smuggling. Corruption was not far behind. One Kasi Chetty, cash-keeper of the collector, was said to have amassed 50,000 pagodas by under-weighting and under-rating. The system, despite frequent tinkering to stem corruption, was finally abolished in 1853.¹² A detailed analysis of tobacco revenue would fall within the purview of administrative history or economic history. What interests the cultural historian is the fact that the imposition of government monopoly and widespread corruption points to the widespread consumption of tobacco in indigenous society.

A crucial aspect of tobacco cultivation in India was the fact that it had no export market. “[N]early the whole of tobacco produced in India is consumed in the country, the great bulk of it in the district in which it is grown”.¹³ In fact it was not quoted in the London market at all. “The general complaint against Indian tobacco has been that they are either received mouldy and fit for nothing, or so high-dried and brittle to be fit only for snuff.”¹⁴ There was also the question of taste. Europeans, with their own standards of taste found Indian tobacco to be “coarse, rank, ill-flavoured” while Indians, especially the lower classes, took their tobacco “*au naturel* and the stronger and ranker it is the better they like it”.¹⁵ Thus, the entire tobacco production ended up being consumed internally.

Though it has been suggested that tobacco has the “unique advantage” of its great flexibility in adapting itself to the most varied climates and soils¹⁶ the climate of Madras Presidency was considered to be especially well suited for tobacco. Every variety of tobacco experimented by Agricultural & Horticultural Society of Madras was said to have thriven to perfection: Havana, Virginia, Manila, Maryland.

II

We have only tantalizingly fragmentary evidence to gauge the initial response of the people towards tobacco. That it should have a derivative noun — *pukaiyilai*: literally, smoke leaf — is some indication that it had penetrated into the lower levels of society. Buchanan’s following remarks indicate the broad contours of tobacco’s spread at the fag end of the eighteenth century.

In both the upper and lower Carnatics, taking snuff is much more common than in Bengal: indeed, I have never been in a country where the custom is more prevalent. Smoking, on the contrary is in great disrepute. The Hooka is totally unknown, except among Mussulmans. The lower classes smoke cheruts, or tobacco rolled up in a leaf; but a Brahman would lose caste by such

¹² “Abuse of Tobacco and Salt Monopoly”, History of Freedom Movement, R VIII, S.No. 9/1, National Archives of India.

¹³ O’Connor, *Report on the Production of Tobacco in India*, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁶ Braudel, *Structures of Everyday Life*, p.262.

a practice, and it is not considered as becoming, even among the richer part of the Su'dra tribe.¹⁷

Buchanan's observations attest to the differential response to tobacco. While the subaltern sections seemed to have freely indulged in consuming tobacco without much inhibition, the elite seem to have been more guarded. It is also clear that tobacco was consumed in various forms: smoking, chewing and as snuff. It would also be pertinent to note near that "cheroot" comes from the Tamil word "*curuṭṭu*" ("to roll" in a leaf).

In the west coast, especially in Malabar, tobacco seems to have been considered a "necessity of life". Given the fact that peasants tilled the fields "standing for hours, month after month in wet soil and exposed in consequence to fever and disease", it was claimed that "tobacco was the sole effectual prevention".¹⁸ Though this bears testimony to the stimulating nature of tobacco, which was supposedly indispensable "in a humid climate", this stands in stark contrast to later (modern) criticism about tobacco, in late colonial times, especially with the rise of a middle class, which was couched in the language of medicine.

Apart from these stray and scattered bits of information from Buchanan and other colonial official records, we have little else to understand the Tamil encounter with tobacco. As ever, in true Tamil style, we have to turn to literary texts.

In the collections of occasional and impromptu verses, canonized in Tamil literature as *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu*, we have a number of poems about tobacco. The problem with these delightful and irreverent verses, celebrated by connoisseurs, which provide a wealth of cultural details of the immediate pre-colonial and early colonial times, is that it is patently impossible to date any of them.¹⁹ However, all the *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu* verses are unabashedly adulatory about tobacco. They can scarcely suppress their delight about the stimulating nature of tobacco. One verse sings of how Tirumal, Sivan and Agni are enamoured of tobacco and comments in exasperation "who can sing the glory of tobacco".²⁰ When another poem attempts a double entendre/bitextual poem (*iraṭṭura molītal / cilēṭai [śleṣa]*) on tobacco and Lord Mukundan,²¹ it is hardly in doubt that the objective is to praise tobacco and not the lord. When another verse extols the glories of the snuff from Puthuppalaiyam, which the *devas*, *cittars* and the Hindu Trinity consume with passion, need one say anything about lesser mortals. Yet another poem asserts the tobacco's virtues thus.

The virtue of a needle is not to lose its point
The virtue of saints is to restrain the semen

¹⁷ Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras*, Vol. I, p. 52.

¹⁸ B.S. Baliga, "History of Tobacco Revenue", p. 288.

¹⁹ For an informative account of how *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu* was canonized see Thamizhanban, *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu: Ōr Āyvu*, Pablo Bharati Pathippagam, Chennai, 1987.

²⁰ I have used the Saiva Siddhanta Noorpathippu Kazhagam's editions of *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu*: the references to the poems give volume number and stanza number. *Taṇippāṭal Tiraṭṭu*, Volume 4, No. 850.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Volume 3, No. 584.

The virtue of courtesans is music

The virtue of the scholar's nose is to pinch snuff.²²

But the height of celebration is the *Pukaiyilai viṭu Tūtu*.²³ It was written by one Seeni Chakkarai Pulavar, the son of the court-poet of Ramanathapuram palace. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, the editor of this minor classic, dates him to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This poem is written in the genre called *Tūtu* or the message poem familiar as the archetypal orientalist genre. In its classical form, the heroine, separated from her lover, sends a message of love. In later days, from being just a romantic poem, it came to be a convenient form to flatter patrons or to express religious devotion. The typical messengers, as defined, for instance, by the grammatical text *Irattiṇac Curukkam*, are the female friend, parrot, peacock, koel, the breeze, etc. (By the late nineteenth century, money, telegraph, footwear, donkey, raven, etc. were to be burdened with this task — this, however, is a different story.)

Seeni Chakkarai Pulavar, in an innovative move, presses tobacco into service. Tobacco is given the task of taking the message of the pining ladylove to Lord Murugan of Palani. However, the message is little more than a pretext, for, of the 59 couplets (*kaṇṇi*) 53 are in praise of the tobacco, with a mere six forming the text of the message.

The first four *kaṇṇis* are double entendre about tobacco and Tirumāl (Vishnu). Tobacco is a *celvappayir*, the wealth-yielding crop, a commercial crop; it is strong in flavour, reaps wages for the labourers and intoxicates its consumers. Next comes the double entendre with Sivan, Brahma and, that other divine construct, the Tamil language.

Here, the poem imputes a divine myth of origin to tobacco. Once upon a time, the Hindu Trinity quarrelled among themselves about who was supreme. Naturally, they went to the court of the devas. The devas said “Your quarrel can wait. Now we shall give one object each for safe custody”: Vishnu was given the basil leaf; Sivan was given vilvam, while Brahma was given, what else but, tobacco. Unfortunately for Sivan, the Ganga washed away the vilvam while the milky ocean swallowed up Vishnu's basil. When the devas asked for the objects, only Brahma could say “*em pattiram pōkalai*, i.e., “my leaf is not lost”. Thus it was claimed that tobacco came to be called “*pukaiyilai*”. Also tobacco was christened *Brahma Pathiram* or Brahma's leaf!²⁴ (B.G.L. Swamy sees the fashioning of such legends as *post facto* legitimation by brahmins after they became addicted to tobacco.)

Then the poem goes on “to sing the greater glories of tobacco” — “*vanta pukaiyilaiyiṅ māmakattuvaṅka!*”. Interestingly the epithet used to qualify tobacco is “*vanta*”, (“that which came”) clearly conceding its foreign origin. A home where no tobacco is smoked is not a home worth the name. Even the learned and

²² U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (ed.), *Pukaiyilai Viṭu Tūtu*, Madras, 1956, preface.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ B.G.L. Swamy narrates a similar legend but with the dramatis personae as Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Parvati. He claims that he got the story from the historian P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar. B.G.L. Swamy, *Pōtaiyiṅ Pātaiyiṅ*, Vasagar Vattam, Madras, 1978, pp. 124-25.

the mighty are in its clutches. What is betel leaves and areca nut without tobacco? Even “arrack” is but only a younger brother to tobacco. It is also the ultimate aphrodisiac. In any case tobacco is the “*mōkappayir*”, “the crop of passion”. It is the Sanjeevi that can quench any thirst. It is so strong and pungent that even raw onions are no match. Who knows its qualities fully but the betel leaves. It gives profits to traders and pleasure to its consumers. It titillates, causes a nice itching sensation in the nostrils and gives a mild kick. Thus, after holding forth elaborately on the glories of tobacco, the poem ends with a brief message to be carried to Lord Murugan.

If these poems could be taken to be the elite response to tobacco, there is a range of popular literature on tobacco. Here are some riddles:

First it is green; but then it is not a parrot.
Then it turns black; but it is not a crow.
Sprouts everyday; but it is no betel creeper.
Hangs upside down; but it is not a bat.
What is it?

The answer is, of course, tobacco.²⁵

One is cultivated for 12 years
Another is cultivated for 6 months
Yet another is cultivated for 3 months
The last is sowed and reaped the same day
All of them need to be threshed on the same floor.
What are they?

Given the fact that tobacco chewing in Tamilnadu went hand in hand with betel leaves and areca nut the answer is “areca nut, betel leaves, tobacco, lime”.²⁶

Moreover, tobacco is a part of many folk rituals. It is customary to distribute tobacco among those who attend funerals. Folk deities like Karruppasamy and Sudalaimadasamy are propitiated with arrack and cheroots. Pavadairayan is praised in one song for not getting stoned ever after consuming ganja, tobacco and liquor.²⁷

But this celebration of tobacco was by no means unequivocal. It was marked by ambivalence. While Siddha medicine prescribed tobacco for swellings, toothache, itches and constipation, it also condemned tobacco for being an antidote to many medicinal drugs, for causing dryness of the mouth, for emaciating the body, for increased secretion of bile and for diluting the semen.²⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, with the rise of a modern, English-educated middle class, with hegemonic aspirations, tobacco came in for widespread condemnation. Sometimes, this condemnation was couched in the

²⁵ S.V. Subramanian (ed.), *Tamilil Viṭukataikaḷ*, International Institute of Tamil Studies, Madras, riddle number 233.

²⁶ Ibid., riddle number 1879.

²⁷ I am grateful to A. Sivasubramanian, the renowned folklorist, for sharing this information.

²⁸ *Poruṭṭaṇṇu Nūl: Payir Vakuppu*, Government of Tamilnadu, Madras 1969, note based on *Akattiyar kuṇapāṭam*. See also the erudite entry in T.V. Sambasivam Pillai's *Tamil-English Dictionary of Medicine, Chemistry, Botany and Allied Sciences (Based on Indian Medical Science)*, Vol. 5, Government of Tamilnadu Reprint, 1994.

language of medicine and health. The consumption of tobacco, in its various avatars, was seen to harm the health of the nation's subjects. Tobacco, though a recent player in the field, came to be subsumed in the category of intoxicants and stimulants, which had a longer genealogy. It is indeed striking to note how the various distinct objects are collapsed.

With the rise of the national movement, and its agenda of declaring the sphere of culture sovereign, not surprisingly, tobacco too was condemned. Despite the early colonial, indigenous elites' attempt to naturalise tobacco to culture by the use of mythology and traditional literary genres, tobacco was associated with the west and its moral depravity. As one commentator wrote.

Tobacco has spread like wild fire in our Bharat nation from Kanyakumari to Himalayas. With what speed it has spread! Spreading like the wind, it has sucked dry the life, blood and vitality of Indians and has made them unmanly eunuchs. Oh!... it has even spread to the countryside of the English learning students, 90 out of 100 have cigarettes and matches in their pockets. This is culture — the uncultured of today.²⁹

This impassioned passage expresses all the fears of the middle class. Tobacco not only weakened the health of the citizens but also the nation. It emasculated its citizens. Not even the countryside — a sovereign realm away from the clutches of western modernity — is free. It corrupts, especially the English-educated youth.

Striking parallels can be drawn from the middle-class critique of coffee, which I have elaborated elsewhere.³⁰ But unlike coffee, tobacco could not occupy a liminal realm where ambiguity was possible. It offered little leeway to offer excuses for its consumption. Unlike coffee which was appropriated by the Tamil middle-class and made into its cultural marker, tobacco could only be an unmitigated evil which could at best be tolerated.

But then there is always the gulf between elite avowals and popular practices. While Mahatma went about condemning tobacco, enterprising traders marketed "Gandhi Cigarettes"!

²⁹ *Māruti*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October-November, 1926.

³⁰ "In Those Days There was no Coffee: Coffee-Drinking and Middle-Class Culture in Late Colonial Tamilnadu," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39(2-3), 2002.