

CAMPAIGN For TOBACCO-FREE Kids®

BIDIS

Bidis (or “beedies”) are small, flavored, filterless Indian cigarettes that have been gaining popularity among America’s teenagers. They consist of shredded tobacco rolled in dried tendu leaves (a broad-leafed plant native to India) and secured with string. They are produced in a variety of flavors, including chocolate, vanilla, cherry, licorice, menthol, and mango.¹ Many consumers, including youth, think bidis are not as harmful as regular cigarettes but they are at least as harmful if not more. Accordingly, several states have banned the sale or distribution of bidis (IL, VT, WV) and others have banned their sale or distribution to youth.

Prevalence. While bidis are not as popular among U.S. kids as cigarettes, their use is significant. The 1999 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), conducted by the American Legacy Foundation in collaboration with the CDC Foundation, found that 2.4% of middle school students and 5.0% of high school students are current bidi smokers.² In India, where bidis are known as the “poor man’s cigarette,” more than 500 billion bidis are produced and consumed each year.³ It is difficult to determine the exact number of bidis that are imported into the United States every year, but it appears to be increasing dramatically. Between 1994 and 1995, when bidis were reclassified from “cigar” to “cigarette,” the value amount of cigarette imports from India increased by more than 500 percent, suggesting that bidis make up the bulk of imported Indian cigarettes. Since then, the value amount of cigarette imports from India has continued to rise dramatically, increasing by more than 400 percent between 1995 and 1998.⁴ Talking about exports to Europe and the USA, in October 2001 a spokesman for Sopariwala Exports, one of India's major bidi exporters, stated: "There is a lot of potential for this product [flavored, hand-made Indian bidis]. We expect they will catch on even more."⁵

Health Effects of Bidis. Bidis are not a “safe” alternative to cigarettes. Available scientific research indicates that bidi smokers run the risk of developing oral cancers, lung cancers, and other health problems – just like cigarette smokers.⁶ Unlike most cigarettes smoked by kids, bidis are unfiltered and may have more deleterious health effects. According to the CDC, an unfiltered bidi releases three to five times more tar and nicotine than a regular cigarette, despite containing less tobacco.⁷ Bidi smoke also contains more deadly chemicals such as ammonia and carbon monoxide than regular cigarette smoke.

Appeal of Flavored Tobacco Products. While bidis have been imported into the US for at least 20 years⁸, they seem to have only recently become popular among young people. Tobacco industry documents have long suggested that flavored tobacco products might appeal specifically to young teenagers. In fact, cherry flavoring was added to one spit (smokeless) tobacco starter product in 1993. As one former US Tobacco sales representative described it, “Cherry Skoal is for somebody who likes the taste of candy.” As early as 1972, a Brown & Williamson document on the project “Youth cigarette – new concepts” listed cola, apple, and sweet flavor cigarettes as suggestions and stated, “It’s a well-known fact that teenagers like sweet products.” Flavorings may therefore account for some of the recent popularity of bidis. Bidis may also be easier for underage smokers to buy. A recent study conducted in San Francisco found that bidis were sold to minors without age identification twice as often as regular cigarettes.⁹ In addition, bidis are regularly sold on the Internet.

Restrictions on Bidis and Their Sale. According to the tobacco product definitions of the Federal Trade Commission, the Food & Drug Administration, most if not all state laws, and the Master Settlement Agreement, bidis fall under the definition of cigarettes.¹⁰ Therefore, among other things: a) packs of bidis must display the Surgeon General’s Warning; b) it is illegal to sell

bidis to minors; and c) bidis are taxed at the same rate as cigarettes, and must bear tax stamps. But the San Francisco research project found that 41 percent of the bidis purchased had no tax stamp, and almost seven out of 10 packs had no health warning label. This strongly suggests that bidis have not been rigorously subjected to the relevant health and customs regulations.

At least three states have special laws banning the sale or distribution of bidis (IL, VT, WV) and several have laws banning their sale or distribution to youth (e.g., AZ, NY, OR, RI, and VA).¹¹ In February 2000, a bill was introduced in Congress to ban prohibit the import of bidi cigarettes into the United States.¹² At least 17 states have also taken steps to prevent the online sale of bidis to children (AZ, CA, KS, IL, MD, MA, MN, NJ, NM, OR, PA, TX, VT, VA, WA, WI).¹³ Bidis are readily available online, where many websites sell bidis without asking for proof of buyer's age, and some contain implied or explicit health claims such as, "tendu leaves used in bidi cigarettes have herbal properties" and "bidi cigarettes are healthier than cigarettes."¹⁴

Child Labor. Despite a 1991 Supreme Court (India) ruling that child labor in tobacco should be prohibited, more than 325,000 children labor in the bidi industry in India. Older children (over ten) roll 1,500 to 2,000 bidis each day, six and a half days a week. For their labor, they may earn as little as four rupees a day. In comparison, the government-set minimum wage for bidi rolling is 30.9 rupees per 1000 bidis rolled.¹⁵ Bidi rolling is classified by the (India) Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act as hazardous because the working position produces chronic back pain, interferes with normal growth patterns, and causes physical deformation. Bidi rollers also suffer lung disease from constantly inhaling tobacco dust. They have high rates of tuberculosis, asthma, and other lung disorders.¹⁶ On November 24, 1999, the U.S. Customs Service banned the importation of bidis produced by Ganesh Bidi Works in Mangalore, India, after receiving evidence that the company uses indentured child labor to produce the bidis.¹⁷ Under section 1307 of the Tariff Act of 1930, it is illegal to import merchandise into the United States that is made with indentured labor.¹⁸

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, June 12, 2001

¹ Venable, Malcom J. Bidis Booming/Hip cigarette cheaper, but not risk-free. The Richmond Times-Dispatch, 11 June 99.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Tobacco Use Among Middle and High School Students – United States, 1999," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, V. 49 No. 3, 28 January 2000.

³ Human Rights Watch, "The Small Hands of Slavery: Bonded Child Labor in India" 1996.

⁴ Import data from the U.S. International Trade Commission, *dataweb.usitc.gov*.

⁵ "Sopariwala Expands Marketing of Oasis Flavored Bidi," *Tobacco Reporter*, October 2001.

⁶ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed> A Medline search of published research on bidis yielded several Indian studies on the health effects of bidis. An overview of the research can be found at Gupta P.C., et al., "Epidemiology of cancer by tobacco products and the significance of TSNA," *Crit Rev Toxicol*. 1996; 26(2):183-98.; and Nayak K.C., et al. "Treadmill exercise testing in asymptomatic chronic smokers to detect latent coronary heart disease," *Indian Heart J*. 1989 Jan-Feb;41(1):62-5.

⁷ Venable, M.J. "Bidis booming/ Hip cigarette cheaper, but not risk-free" Richmond Times-Dispatch, 11 June 1999.

⁸ www.quintin.com/beedies.html.

⁹ San Francisco Tobacco Free Project Report, 1998.

¹⁰ U.S. Code: Title 15, Section 1332; 21 CFR part 897.3; Master Settlement Agreement, section II, paragraph (m).

¹¹ Robbins, L.T., National Conference of State Legislatures LegisBrief 9(45), *Flavored Cigarettes (Bidis) Popular Among Youth*, November/December 2001, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/LEGIS945.htm>.

¹² Gorman, Anna "Countywide Gallegly Submits Bill to Ban Bidi Import," Los Angeles Times p B2, 12 February 2000.

¹³ Associated Press Newswires, "State acting to curtail Internet sales to children," 22 December 1999

¹⁴ <http://www.azadbidi.com/main.htm>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "The Small Hands of Slavery: Bonded Child Labor in India" 1996. In 1995, the exchange rupee/dollar exchange rate was approximately 34 rupees to the dollar. Minimum wage for bidi rolling was approximately 89 cents per 1000 bidis rolled.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, "The Small Hands of Slavery: Bonded Child Labor in India" 1996.

¹⁷ "Attorneys General Call for Crackdown on Bidi Cigarettes" NAAG News Release, 6 December 1999.

¹⁸ 19 USC Sec. 1307.