

Betel-Leaf (Pan) Culture: A Study of Mughal India

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to show the importance of betel leaf in India since ancient times and how it became an important part of the culture at Mughal court. Betel leaf formed an inseparable part of menu at feasts, marriage ceremonies etc. It was also used as an offering to Hindu deities. The medicinal importance of betel leaf was also known. Different types of betel leaf were grown in Mughal India and its production yielded revenue also. Among the royal karkhanas was betel box manufacturing karkhana. Betel boxes were used as a gift item or as a reward to someone. For the present study both primary and modern works have been consulted.

Key Words: Betel Leaf, Culture, Types, Utility.

I. INTRODUCTION

Betel-leaf (*pan*) has been used in India since ancient times. Betel -leaf is called *Tambolain* Sanskrit from which it was adopted by Persians as *Tambula* and in Arabic *al-tambul*. According to Shri P.K Gode, the earliest reference to betel-leaf or *tambula* occurs in Mandasor Silk Weavers inscription of 473A.D from which it appears that the Indian ladies in 5th century used to redden their lips by the use of *pan*. The Chinese traveller I tsing in his travels (671-695 A.D) refers to the use of betel-nuts in the ten islands of the southern seas and to the betel-nut forests in Nicobar Islands¹.

During Sultanate period, Ibn Batuta writes, "Betel trees are found only in India and the town of Dhafari (at the extremity of Yemen). Betel trees were grown like vines on the cane trellises or else trained up coco palms. They have no fruit and are grown only for their leaves. The Indians have a high opinion of betel, and if a man visits a friend and latter gives him five leaves of it, you would think he had given him the world, especially if he is prince or notable. A gift of betel is far greater honour than a gift of gold and silver. It is used in this way. First one takes areca nuts, which are like nutmegs, crushes them into small bits and chews them. Then the betel leaves are taken, a little chalk is put on them, they are chewed with areca nuts". Betel leaves were used as mouth freshener. They help

in digestion and were used to prevent the disagreeable effects of drinking water on empty stomach². William Foster has also given the medicinal importance of betel leaf in his account as; "Betel cools head, strengthens teeth. It makes one unused to it giddy"³. This indicates that the medicinal value of betel leaf was well recognized. Taking reference from U.O Dutt's "Materia Medica of Hindus" George Watt writes in his book "A dictionary of economic products of India" that betel leaf acts as a gentle stimulant and exhilarant. Those accustomed to its use feel sense of languor when deprived of it. Ancient Indian writers recommend that betel-leaf should be taken early in the morning, after meals, and at bed-time. According to Susruta, it is aromatic, carminative, stimulant and astringent. It sweetens breath, improves voice and removes all foulness of mouth. According to other writers it acts as a aphrodisiac. Medicinally it is said to be useful in diseases supposed to be caused by deranged phlegm and its juice is much used as an adjunct to pills and administered in these diseases; that is, the pills are rubbed into an emulsion with the juice of betel leaf and licked up. Thus *pan* leaves are still used as a domestic remedy in various ways⁴. During Firoz shah's reign there were *Karkhanas* for producing varieties of goods. One of the *Karkhanas* was *Khasdarkhanain* which betel-boxes were manufactured⁵. This shows its significance during Sultanate period.

Manucci was very much surprised to see that almost everybody in India used to spit something red like blood and he thought their teeth had become broken but when he enquired about it, he found it was an aromatic leaf which was called *Pan* by the natives. He got fainted when he tasted it for the first time. About *Pan* Manucci has given Description like this; "Betel or *pan* is a leaf similar to ivy-leaf, but the betel-leaf is longer; it is very medicinal and eaten by everybody in India. They chew it along with 'areccas' (areca), which physicians call *Avelans Indicas* (Indian filberts), and a little Catto (Kath or Katha)"⁶. Tavernier writes that the ladies were especially in the habit of chewing betel leaf throughout the day. The chewing of the betel leaf was included in Singhar and vermilion lips with *pan* were considered to enhance the beauty⁷. During Mughal period use of betel-leaf had become an important aspect

of court culture. It was served at feasts in *Pandishes*.⁸ It was also offered to the visitors at royal court⁹. It was also given as a gift item¹⁰. Mughal princess JahanAra was given the revenue of Surat by Shahjahan to meet her expenditure on betel¹¹. According to Manucci, royal ladies often received from the king special presents in cash on the grounds that they had to buy betel or perfumes or shoes¹². This shows that it was an item very much relished by Mughals. Bernier writes that it was so much royal favour as the coffee in Turkey¹³. Betel was also offered to Hindu deities during worship¹⁴. It was also used as cosmetic. Both men and women used to colour their lips red to make them appear attractive¹⁵. AbulFazl writes that betel-leaf of first quality was produced in Agra¹⁶. In Malwa also fine quality betel leaves were produced¹⁷. In the Subah of Bihar a kind of betel leaf called *Maghi* was grown. It was delicate, thin in texture, beautiful in colour, fragrant and pleasant to taste¹⁸. About the betel-nut grown in Bengal AbulFazl writes, "The betel nut is of kind that stains of a red colour the lips who chew it"¹⁹. Betel nut was mainly found in Bengal and Deccan or else it was imported because it formed the chief ingredient of pan which was universally eaten all over Hindustan²⁰. In *Ain-i-Akbari* there is a reference of Amir Khusro of Delhi who writes about betel in one of his verses, "It is an excellent fruit like the flower of a garden, the finest fruit in Hindustan." Like Sultanate period, the Mughals also had the knowledge of medicinal value of betel leaf. AbulFazl writes, "The eating of leaf renders the breath agreeable, and repasts odorous. It strengthens the gums, and makes the hungry satisfied, and the satisfied hungry". He mentions about different varieties of betel leaf such as;

A. *Bilahi*

He describes it as white and shining which doesn't make tongue harsh or hard. Its taste was considered best among all types. After it was taken away from the creeper, it turned white after a month or twenty days.

B. *Kaker leaf*

About this AbulFazl writes that it was white with spots and had hard veins. When much of it was taken, the tongue became hard.

C. *Jaiswar leaf*

AbulFazl writes, "Jaiswar leaf doesn't get white, and is profitably sold mixed with other kinds.

D. *Kapuri*

It was yellowish, hard and full of veins, but was good in taste and smell.

E. *Kapurkant leaf*

It was yellowish-green and pungent like pepper and its smell was like camphor. It couldn't be taken much. This type of leaf was produced in Banaras but even there it couldn't thrive in every soil.

F. *Bangla leaf*

It was broad, hard, plushy, hot and pungent.

Also leaves at different stages of development were named differently like; the new leaf was called *Gadauta*, then the *Karhanj* leaf, the *Nauti* leaf, the *Bahuti* leaf, the *chhiw* leaf, the *Adhinida* leaf, the *Aghania* or *Lewar* leaf and the *Karhanj* leaf which was separated for seedling was called *Peri*. With the exception of *Gadauta* all other were taken away from the creeper when they were a month old. *Karkhanj* leaf was taken by some while others kept it for seedling. It was considered excellent. A bundle of 11,000 leaves was formerly called *Lahasabut* during Akbar's time *Lahasa* was a bundle of 14,000. Bundle of 200 was called *Dholi*. *Lahasa* was made up of *Dholi*'s. In winters the cultivators used to turn and arrange the leaves after four or five days while in summers it was done every day. Betel nut and *kath* (*chuna* in Persian) was put on the leaf with some lime paste on other and then these were rolled up; this was called *bira*. Some used to put some camphor and musk into it; and tie both leaves with a silk thread while others put single leaves on plates and use them like that. Betel leaves were also used for preparing dish²¹.

IrfanHabib has given the list of crops for which crop-rate (*rai's*) were prepared. But for certain crops (like indigo, poppy, turmeric, hemp etc.) no *rai's* were prepared and revenue rates were formulated directly in terms of cash. Among these crops was betel-leaf (*pan*) also²². Thus, betel leaf production became a source of revenue which has a direct impact in growth of economy. It was one of the chief articles of trade in Bengal by English traders. The English traders were given monopolistic control over its trade according to the farman issued by Mughal subedar Shaista Khan. So no other individuals or concerns were allowed to deal in this commodity except the company or whom the company permitted. This enabled them to fix their own prices. Large consignments used to be imported at Patna by boats e.g. In 1777 in course of nine months from January to September an aggregate of 9,607 maunds & 10 seers was received²³.

Thus it can be concluded that betel leaf formed an important aspect of court culture. It was served at feasts, festivals, as a gift item etc. It was also used as a cosmetic and as medicine. Hindus used to offer it to the deities. Different varieties of betel-leaf were cultivated in India and there was huge demand for

it. Revenue was also generated from its cultivation and it formed an important item of trade due to its widespread consumption.

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