

Did You Know?

You already know that India is currently a match-producing dynamo, but did you know that it was Japanese immigrants who brought match-making to India?

The origin of the safety match industry in India goes back to the beginning of this century. Around 1910 immigrant Japanese families who settled in Calcutta began making matches with simple hand- and power-operated machines. Local people soon learned the necessary skills and a number of small match factories sprang up in and around Calcutta.

These small match factories could not meet the total requirements of the country however, and India began to import matches from Sweden and Japan. During the First World War, when Swedish matches could not be imported, the Indian market was fed mainly by imported matches from Japan and by the locally made ones which followed the Japanese pattern introduced in Calcutta.

After the war, factories in Calcutta were unable to compete with imports, and handmade match production shifted to southern India, especially in the Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu State. This shift was due to the pioneering efforts of P. Iya Nadar and A. Shanmuga Nadar who went to Calcutta to learn the process from Purna Chandra Ray, a local businessman, who had learned the trade in Germany. The Nadars set up a number of manual match production units in extremely poor regions of Tamil Nadu, where a combination of the dry climate, cheap labour and availability of raw materials from nearby Kerala created ideal conditions for match production. The first sulphur match that would bum when brought into contact with a rough surface was produced in South India in 1923, and the first safety match, in the form we know today, in 1932.

Mechanization came to the Indian match industry in 1924 when M/s Wimco, Ltd. (Wimco), started operations in 1924 as a unit of the multinational Swedish Match Company. Wimco is still the only representative of the large scale sector in wooden match manufacturing and is the only fully mechanized match factory in the country.

During the past few decades, the Indian match industry grew especially rapidly. Government policies protected Indian matches by placing protective tariffs on imported products and specifically favored the expansion of the handmade, small-scale sector through the use of differential excise taxes. There are now 12,000 units in the small-scale, non-mechanized sector, of which 75% to 90% are situated in Southern India. [<http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5860e/x5860e05.htm>] [Note: There was no date associated with this source, so I'm not certain how current those last stats are]

