

# Beedies



## A Briefing Report

**THE NATIONAL ANTI-DRUG SECRETARIAT**

Ministry of National Security  
Commonwealth of The Bahamas

001-2015



# Beedies: A Briefing Report

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers at the National Anti-Drug Secretariat (NADS) undertook this descriptive study to learn more about 'beedies', which are being smoked by many of our nation's youth. Beedies are small filter-less tobacco cigarettes that are made in India. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, an unfiltered beedie releases 3-5 times more tar, carbon monoxide and nicotine than a regular cigarette, and thus pose greater health risks.

Several progressive countries, including the United States, have banned many of the beedie products. The US banned several of the products citing that they did not meet the requirements of the Tobacco Control Act. While beedies are not illegal in The Bahamas, local distributors have stopped importing the product due to its high rate of duty. This has created an underground market which is suspected of being organized by local Chinese merchants.

The study concludes by recommending that the Ministry of Health examine the health risks associated with the smoking of beedies and determine whether such risks are sufficient to support banning the product in The Bahamas as in other progressive jurisdictions. Joint intelligence-lead operations involving the Customs Department and the Royal Bahamas Police Force should also be executed to disrupt and prosecute persons operating the underground beedie market. Finally, a public awareness campaign should be launched to educate members of the public, particularly youths, on the lethal effects of smoking beedies. The belief that persons who begin smoking beedies are more likely to begin using illegal drugs can only be supported by scholarly research.



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## WHAT IS A BEEDIE?

A **beedie**, also spelled **bidi**, **bedis** or **biri**, is a thin Indian cigarette filled with shreds of tobacco and wrapped in a tendu leaf tied with a string at one end. Tendu leaves are broad-leafed plants native to India. The name beedie is derived from the Marwari word *beeda*—a leaf wrapped in betel nuts, herbs, and condiments. These cigarettes contain more tar and nicotine than regular cigarettes – but less actual tobacco (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).

These small, filters-less cigarettes come in a variety of flavors including strawberry, cherry and cinnamon. Youths can have their choice of “exotic flavors” – as termed by the Darshan brand – like Black Liquorice, Mandarin Orange and Mango (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).

Known as the ‘poor man’s cigarette’, Beedi smoking tends to be associated with a lower social standing. These tobacco-filled leaves are inexpensive, when compared to regular cigarettes. Those with a high social standing who do smoke beedies often do so out of the public’s eye (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).



*Tendu Patta (Leaf) Collection in Chhattisgarh, India*

## HISTORY OF BEEDIES

Indian tobacco cultivation began in the late 17th century, and beedies were first created in Gujarat when tobacco workers took left-over tobacco and rolled it in leaves. Initially the leaf used was known as kachnar. In 1899, during the Gujarat famine, brothers Mohanlal Hargovindas Patel migrated to the Jabalpur region as railway contractors. They discovered that the local tendu (*diospyros melanoxylon*) leaves were ideal for wrapping the tobacco and founded the beedi rolling factories locally. The first trademark was registered by Haribhai Desai of Bombay (using kachnar leaves) in 1901, and Mohanlal and Hargovindas obtained their trademark in 1902 for tendu-rolled beedi (Lal, 2009; Isaac, Franke, & Raghavan, 1998).

The commercial Indian beedi industry grew rapidly during the 1930s probably driven by an expansion of tobacco cultivation at the time but also helped by Gandhi's support of Indian industry and Indian products. Perhaps due to this, educated classes in India grew to prefer beedies to cigarettes although this is no longer the case. Muslim leaders, calling cigarettes foreign products, have also endorsed beedies at times (Lal, 2009).

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beedi manufacture had grown into a highly competitive industry. This stage of commercial production - at the height of the beedi's popularity - saw the creation of many new beedi brands as well as beedi factories employing upwards of one hundred, primarily male, beedi rollers (Lal, 2009).

Factory-based beedi production declined as a result of increased regulation during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, and beedi-making became a cottage industry with a home-based women workforce predominantly employed only in the beedi rolling. In contrast, males continue to be employed in other aspects of beedi production (Isaac, Franke, & Raghavan, 1998).



## MANUFACTURING BEEDIES

More than 3 million Indians are employed in the manufacture of beedies. This cottage industry is typically done by women in their homes. Workers roll an average of 500–1,000 beedies per day, handling 225–450 grams (7.9–15.9 oz) of tobacco flakes. Studies have shown that cotinine levels in the bodily fluids of beedi workers are elevated even among those who do not use tobacco (Mahimkar & Bhisey, 1995).



*Female factory workers roll beedies in India*

The production of bidis is also popular in Bangladesh where underage children are employed ‘in response to consumer preferences’. In fact, the rolling of bidis was traditionally the work of women and children, since smaller fingers were better able to roll and fold leaves (Lal, 2009). The more recent 2014 report published by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs confirmed that Bangladesh still resorts to child labor to produce these cigarettes (US Department of Labor, 2014). Today, beedies can be purchased online at <http://www.alibaba.com/showroom/indian-beedies.html>.

## MEDICAL EFFECTS OF BEEDIES

Contrary to popular belief, beedies are not a safe alternative to cigarettes. Due to the natural look of the product, some people mistakenly think that they are safer to smoke than regular cigarettes. The omission of warning labels on packages further propels the myth of beedies relative safety. Unlike most cigarettes smoked by kids, beedies are unfiltered and may, in fact, have more deleterious health effects.

According to the Office of Smoking and Health at the U.S Centers for Disease Control, an unfiltered beedie releases 3-5 times more tar, carbon monoxide and nicotine than a regular cigarette, despite containing less tobacco. As with many other types of smoking, beedies increase the risk of certain kinds of cancers, heart disease, and lung disease. The research available on beedies show that their users run the risk of developing oral and lung cancers, just like that of cigarette smokers (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).

Because a beedie typically does not have a filter and the leaves used to wrap the tobacco are not porous, a smoker must inhale more often and more deeply to keep it lit. Studies in India have shown that this leads to larger amounts of tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide in the lungs than when a regular cigarette is smoked (Suzan, 2009). Like other tobacco smokers, Beedie smokers would be expected to have an increased risk of coronary health disease and cancers of the mouth, pharynx and larynx, lung, esophagus, stomach, and liver. Beedie use during pregnancy can cause prenatal mortality (Suzan, 2009).

## BEEDIE USE AROUND THE WORLD

### *India*

A traditional method of tobacco use throughout South Asia and parts of the Middle East, today beedies are popular and inexpensive in India. There, beedi consumption outpaces that of conventional cigarettes although these tobacco-filled leaves deliver more nicotine



carbon monoxide, and tar and carry a greater risk of oral cancers. Beedies accounted for 48% of Indian tobacco consumption in 2008.

### *United States & Canada*

In the United States, beedies are treated like conventional cigarettes. They are taxed at the same rates, are required to have a tax stamp, and must carry the Surgeon General's warning. However, a study done in San Francisco showed that about 4 in 10 packs of beedies did not contain the required warning label and 7 in 10 did not carry the tax stamp. 2006 statistics on beedi usage shows that 2.9% of high school students in the United States take part in beedi smoking compared to 1.4% of those aged 18 to 24 (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).

Some beedies are flavored and both the US and Canada have banned flavored cigarettes, While bidis have been imported into the United States for at least 20 years, they seem to have become popular among young people only recently. The US government has asked the Food and Drug Administration asked the organization to expand its youth access efforts to control the sale of bidis to minors and to engage in compliance checks of retailers that sell bidis. In addition, concerns have been sent to the Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission questioning him on several issues related to bidis including the sale of the product on the Internet and the enforcement of existing regulations. While there are currently no national statistics on the prevalence of bidi use in the US, there are anecdotal survey data (Yen, Hechavarria, & Bostwick, 2000).

### *The Bahamas*

Beedies began to emerge on the streets of The Bahamas over a decade ago. They are typically sold individually from local bars and convenience stores as well as 'over the hill' shops. Over the last few years, the smoking of beedies, particularly by youths, has been a concern as vendors seem to be unaware of the health risks and the fact that this tobacco product should not be sold to persons under the age of 18. Law enforcement officials have voiced concern that beedie smokers tend to lace their cigarettes with marijuana in order to



avoid detection. Until recently, beedies were imported in large proportion. However, due to recent changes in the rate of duty, the import of the product has stopped and an underground market has emerged.

## RESEARCH ON BEEDIES & YOUTHS

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta published the first official study on adolescent beedie use in its September 17, 1999, issue of *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Of the 642 adolescents surveyed, 40% in grades 7 through 12 had smoked beedies at least once and 16% had smoked a beedie in the past 30 days. The numbers were highest among Hispanic youth, but no statistically significant differences were seen in beedie use by race or ethnicity, sex, or school grade (Suzan, 2000; 2009).

The study of urban youth at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Tobacco Control Program supports the previous anecdotal reports and informal surveys that led public health officials to fear that beedie use was exceptionally high, particularly among young people (Suzan, 2000; 2009).

These figures were relatively low compared with the findings of a 1998 informal survey by the San Francisco Tobacco Free Project. High schoolers from Booker T. Washington Community Service Center surveyed 461 students at area schools and found that 58% of students had smoked a beedie in their lifetime and 31% smoked them on a regular basis (Suzan, 2000; 2009).

The Massachusetts study also asked why adolescents prefer beedies to cigarettes. About 18% of respondents said that it was because beedies were cheaper, 13% said they were safer, and 12% said that it was because they were easier to buy. Twenty-four percent of respondents cited taste as a factor in their choice of beedies over cigarettes (Suzan, 2009).



## REGULATION OF BEEIDES

### United States

In the United States, it is legal for persons under the age of 18 to smoke. However, they cannot legally purchase the cigarettes. In both Alabama and Florida, it is illegal for persons under that particular state's legal age to possess tobacco products. These charges are considered youthful, non-criminal offenses that are normally cleared up with community service. In, Utah it is a Class C misdemeanor for persons under 19 to possess tobacco products. When a customer appears to be under a specific age, state and local laws may require retailers to verify age from official documentation.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took its first regulatory action against a tobacco product by ordering a company to stop selling cigarette-like products called beedies. It was the first time the FDA has used power that Congress granted it in 2009 to stop a company from selling tobacco products already on the market and it chose a small target — an Illinois distributor of the beedies, which are popular in India and other South Asian countries (Suzan, 2009).

The FDA also issued orders to stop the further sale and distribution of four tobacco products currently on the market. The action marked the first time the FDA has used its authority under the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act to order a manufacturer of currently available tobacco products to stop selling and distributing them (Suzan, 2009).

The products – *Sutra Bidis Red*, *Sutra Bidis Menthol*, *Sutra Bidis Red Cone*, and *Sutra Bidis Menthol Cone* – were found to be not substantially equivalent to tobacco products commercially marketed as of February 15, 2007, also known as predicate products. This meant they could no longer be sold or distributed in interstate commerce or imported into the United States. The manufacturer, Jash International, did not meet the requirements of the Tobacco Control Act to be able to continue selling these products (Suzan, 2009).



## The Bahamas

A recent interview with officials at Bahamas Customs revealed that one of the main local importers of the beedie product was Bahamas Wholesale Agencies (BWA). BWA brought them in from India on bond through the United States. Each carton of beedies contained 20 packs. Each pack of beedies contained 25 sticks (cigarettes). The product was treated as a tobacco product and assessed at a rate of 220% as a mini-cigar. This was the same rate applied to cigarettes. In July 2012, the rate was changed to 25 cents per-stick. This caused many of the distributors to stop importing the product due to the higher rate. As a result, suppliers went 'underground' and began to smuggle this product in order to avoid paying the rate of duty.

In 2013, the Excise Stamp Act 2013 was enforced which stipulated that all tobacco products be stamped once duty was paid. This was in an effort to reduce the amount of smuggling and better identify unaccustomed goods. As is the case with all laws, there are penalties to be paid for non-compliance with the law. Failure to register as a vendor of tobacco products or pay for and affix the Excise Stamp can result in stiff penalties ranging from \$1000 to tens of thousands of dollars and/or jail time, depending on the nature and frequency of the offense.



As a vital adjunct to ensuring compliance, the Government has produced the new excise stamp that must be affixed to the packaging of tobacco products to show Excise Officers and honest purchasers that the tax has been paid. The Excise Stamp carries a bar code that can be read by a special electronic device to assure Excise Officers that manufacturers, importers and vendors are properly registered and have paid the appropriate fees due to the Revenue Office. The absence of the appropriate Excise Stamp on a tobacco product gives notice that the excise tax has not been paid, which can lead to product seizure and a number of penalties.

The Act also stipulated that it was illegal to sell beedies individually. This move caused all prior distributors to stop bringing in the product as it was no longer profitable. Hence, any beedies found on the streets today is as a result of illegal smuggling. Operations headed by the Investigations Section at the Customs Department have resulted in several seizures of unaccustomed beedie products.

## BEEDIES & BAHAMIAN LAW

It does not appear that many Bahamians are aware of the health risks or laws that address the smoking of tobacco products among youths. As a result, a number of vendors may sell beedies or cigarettes to youths without taking the appropriate measure to verify the age of the purchaser. Needless to say, it does not seem to be difficult for a youth to get their hands on a beedie cigarette.

Section 62(4) of the Child Protection Act states that an owner or operator of an establishment that sells or serves intoxicating liquor or tobacco products shall not be guilty of an offence under subsection (3) if he proves to the satisfaction of the court that at the time of such sale he took all reasonable steps to ascertain and reasonably believed that the person to whom the intoxicating liquor or tobacco product was sold was not a child. Therefore, one can deduce that it is unlawful to sell tobacco products to persons under the age of eighteen years.

## CONCLUSION

There is well documented research that have found that beedie cigarettes contain more nicotine and tar than regular cigarettes. The US CDC lists several chronic health outcomes well documented to be caused by smoking other types of cigarettes and concludes that there is expected to be a significant risk to youth from smoking beedie cigarettes. The severe health risk has prompted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to stop the sale and distribution of four beedie products in the United States. While beedies are not illegal in



The Bahamas, distributors have stopped importing the product due to its high rate of duty. This has created an underground market that youths take advantage of.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Health urgently examine the health risks associated with the smoking of beedies and determine whether such risks are severe enough to support banning the product in The Bahamas as in other progressive jurisdictions.
2. Joint intelligence-lead operations involving the Customs Department and the Royal Bahamas Police Force should be executed to disrupt and prosecute persons operating the underground beedie market.
3. A public awareness campaign should immediately be launched to educate members of the public, particularly adolescent youths, on the lethal effects of smoking beedies specifically and smoking generally.



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