

# Ground Realities of Beedi Workers in West Bengal

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

## Introduction

Beedi manufacturing began in Bengal in the 1930s and the industry employs an estimated 14, 84,670 workers in the state of West Bengal as of 2008. Of these, 11,61,870 are women.<sup>1</sup> Beedi sector is a major employer in the tobacco industry and it is estimated that it accounts for more than 85 percent of the total workforce employed in the industry.<sup>2</sup> In West Bengal, *Pataka beedi* is one of the largest beedi companies and its average daily production is reputed to be Rs 13 crores.<sup>3</sup> Other beedi brands present in the state are Shiv, Jahangir, Howrah, Jeet, Noor, Kishan, Lakshmi, CG Patel, Das, Sundari, Anand and Shyam.

Beedi making as a predominant occupation is presently found in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Coochbehar, Purulia, North 24 Parganas, Nadia and Purba Medinipur. Murshidabad is home to many of the big beedi companies and has the largest number of beedi workers in the state. At present, the Jangipur sub-division in Murshidabad is a very sought after area for beedi manufacturing. Although there are no accurate figures available it is estimated that there are 12 lakh people associated with the beedi industry in Murshidabad, and of them 7 lakh are in the Jangipur sub-division. Workers are largely women, poor and a majority of them belong to Muslim and SC communities. Beedi manufacturers therefore see themselves as benevolent employers of illiterate and poor women, who can earn livelihood from the "safety of their homes".

Beedi rolling and processing is a cottage industry and functions through a three-tier system, with workers at the bottom, followed by contractors/agents in the middle and factories at the top. The workers, mostly women who are home-based, are provided with the materials for beedi rolling by the *munshis* (middlemen), who are usually men. They, in turn, collect the beedis from the workers and supply them to the factories. The *munshi* delivers 'raw beedis' to the factory. The beedis are toasted in a charcoal oven in the factory and then packed in bundles. The bundles are packed in cartons and sacks, and readied

for transportation. Those who carry out this task are employees of the company and paid a daily wage. There is also a 'casual' system of beedi work called '*kena-becha*' system (buying and selling), where *Munshis* give beedis to 'small' companies (unregistered companies) and not to the 'big factories'. The wages paid are lower than those paid for big factories.

## Policies and Welfare Schemes for Beedi Workers

The Central and State governments, over the years, have enacted legislations and policies aimed at monitoring working conditions and providing social security benefits for the welfare of beedi workers. Besides the existing labour laws such as Minimum Wage Act and the Provident Fund Act, the Government of India has also enacted two important laws specifically for the beedi sector workers. The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 is an Act to provide for the welfare of the workers in Beedi and Cigar establishments and to regulate the conditions of their work, and for matters connected therewith. However, regulating this is a challenge as the workers are largely home-based. The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976 resulted in the creation of Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWFF) for the welfare of beedi workers. The BWFF is administered by the Labour Welfare Organisation (LWO) under the Ministry of Labour and Employment and is financed through a cess levied on manufactured beedis, which applies only to registered companies manufacturing more than 2 million beedis per year. This exemption excludes the large number of workers who roll beedis for unregulated smaller companies, but are not eligible for benefits and entitlements.

It is in this context that this study was conducted in West Bengal, 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 of legal entitlements of the workers and key issues of advocacy which have been taken up by various stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup> Association for Social and Health Advancement ASHA 'Making a Case for Women Beedi Workers in Murshidabad, West Bengal'.

<sup>2</sup> Association for Social and Health Advancement ASHA (2007) Profile of Women Beedi Workers.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with beedi industry representative.

## Methodology

The study was carried out between October and December, 2016, in Murshidabad and Malda districts, the two important beedi producing districts with largest number of beedi workers in West Bengal. In-depth interviews with key informants drawn from important stakeholder groups, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Beedi Workers (mainly women and adolescent girls) were the main data collection methods used. In both districts total 6 FGDs (4 in Murshidabad and 2 in Malda) and 9 Key Informants Interviews (all in Murshidabad) were conducted with officials of beedi companies, labour department, health department, trade union office bearers, and three NGOs – ASHA (Association for Social and Health Advancement), Marfat and Reach India Trust - working for the rights of beedi workers in the state. Fieldwork was facilitated by two NGOs ASHA and Marfat working in Murshidabad district.

## Findings:

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

### Registration of beedi workers and access to identity cards

In order to gain access to entitlements and benefits under the welfare schemes, including Provident Fund (PF) and other social security benefits, workers need to be registered. Most participants in both districts did not have registration and identity cards. In practice, it is the *Munshi* who facilitates the registration process of workers, but this has not been carried out for most workers. Some beedi workers have cards issued by the central hospital / civil dispensaries run through Beedi Workers' Welfare Fund under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, which enables them to access different entitlements but in the absence of an Identity Card (ID) card from the beedi company for which they work, they are deprived of social security entitlements like PF, gratuity, bonus, leave, maternity entitlements etc. Most workers are not aware that they are entitled to these and should be registered for it. Further, there is no clarity amongst workers about whether the documentation is done for individual workers or families. In several cases, it appears that the 'head of the family' logic has been followed and cards, passbooks and registration IDs have been issued to men, even though it is the women who roll the beedis.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with beedi industry representative.

<sup>5</sup>In Murshidabad, most women said that they rolled 1000 to 1200 beedis a day, working 8 to 10 hours a day. In Malda, the figure ranged from 800 to 1000 beedis a day.

## Malpractice related to wages

The nationally accepted wage rate is Rs 169 for rolling 1000 beedis<sup>4</sup> (which approximately amounts to a day's wage<sup>5</sup>) but in West Bengal, the present wage being paid is Rs 126 per 1000 beedis. This figure is arrived at through a bipartite agreement between the Beedi Merchants' Association (BMA) and the Trade Unions (TU) at the state level. However in practice, workers may not receive the full wage. Often times, workers are not paid for all the beedis they make, due to a high rate of rejection. No wages are paid for the rejected beedis and the rejected beedis are either taken by the *Munshi* or sold in the market at a lower rate. Additionally, poor quality materials are often provided, so the workers have to make up for the deficit materials by spending through their own pocket. Hence the net earning ends up being much lower than the minimum wage.

## Impact of Demonetization

The demonetization of currency in the month of November 2016 also adversely impacted operations in the production chain. There were repeated delays in getting the supplies and payments were made every fortnight instead of weekly. Some workers reported that normally they have to give the *Munshi* 50 extra rolled beedis per 1000 (two *mutthos*) in order to get their wages. However during demonetization, the *Munshi* started demanding four *mutthos* (100 beedis) extra for releasing the payment. In one village, the workers decided to revolt against this and refused to give two *mutthos* extra. As a result, 500 beedis were taken from each worker without any payment for the same. Also, during this time workers were expected to work for lesser wages, at Rs.110 per 1000 beedis. Those who demanded the original rate of Rs. 126 were provided with the raw materials for only 2-3 days of the week, and not given additional work.

## Access to social security entitlements

Beedi workers and their families are entitled to various social security benefits and welfare schemes but utilization of these is minimal. This is due to two main factors - poorly managed registration of beedi workers and lack of information about entitlements among workers. There is confusion among workers, about the routine state government benefits and those benefits that they are entitled to specifically because they are beedi workers. Younger women reported getting payments for Janani Suraksha Yojana

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*Aasma (Name changed), 11 years old, lives with her maternal uncle in Dhuliyan block, Murshidabad. Earlier, they lived in Farakka, but due to her mother's illness three years ago; they shifted to Murshidabad to live with her mother's uncle. In her uncles' house, all her aunts roll beedis. Her mother also rolled beedis before she became too ill to do so. Aasma learnt beedi rolling from her mother. Her father is a daily wage mason and does not make enough money to run the household, or pay for his wife's treatment. Aasma's brothers also work; they work in her uncle's food stall, but do not get paid because he provides them shelter.*

*Aasma gave up school two years ago, to start rolling beedis after they moved to Murshidabad. She rolls beedis for about 8 hours a day and can roll on an average 800-1000 beedis per day. Alongside this, she also looks after her youngest brother as there is no Anganwadi center in the neighbourhood. Aasma reports that she does not have a passbook or card. Her aunts are the ones who collect the money from the Munshi. Even at the age of 11 years, Aasma suffers from back pain and finds it very painful to work.*

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into their bank accounts. However, very few women could tell us if they had individual bank accounts or joint accounts. Some also reported getting money for children's education in their bank accounts but were not clear about the specifics.

### **Health issues and poor access to health care**

The nature of beedi work involves constant use of fingers and long hours of sitting in a cramped posture in confined spaces leading to immense strain on the vertebral column. In group discussions, workers reported health problems like calluses in hands, back, neck and joint pains, fatigue in the arms and numbness in fingers. Constant exposure to tobacco dust results in respiratory irritation. Health care providers at Tarapur hospital also reported that throat aches, respiratory disorders, piles and pain in urinary tracts are common problems faced by large numbers of beedi workers. Many also report headaches, nausea, giddiness and burning of the eyes from long hours of work and exposure to tobacco. A study titled 'Behind the Smoke Screen' conducted by Marfat documenting child labour in Dhuliyan, Murshidabad reports that the incidence of back pain is highest among children who roll beedis. The incidence of Acute Respiratory Infection (ARI) and skin diseases is also higher among children rolling beedis because of their greater exposure to toxic tobacco dust.

BWWF runs a central hospital (at Tarapur, Murshidabad), civil dispensaries and mobile van units to provide health services exclusively to beedi workers. According to the figures available at the hospital the average number of patients at their outpatient clinic in 2014 ranged from 7,000 to 8,000 every month. It is a 65 bed hospital and 9 doctors are posted there at present, of whom 3 are specialists. However, Beedi workers complain of unreliable

services. Although beedi dispensaries/ hospitals are not crowded, they report that medicines are often not available which pushes them to avail either state health services or informal provider services.

### **Child labour**

No official estimates of child labour in beedi industry in West Bengal exist at present. Unofficial estimates by Trade Unions and various researchers state that the children comprise about 25% to 40% of the total beedi workers. In their survey, Marfat found that 11.75% of total beedi workers in Dhuliyan, Murshidabad were children below 14 years.<sup>6</sup> Extrapolating this for Jangipur sub division where there are anywhere between 0.3 (official figures) to 1.2 million (unofficial figures) beedi workers there could be about 33000 to 120000 child beedi workers in the area. Most beedi workers admit their children to school. However, children begin dropping out from middle school onwards owing to economic circumstances. Typically, boys migrate to other states for work and girls begin rolling beedis full time. Beedi rolling is a family activity, with children contributing in cutting and rolling of beedis, which allows the family to roll more beedis per day. The engagement of children in this occupation has implications on their education, future opportunities and also has a negative impact on their health as demonstrated in the case study above.

### **Organizing efforts of Trade Unions**

Workers in the beedi industry are home based and the very nature of their work makes them invisible. Further, they are largely women with mobility and other restrictions, hence organizing them is a challenge. Trade unions such as AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), INTUC (Indian National

<sup>6</sup>The survey defined child labourer as any child who is engaged in activity that produces measurable value or an economic asset and which is based on an employer-employee relationship irrespective of the value created and the time spent on work.

Trade Union Congress) and CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) have attempted to organize beedi workers in the state and have raised issues especially around wages and provident fund benefits. It is worth noting that in an industry where most workers are women, they are not represented as union leaders nor do they participate in the decision making process of the union. Apart from the Unions, some civil society organizations have also been working amongst beedi workers. Association for Social and Health Advancement (ASHA) is one such organization which has been working for several years in 21 gram panchayats in Murshidabad district with women beedi workers and adolescent girls. ASHA builds capacities of women beedi workers by mobilizing them into groups and facilitating collective action so that they can assert their rights. Marfat, another organization works specifically around child labour in the beedi industry. The organization runs a field level intervention to ensure health, education and cultural participation of children engaged in household beedi-rolling industry from the perspective of child rights. Reach India Trust is another organization working in Murshidabad who organizes women into self help groups, and runs micro-credit programs for beedi workers.

### Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study has indicated some important issues that affect beedi workers in West Bengal. The state must take steps to improve the situation for the workers and make existing welfare provisions effective. In view of strengthening of rights of beedi workers the following recommendations are provided based on the research:

- **Registration/ documentation of each worker:** Every adult worker must be registered in her own right and not seen as part of a family unit. This will enable each worker to access her benefits.
- **Regulation of manufacturers and munshis:** Manufacturers have to be identified and regulated. Many manufacturers escape paying

taxes by making use of loopholes in the law. Many 'small manufacturers' are actually branches of a big beedi business. The role of the *Munshi* has to be redefined to promote workers' interests and not to exploit them.

- **Establish direct relationship between manufacturers and workers:** A worker must know if she has a single or multiple employer(s). Manufacturers have to own their responsibility to beedi rollers – providing good quality raw materials in sufficient quantities, stopping arbitrary rejection, providing correct documentation and paying correct wages.
- **Enforcement of right to education:** The right to education needs to be fully enforced for making quality education accessible to children from the Beedi rolling communities. It should be ensured that no child from the communities of beedi workers is left out of education. To do this, primary schools in their localities need to be strengthened for quality and opportunities for secondary and higher secondary should be provided.
- **Create job opportunities:** The State should provide livelihood choices to people, other than rolling beedis, which at present is the only wage work available. Other jobs will also increase the mobility of women as they will travel outside their homes on a daily basis. The idea that the beedi industry is a benevolent industry because it allows women the 'safety' to work in their homes must be challenged.
- **Preventive measures to protect health:** Education about the ill effect of beedi on the health of smokers as well as workers is required. Alongside this, manufacturers must think of measures like masks, health check-ups, spacious workspaces, provision of toilets and so on for workers.
- **Entitlement awareness:** Information about services, rules, welfare schemes and so on has to be communicated frequently and effectively to beedi workers.

## 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](mailto:namhhr.india@gmail.com)

#### West Bengal

Association for Social and Health Advancement (ASHA) Murshidabad,  
 Marfat, Murshidabad,  
 Parichiti, Kolkata