

[Beedies, a New American Fad](#)

Category : [February 1997](#)

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TRENDS

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But smoking overall declines in face of serious health risks

When the marlboro man moved to India, who would have guessed that "Ganesha Beedies" would invade America in revenge? Strange but true, those most low-caste of cigarettes are the latest American college fad. A beedi, at half the diameter of American cigarettes, is made of Indian tobacco hand-rolled in ebony leaves. They sell for \$2.50 to \$3.00 for a pack of twenty (about a dollar of which is taxes). That's pricey for a product that sells for one rupee--three US cents--in India, but is in line with US-brand cigarette prices.

What's the appeal? Suresh Ralapati, an NRI and tobacco scientist of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (the "ATF," which regulates cigarettes), ventured, "Perhaps the fact that they look like joints [illegal marijuana cigarettes] interests the young people." There's also the nicotine. According to Time magazine, which reported on the fad in its October issue, Indian tobacco has 8 percent nicotine, compared to one or two percent in American cigarettes. The nicotine gives beedies quite a punch, but they are not illegal under US standards.

That may change shortly, for there is a strong push on to have nicotine declared an addictive drug. Such a declaration would move jurisdiction over cigarettes from the ATF to the Food and Drug Administration and put nicotine in the same category as heroin and cocaine. Concern about "second-hand smoke" has led to smoking bans in public places, offices and factories. Further regulation could raise the price of cigarettes and cut their availability.

There are more problems. In 1996 tobacco giant Brown and Williamson became the first to lose in a smoking-death case and was ordered to pay \$750,000 in damages to the surviving spouse. Hundreds more lawsuits are pending. Fourteen states are suing tobacco companies to recover billions of dollars spent treating ailing smokers in public-health programs.

Sensing a losing fight, tobacco companies have turned to the East. According to the World Health Organization, smoking in developed nations fell 10% from 1970 to 1994, while in developing nations it rose 67%. One factory in England is increasing its capacity from 11 billion cigarettes a year to 48 billion (50% of India's total production). Almost all are destined for the Far East, which the Wall Street Journal called "the fastest growing and most lucrative tobacco market."

Just as President Clinton announced severe restrictions on tobacco advertising (especially protecting minors), Indian tobacco firms were fighting Delhi city's anti-smoking law, which would be the first in India to ban smoking in public places and prohibit advertising. India's tobacco companies responded by claiming "twisting of scientific evidence" about

the hazards of smoking. But all legal battles have proven tobacco companies have known for years of smoking's great health risks, and suppressed the information in their quest for profits.