

Tobacco Production and its Role in India

Manoj Krishna Guttula*

VST Industries Ltd. India

***Corresponding Author:** Manoj Krishna Guttula, VST Industries Ltd. India.

Received: May 17, 2019; **Published:** May 22, 2019

DOI: 10.31080/ASAG.2019.03.0496

Introduction

Agriculture in India is the primary occupation for 50% of the workforce. It accounts for 18% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017-18. Different regions have different methods of farming. However, all these methods have significantly evolved over the years with changes in weather and climatic conditions, technological innovations and socio-cultural practices.

However, the key question that arises today is whether our existing strategies adequately prioritize the key elements that have the potential to bring prosperity to farmers by providing cost-reducing, income maximising solutions and achieving desired growth in future.

History

- Tobacco plant is native to North and South American continents and they knew its cultivation 8000 years ago.
- It was Christopher Columbus who landed in America in the year 1492 who brought this plant to European countries.
- Portuguese traders brought tobacco plants to India during 17th century through Goa and Indians started cultivating it.

Tobacco cultivation in India

- Tobaccocultivation accounts for 10% of the area and 9% of total production.
- 2nd largest producer after China.
- 5th largest exporter after Brazil, USA, Malawi, Turkey.
- Principal cultivated varieties are Flue cured, Burley, Rustica, Natu, Kasturi, Malawi Western Sun Cured (MWSC), Dark fire cured, Oriental, Talmari.

Why tobacco production?

- It is a short duration crop (100-120 days), Drought tolerant, Hardy and important commercial crop of India as majority of Indian soils lies in tropical & Sub- tropical climates.

Agronomic aspects

- Grown in light soils (Sandy, Red) with pH 7.5-8

Nursery raising

- Raised seedbeds of size of Length :15m, Width- 1 m, Height – 15 cm with space between two raised beds – ½ meter are prepared during 1st to 2nd fortnight of July.
- Seed rate followed is 2.5 Kg/ acre (or) 1g/m²
- Seeds are sown by hand through Uniform broadcasting by mixing with manure or sand.
- Seedbeds are mulched with leaves /paddy straw for moisture retention.
- Gentle irrigation is given 2-3 times a day by using rose can up to 10-15 days prior to transplantation and let seedlings harden.

Transplanting

- Fields are prepared, by following deep summer ploughing and cross ploughings prior to transplanting,
- Manures and fertilizers are incorporated into soil manually.
- During 2nd fortnight of August to end of September, Individual Seedlings are transplanted when about 8-10 cm high with pencil thickness.
- Low level of irrigation is after transplantation. Based on the soil moisture conditions, irrigation is done after each inter cultivation operation and after harvesting of every stalk position.

Growing

- After establishment of seedlings in the ground, farmers let nature run its course, with plenty of sunshine and heat and as little rain as possible.
- The plants grow somewhat under stressed conditions contributes in developing the typical leaf qualities that are sought in good quality tobacco.
- Scheduling at 50% DASM is ideal.
- Critical stages are Knee height to bloom.
- Water \propto Chlorides $1/\propto$ Leaf body (Bad quality parameters)
- Topping and desuckering is recommended for Non Oriental tobacco varieties.

Harvesting

- 70 days after transplanting.
- Sand leaves are removed before the 1st stalk position harvest.
- Done at the early hours of the day from bottom to top.
- Primed 3-4 leaves for 3-4 times.

Stringing

- Single leaves are threaded on strings manually in the field.

Curing

- Essential for loosing moisture and undergo physical and chemical changes.
- Strings of harvested leaves are initially hung under shade in the open air, to wilt.
- Racks are built in East - west direction in case of sun cured varieties.
- Time for curing leaves from the various harvestings varies from 15-35 days., with lower stalk positions generally requiring less time.
- Weather conditions also influences curing.
- Strings get ready for de-racking when they become dry and produce sparkling sound while breaking the stem.
- Done in the early hours with dewfall/ Water application.

Bulking

- Helps for uniform moisture distribution.
- Period : 20 - 30 days.

Baling

- Baling is done when stacked tobacco strings attains uniform colour and moisture.
- The unstrung leaves are packed into cardboard boxes/ Bales and delivered to factories.

Transformation of tobacco cultivation

Tobacco is grown in 0.45 M ha in India, accounting for approximately 0.27% of the net cultivated area with 750 M Kg production and around 80% of tobacco is grown in the states of Andhra Pradesh (44%), Gujarat (24%) and Karnataka (15%).

Poverty to prosperity

In India, tobacco was introduced as a commercial crop during 1930s. Tobacco cultivation transformed the poor farmer lives by gaining remunerative prices to their produce and helped many villagers to fight against poverty.

Till 2017, tobacco is cultivated in 4.64 Lakh hectares of the arable land which ensured prosperous living for the farming community and enhanced rural standards of subsistence living.

Prosperity to poverty

Now, tobacco farmers of India has been witnessing a great change from the past few years as excessive taxation on cigarettes and there has been a decrease in global demand for leaf as the result of international efforts in tobacco control and tobacco companies which will lead farmers to undertake the reverse journey from prosperity to poverty and cause poverty in tobacco producing regions and a desperate situation for smallholders who they claim have no alternative but to grow the crop.

Effects of tobacco control in India

- Tobacco products which contribute Rs.30,000 crores in Government's Tax revenues will be at loss.
- It is claimed that tobacco control in India would have disastrous consequences which derives 6,000 crores of foreign exchange earnings from leaf exports.
- Excessive taxation on domestic cigarettes have only benefitted the illegal trade of foreign brand cigarettes which affects the sale of duty paid cigarettes and reduction in demand for FCV tobacco. Ultimately, the livelihood of the FCV tobacco farming community will be at stake.
- Indian tobacco industry which provides livelihood through direct and indirect employment for 45 million people in many regions of the country will be at risk.

Volume 3 Issue 6 June 2019

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