Ground Realities of Beedi Workers in Tamil Nadu

Summary Report of the Field Research on the conditions of beedi workers, industry accountability to legal compliances and social security of workers

Background

Tamil Nadu is one of the largest states in India in terms of beedi production, number of workers engaged in this occupation and in sale of beedis. There are around 75 large-scale beedi manufacturers producing 50,00,000 or more beedis a day, and about 500 small manufacturers are engaged in producing between 5,00,000 - 50,00,000 beedis a day. (Babu, G (2011, Oct 11). Business-standard.com.Tamil Nadu beedi makers move to West Bengal; retrieved on 14th Jan, 2016 ) Organisations and trade unions estimate the daily production of beedis in the state to be close to 50 crore and the total production value of over Rs 4000 crores annually. Close to five lakh workers in the state of Tamil Nadu are engaged in the beedi sector, with Tirunelveli district being the biggest hub of beedi industry with close to 400,000 workers. Vellore with 50,000 and Thoothukudi with around 20,000 workers are the other important centres.¹ In Tirunelveli, Khaja, Sayed and Ganesh are considered to be the big companies while Chandrika, Jyothimaan, King and No.10 Mark are the medium ones. Many of the companies have operations in the adjoining Thoothukudi district too. Jairam Beedi (Andhra Brand), Sun Beedi, Daulat Beedi, S Beedi, Ganesh Beedi, Salam Beedi, Nehru Beedi, Taj Beedi, Makaan Beedi, Special Matha Beedi, No 10 Beedi, Hundred Beedi are the companies which operate in Vellore district apart from the smaller branded/unbranded ones. In addition, there are several smaller and unregistered companies with or without their own brand of beedis.

This study was conducted in Tamil Nadu, with the primary aim being to identify key concerns of beedi workers with a focus on (but not limited to) labour, livelihood, health, social security and related exploitation. The study also explored the beedi industry and its geographical distribution, the status with respect to legal entitlements of the workers and key issues of advocacy which have been taken up various stakeholders

Methodology

In-depth interviews with key informants drawn from important stakeholder groups, and focus group discussions with beedi workers were the main data collection methods used. Key informant interviews were held with trade union office bearers, government officials from the labour department and health department and Nava Jeevan Trust, an NGO working for the rights of beedi workers in the state. The study was carried out in Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Vellore districts, where majority of the workers of this industry in the state reside. Fieldwork was supported by Nava Jeevan Trust in Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi and by the D Arul Selvi Community Rehabilitation Project in Vellore.

Findings

The following key issues of concern around the welfare and rights of beedi workers emerged during the study:

Registration and Access to Identity Cards and entitlements:

Identity cards have not been issued to majority of the workers, and as a result they are disenfranchised from accessing the benefits for beedi workers either from welfare fund, social security or other schemes of the government. Comparatively, lesser number of workers had passbooks issued by the beedi company they were working for. Lack of any documentation from the beedi company was said to be a great obstacle to create employer-employee relationship resulting in deprivation of workers from social

¹Inter personal communication with representative of Nava Jeevan Trust and CITU trade union leader
security such as provident fund, gratuity, pension and bonus. If workers insisted on registration and identity cards, they were apparently warned of losing even the work that they have. Further, there are smaller branded/unbranded companies which pay higher wages than registered companies but do not give any ID card to the workers, thus depriving them of their legal entitlements. Majority of the workers are illiterate/semi literate and remain unaware of legal enactments and schemes meant for their welfare.

Non-adherence to minimum wages: Minimum wage is notified by the state government and is linked to rolling 1000 beedis a day. In the state of Tamil Nadu the wages for rolling 1000 beedis a day is Rs. 192/-, which are paid on a weekly basis by the contractors. Most of the workers, except a few who are actively associated with trade unions, are not even aware of the government notified wages. Because of the poor wages which are not sufficient to meet their basic needs, most of the workers have taken loans (at high interest rates) from multiple sources and are therefore in a debt trap.

Demonetization - Impact on Beedi Workers:
Up to November 2016, the weekly wages were disbursed in cash every Saturday evening. After demonetization, the wage is being electronically transferred to their bank account as per government stipulation. Women, who form the work force of beedi rolling, reported that such a move had directly affected them.

...as there is no ATM in our village we have to now depend on male members in the family to withdraw the salary from the account. Hence, now they have full control over our money and spend it as they wish ... most of them use such money for alcohol consumption... (Group Discussion with Beedi workers in Tirunelveli district)

Malpractices:
Material supplied by the beedi companies/contractors is not only of poor quality but also in inadequate quantity to roll the required 1000 beedis per day. Workers have to spend out of their own pockets to purchase additional raw materials to complete rolling the required number of beedis. The rejection of beedis is done arbitrarily by the contractors and this again results in loss of wages. Such a loss of wages, sometimes, could be even be as much as a day’s wage. Some respondents admitted that they lost about 40% of their total salary as their beedis were rejected. They were afraid that if they questioned the company /agent they would have to face harassment in different ways. The methods of harassment were recollected as follows: supplying inadequate or low quality tobacco and leaves which will eventually lead to the rejection of beedis; subjecting the woman to abusive language in public; threats concerning recovery of loans; pressure to complete 1000 beedis on an everyday basis or face rejection for failing to produce required number of beedis; rejection on flimsy grounds such as not ‘rolled’ properly, not ‘folded’ properly, not in the prescribed height and width, moist and wet, too dry and the like. Hence, an atmosphere of fear is generated thus stopping women from claiming their entitlements and from showing any resistance when their rights are violated.

Health Impact:
The nature of work which involves prolonged bending forward while sitting, excessive use of finger tips, and the constant high tension levels to meet targets are causing a number of health problems. Callosities in hands, fatigue in the arms, numbness in fingers, throat aches, respiratory disorders, and piles or pain in urinary tracts were common problems faced by a vast majority of the beedi workers. Back ache, neck ache and joint problems were reported by most of the beedi rollers. These arise essentially due to the poor posture in which the workers, sit and work for long hours without any break. Many of them said that this kind of work left them with reduced appetite, due to the smell of the raw materials and the monotonous work. With unrealistic targets to meet, women reported that they do not get enough time to cook and eat a proper meal which not only affects their health but also of their family.
Inadequate Health care Facilities and Access:

The 28-bedded Beedi Workers’ Hospital at Mukuddal town in Tirunelveli District is the only one in Tamil Nadu for beedi workers. It caters to a population coming under a 15 km radius of the hospital. However, the workers have reported that though they face serious occupational health problems, the facilities and care offered by this hospital is inadequate. Shortage of funds is affecting the services which can be provided to those who come here with an ailment, stated the CMO of the hospital. Only Out Patient (OP) services are being provided currently and the number of patients accessing the centre has decreased from 400-500 per day a couple of years ago to about 150 now. No surgeries are performed unlike earlier times. Apart from the beedi workers’ hospital, there are dispensaries in all the districts but their state of functioning is not satisfactory. There is shortage of staff and supplies of medicines. Besides, only those workers having identity cards are eligible to access services. Quite often, there are no medicines available even for basic ailments like fever and the workers are provided with prescription to purchase them from medical shops. Due to the uncertainties, they prefer to access the state government health services which provide reasonably good services.

Contractors – the invisible power:

There is no direct and face to face interaction between beedi companies and workers. The companies operate through the contractors / middle men who supply raw material, collect beedis and pay the workers. All negotiations about quality and quantity of work happen through contractors or sub-contractors. Sometimes contractors further sub-contract the work thus making the chain of relationships even longer. Beedi workers only know the person who supplies them raw material and collects the rolled beedis. There is no information made available to the workers by the company about the registered contractors. The contractors, who play such an important role in the chain of production, themselves are not registered and are not covered under any law. Their legal status is not known to the workers.

During the research, the aspect of many companies showing themselves as smaller producers (i.e. producing less than 20 lakh beedis a day) came to light. They are not bound by the regulations for worker welfare that are imposed on registered companies, and hence pose a potential for violating beedi workers’ rights by indulging in acts such as non-issuance of ID cards to workers and the like.

Deficiencies in enforcing labour rights:

Enforcement of labour regulation is very poor because of many factors. The prime reasons include the shift from factory to home-based production which adversely affects the organising of workers by unions; huge vacancies in the labour welfare department; and lack of a coordinated action by different trade unions amongst many other factors. Besides, ‘home’ being the work place for rolling
beedis, there is no mechanism by the State to monitor/supervise working conditions or any violations of regulation. It was reported that at the district and state levels there is no grievance redressal mechanism.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

Beedi workers in the state continue to live and work in conditions of poverty and exploitation even after enactment of many enabling legislations and provisions. Given the health problems, exploitative conditions, non-registration for majority of beedi workers and the nature of the industry being home-based, serious consideration needs to be paid to the conditions of the workers. The responsibility for the same lies with all the stakeholders particularly the beedi company owners, the state labour department, trade unions and the civil society organisation, among others. In view of strengthening of rights of beedi workers and for providing them humane and just conditions of work, the following recommendations are provided based on the research:

- The workers need to be provided with adequate and updated information about their legal entitlements. Both the trade unions and government labour department apart from other organisations could play a key role in this regard.
- The huge vacancies in the government labour department need to be filled up at the earliest so that enforcement of labour regulations is not affected.
- The health facilities for the workers need to be improved and for this there needs to be improved coordination between the centre and state government so that resources can be utilised in a more efficient manner.
- Census of all beedi-manufacturing units whether small or big, registered or unregistered should be undertaken to build a comprehensive database that would provide all information related to units, workers, contractors etc.
- Actual number of beedi workers based on their involvement in rolling beedis needs to be established through an independent mechanism.
- There is a need to focus on skill development programmes, for alternative livelihoods so that as the workers become more skilled they could move away from this occupation. This is going to be a challenge considering the rising age of workers in the industry. Agriculture and MGNREGA could play a key role in becoming source of an alternative livelihood, at least in the short-term, provided the constraining factors are addressed.

**National Forum for Beedi Workers**

**Partner Organisations:**

**National**
National Alliance for Maternal Health and Human Rights (NAMHHR)
Secretariat at Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), Delhi
Blog: http://namhhr.blogspot.in/
Email: namhhr.india@gmail.com

**Tamil Nadu**
Nava Jeevan Trust (NJT), Tirunelveli
D. Arul Selvi Community Based Rehabilitation, Vellore