

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF BETEL SELLERS IN NORTH CENTRAL INDIA: FROM THE ANCIENT TO THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

***SHRIPRIYA PANDEY & **DR. SIDHARTH S. RAI**

**Research Scholar, Department of History Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow
E-Mail: shripriyapandey1@gmail.com*

***Assistant Professor, Department of History Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow*

ABSTRACT

This paper is in an attempt to explore the role of betel sellers and the circulation of betel (tambula) in the socio-economic and urban life of ancient and early medieval north central India. Betel has received attention as a part of food habits, ritual practices, and elite culture, but the occupational group linked with its cultivation, preparation, distribution, and sale has received comparatively less attention. By focusing on betel sellers and other related occupational attention, this study tries to examine the relationship between specialized petty trade, markets, and urban society.

By using epigraphic and literary sources, the paper explores references to "tambula," "tambulikas," and other related terms in order to know their occupational identity and economic role in its trade. The presence of specialized sellers and the regular consumption of betel may provide useful insights into the functioning of markets, occupational specialization, and patterns of everyday consumption in early medieval urban and semi-urban centres.

This study highlights that the history of betel and its sellers can help us understand larger economic and social processes. Instead of studying betel only as a cultural or religious item, the paper investigates its production, trade, and consumption in the modern period. It also reflects the role of small occupational groups in understanding the socio-economic and urban life of early medieval north-central India.

KEYWORDS: betel, commerce, epigraphs, market, tambula, trade.

INTRODUCTION

Betel leaves of the betel vine are generally deep green, heart-shaped, and famous as paan in India. It is also known as the 'Green Gold of India.' It has several names, like Nagaballi, Nagurvel, Saptaseera, Sompotra, Tamalapaku, Tambul, Tambuli, Vaksha Patra, Vettilai, Voojanalata, etc., in different regions of India.ⁱ

"Tambula" is a Sanskrit term that means "betel leaf vine."ⁱⁱⁱ Piper betle is the scientific name of it, which belongs to the family Piperaceae (the black pepper family).ⁱⁱⁱ The male and female plants are different for this vine. There are almost 100 varieties of betel vine all over the world; 40 varieties are found in India and 30 are found in West Bengal alone.^{iv} It is believed that the origin of the betel vine is in Malaysia,^v but instead of its alienness, this plant of betel vine has been more popular in India in comparison to other countries of the world since the olden times.

SOURCES AND AREA OF STUDY

For this study inscriptions (stone or copper) and old texts (literature, folklore, and other writings) and some modern texts that mention betel sellers, betel, and its trade are used to know how betel sellers were seen in the society and what their role was in the economy. The objectives of the study are to explore the role of betel sellers in the economy and society of ancient and early medieval north central India and to analyse the references to betel and betel sellers in ancient inscriptions and literary sources along with the study of the production and trade of betel in the concerned period. It also tries to highlight the importance of small occupational groups in shaping urban markets. The study covers early medieval north central India, in which Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab are included. The study also highlights the production and trade of betel leaves in the modern period and community, which are indulged in, and some folklore related to betel and the role of betel in the national economy.

DISCUSSION

Betel in Ancient and Early Medieval India (North Central India)

Betel leaf plays an important role since ancient culture in India. Its use in India dates back to 400 BC. According to ancient texts of Ayurveda, Charaka, Sushruta Samhitas, and Kashyapa Bhojanakalpa, the practice of chewing Betel leaves after meals became common between 75 AD and 300 AD. Kamasutra and Brihat Samhita also mention of betel which acts as a breath freshener, and something that made the body healthy, digestive and attractive.^{vi} European traveller Marco Polo during the 13th century, recorded betel chewing among kings and nobles in India.^{vii} Mandasaur Inscription of fifth century A.D. gives references of the betel leaves. Brhat Samhita of Varahamihira of sixth century A.D. and other ancient medical texts also give indications of its common use.^{viii} Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang who visited India in seventh century A.D. was given one hundred and twenty betel nuts daily as part of his ration.^{ix} Chewing betel leaves with some spices became common after meals during 730-A.D. to 1200 A.D.^x, this period is commonly known as early medieval period in Indian history. There are various agricultural accounts also which mention the betel leaves such as *Kashyapiyakrishisukti* by Kashyapa in 800 A.D. in Sanskrit, *Vriskshayurveda* by Surapala in 1000 A.D. in Sanskrit, *Lokopakara* by Chavundaraya in 1025 A.D. in Sanskrit.^{xi} Literary sources clearly indicate that betel or tambula chewing was in habit of Aryans for around two thousand years but the inscriptional evidences are very few in numbers which mention the betel chewing especially before 1000 A.D.^{xii} Earliest mentions about tambula in the inscription is related to Gupta period's Mandasor Silk weavers' Inscription of 473 A.D.^{xiii} It is mentioned in Sanskrit language, and its translation is :

'Now women- folk may be young and lovely, and they may have the

Customary garland and pan and flowers to hand, but they will

Never go to meet a lover in the trysting place unless they have first

Put on their two-piece garment of silk.'

This stanza is written by silk weavers and beautifully praises the silk clothes just like the modern silk factory can does its advertisement. These ancient silk weavers claimed that their silk clothes made the women more beautiful and charming. These women used to wear gold jewellery and flowers and had red lips due to chewing the betel or tambula which gives the red colour to lips. Indian women still decorate themselves today like this but the difference is that now they use lipstick to colour their lips instead of chewing tambula.^{xiv} Betel also played an important role of royal present as it was given by one king to other for maintaining good relations between them. Bhaskarvarman, king of Kamarupa sent fresh betel nuts and green doves as present to King Harshavardhana of Thanesar and Kannauj. Another historical record also mentions that during the official meetings happened between Ahom viceroy in western Assam, Satrajita and Mughal emperor Aurnagzeb, betel or tambula was exchanged.^{xv} This show that betel was used as a prestigious gift and played an important role in diplomacy and ceremonial exchanges. Literary account Brahma-Vaivarta Purana of 750 A.D. mentions that chewing tambula after meals is good for health.^{xvi} Presence of Oil machines, cart builders or rathakaras, wood cutters, tambulikas or betel sellers, malakaras or gardeners and kalalas or sellers of spirituous liquors suggest that the existence of their respective industries were present in the kingdom during the Gurjara-Pratihara rule.^{xvii} The Siyadoni Stone inscription^{xviii} and the Kiradu stone inscription^{xix} of Rajasthan mentions the betel sellers, related to early medieval period. It is believed that the betel leaves became the part of the life of aristocrats and affluent people from the Gupta period. During the 9th-10th centuries the gift and exchange of betel increased in many ways, such as welcome, social and political alliance related rituals. The royal betel bag bearer acted as an important role during these rituals.^{xx} He was given a duty of preparing the rolls and gifting it to those who involved in the rituals. The court of Chalukyas of Kalyani (970-1200 CE) became the centre of these rituals from where the political use of betelnut travelled to other courts. The importance of betel bag bearer was increased during the Kakatiyas, Yadavas, and Hoyasalas. During the Vijayanagara empire in 14th century betel bag bearer had become an established figure in royal courts.^{xxi}

Traditional proverbs related to farming of betel leaves

Throughout history, the cultivation of betel, or paan, has inspired a rich collection of folk sayings and proverbs among farming communities. These traditional sayings reflect the everyday experiences, challenges, and wisdom of betel growers, offering insight into the values and practical knowledge passed down through generations. Such proverbs not only guide farmers in their work but also highlight the cultural importance of betel in rural life. Some of the interesting folklores related to betel are:

“Padhay, padhe, rowe paan

Ei theiye nichale an.”

(One who reads, one who makes others read, one who plants betel creepers - these three oughtn't to attend other things.)^{xxii}

Khana, a women seer and composer of natural laws lived around 800-1200 AD. Her account *Khanar vachan* are well-known agricultural aphorisms in Assam and Bengal; For example:

“Pan puntle sharbone

Kheye na phuray Rabane.”

(Sravan {about 15 July to 15 August} is the time to plant betel and the yield will be so abundant that even Ravana would find it hard to chew it all.)^{xxiii}

“Pako paan, khansi na jukam”

(Mature betel is good as it neither causes cough nor cold.)^{xxiv}

Go narkel nere po, aam tutube kathal bho.

(Areca nut and coconut should be planted after slightly disturbing the basal part of saplings but in case of mango and jackfruit it is otherwise.)^{xxv}

Paan purana, grit naya aur kulashani naar

Ye teeno tav payiae, jab prasan ho murar

(Old betel, new clarified butter, and well- bred wife are available only by grace of God.)^{xxvi}

These proverbs illustrate the close link between betel cultivation and the daily life and wisdom of local communities.

Betel sellers and Occupational Identity

In ancient India one who carried betel bag was known as betel bag bearer and various sanskrit terms like *tambula-dayaka*, *tambulavahin*, *tambulika*, *tambulakarankavahin* etc were used for him.^{xxvii} He was a high-ranking functionary who used to carry a pouch with the ingredients for making the betel rolls.^{xxviii} The 12th century account *Manasollasa* mentions the importance of betel bag bearer. The inscriptions of Deccan related to 9th-16th centuries also give reference of betel bag bearer. In these inscription, betel bag-bearer are termed as *hadapa* or *adapa*, which refers to the bag in which ingredients and instruments related to betel roll making were kept.^{xxix} This post of hadapa was considered an honour that was enjoyed by the high- ranking elite men.^{xxx} Betel sellers in north-central India closely associate their occupational identity with the Barai and Tamboli castes. The term Barai basically hints to those who involves in cultivating betel-vine, while Tamboli is used for those individuals who prepared and sell betel leaves. In some of the regions, word Pansari is used but it often suggests the general grocer. In the Central provinces, these terms are used interchangeably but in Bengal, clear difference between grosers and sellers can be seen and they are known as separate castes. In the early 20th century, some districts, including Amraoti, Nagpur, Wardha, Saugor, and Jubbulpore, primarily concentrated the Barai community. The Cultivation was especially famous in areas such as Saugor, Damoh, Jubbulpore and some parts of Berar. Barais act in a role of producers and sellers of a highly valued luxury item in Indian society, occupy a reputable position in society. Their marriage practices and social stratification within the society further illustrate their multifaceted identity, which frequently includes special rites with betel leaves as tokens of status and tradition. In general, the history and organization of the Barai and Tamboli castes demonstrate the deep social and economic roots of betel vendors in the urban and rural life of the region.

Production, Distribution and Trade

The betel vines (often the male plants) are cultivated almost all the regions of India except the dry northwestern parts. It grows under the shaded, tropical forest, 2250-4750 mm rainfall is needed, relative humidity and temperature between from 40-80 % and 15-40degree C. Poor farmers have been growing betel vine crops for generations using traditional methods. This crop provides a National Income of Rs. 6000-7000 million every year and at the same it also provides an income of Rs 800-1000 million to the state of West Bengal. The Railways earn Rs. 100 million every year from transporting betel leaves from West Bengal to various regions of India like New Delhi, Raipur, Gandhinagar, Hyderabad, Jabalpur, Katni, Nagpur, Bilaspur, Gondia etc.^{xxxii} These betel leaves are also in great demand in various other countries of the world where it is not grown. These leaves worth about Rs. 30-40 million are exported to the countries like Canada, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Italy, Nepal, Pakistan and many other countries.^{xxxiii}

Significance of Betel in Socio-religious Life

Significance of betel leaves can be traced in every sphere of human life including cultural, religious, social and even day to day life. A well wrapped betel quid is still famous for an outstanding mouth freshener and mild energizer which is often served on the social, religious and cultural events such as marriage, puja, used to welcome a newborn child, as a ceremonial present to a girl on attaining puberty and also a departing gift to a newly wed daughter etc.^{xxxiv} To showing respect to guests, this betel is offered as a special item and hence betel leaf has a traditional use in Indian society and it stands alone without any comparison even today.^{xxxv} From the beginning of the human society, this betel leaf has achieved a prestigious place in the human society, specifically in the countries like India, Burma, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, Pakistan, etc.^{xxxvi}

The Barai community especially worships the cobra and celebrates the festival of Nāg-Panchmi. The mythology goes that the betel-vine did not exist on earth until the five Pandava brothers required it for a sacrifice. They sent their emissaries underground to the queen of the serpents Bāsuki, who chopped off the tip of her little finger and delivered it to them. When planted on the earth, the tip became the betel vine. Thus, the betel-vine or Nāgbel (the serpent-creeper), produces neither flower or seeds, and new plants are propagated from its joints. On Nāg-Panchmi Barais worship the cobra in their betel gardens, serve milk and think that cobras protect them.^{xxxvii}

Occupation

The Barui people think of grounds with betel-vine (Piper betel Leaf) as almost holy. Growers have strict routines that they follow. For example, they bath before entering the garden, and dirty people are not allowed in. The vine needs to be carefully cared for, with sun protection, regular watering, and manure. Plant the creepers in February, and after five months, they will start to give off leaves. Several growers can work together in the same yard, and each can claim a piece of it. The price of a bunch of betel leaves changes with the seasons. Some places, like Bilahri, Damoh, and Ramtek, are known for their betel leaves. People really like the colour and taste of the Bilahri leaf. They roll the leaf with areca nut, spices, and sometimes musk or cardamom to make "bidas" to sell. People who eat bida often smoke tobacco afterward. Many women sell these bidas, which may bring in more customers. People sell smoke in the morning to make Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and fortune.^{xxxviii}

CONCLUSION

All these evidences including literary sources, inscriptions and royal records suggest that betel had acquired an important and significant place in economy and culture. It was not acted only as daily commodity but it was used for beauty as well as used in various ritual and royal exchanges; helped to maintain political relations. So, its use in daily life, in cultural practices and royal ceremonies, simply show its high demand in the society and directly suggest about the active industries of betel leaves and nuts in different regions of India.

In conclusion, the evidence from literary sources, inscriptions, and royal records clearly shows that betel played an important role in both the economy and the culture of India. It was not just a daily commodity but also played a vital role in beauty practices, rituals, and royal diplomacy. The widespread use of betel in daily life, cultural activities, and political ceremonies points to its high demand and the presence of active industries related to betel leaves and nuts in various regions. This study also gives the valuable glimpse of functioning of traditional markets, occupational specialization and the social mobility of small occupational groups. Their role highlights how everyday trades contributed to the shaping of urban life and economic networks over centuries. Understanding their history helps us appreciate the continuity and transformation of local economies from ancient to early medieval times. Today, even as lifestyles and consumption patterns evolve, the trade and cultural significance of betel continue in many communities, reflecting the lasting impact of this ancient tradition in the region's social and economic fabric.

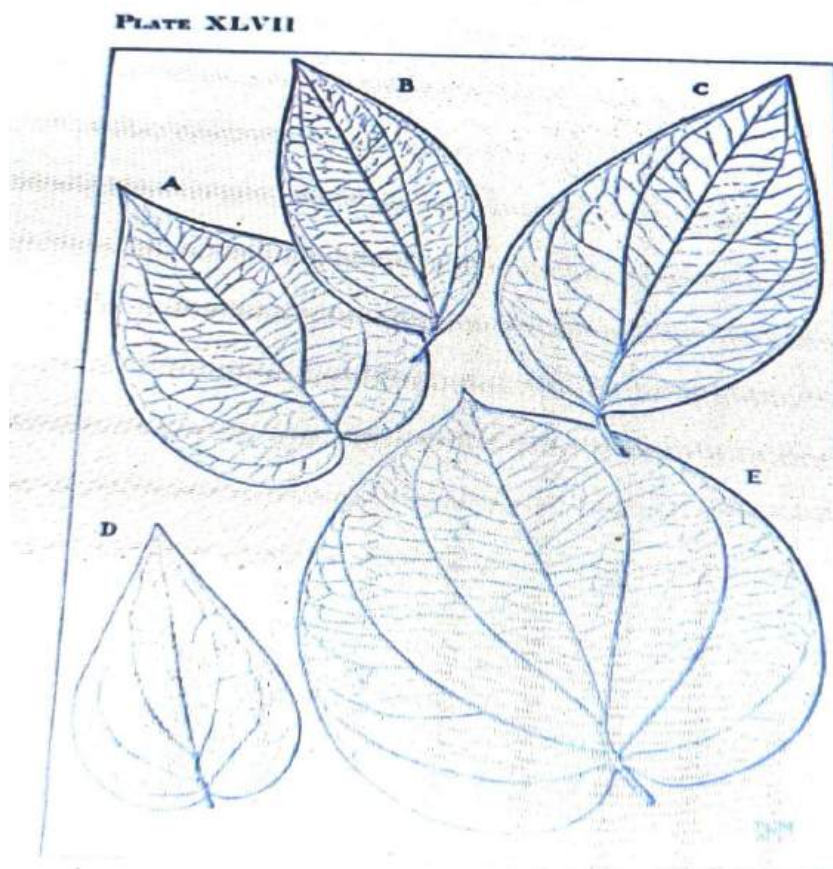


Plate XLVIL: Leaves of the betel pepper (*Piper Betle* L.), the second of the principal ingredients of betel chew, obtained in various Asiatic markets, and showing variation in shape. A and D, Manila, Philippine Islands; Band C, Bombay, India; K, Bangkok, Siam. (Gowda, M. (1951). *The story of pan chewing in India*. Botanical Museum Leaflets, Harvard University, 14(8).



Plate XLVI: Different types of pan beeda, the commercial form of ready-made betel chew. Left, northern India; centre, Philippine Islands; right, Siam.

From a painting by Blanche Ames

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