

# **Ground Realities of Beedi Workers In West Bengal**



**Centre for Health & Social Justice**



**Content: Anchita Ghatak**  
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## Executive Summary

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 subdivision 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 (BWWF) for the welfare of beedi workers. The BWWF is administered by the

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<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

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.

### **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.

- **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 JananiSurakshaYojana 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

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<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

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 Dhuliyān, 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 Dhuliyān, 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 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

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<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



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. ~~One~~ 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.

## **I. Introduction**

Beedi manufacturing is a traditional agro-forest based industry in India, highly labour intensive and predominantly unorganized. The beedi industry is one of the largest employers of workers in India, after agriculture, handloom and construction. The industry employs unskilled labour and is located where there is availability of cheap labour. However, the estimates of the numbers of beedi workers engaged in this industry vary depending on who is making the estimates. The most popularly quoted figures are government estimates of 4.4 million workers in the beedi rolling industry (1999-2000), majority of whom are home based women workers. The trade unions claim that there are over 7 million beedi workers (Best Practices Foundation, 2011). It is said that if those engaged in beedi trade and the tendu leaf collection are also taken into account, the actual numbers of people involved in the beedi sector is much higher. The unions also point out that beedi workers constitute a major share of the workforce under the poverty line.

Beedis are cheap and widely smoked in India. About 19% of tobacco consumption in India is in the form of cigarettes, while 53% is smoked as beedis. The rest is used mainly in smokeless form. Roughly eight beedis are sold for every cigarette. (John, 2008). While a packet of 20 normal cigarettes can cost in excess of 150 rupees, a bundle of 15 beedis can sell for as little as five rupees, their price kept low by favourable tax rates. Companies producing less than 20 lakhs annually are not taxed.

Each year close to 1 million deaths related to tobacco disease are recorded in India; about 600,000 of those deaths are tied to beedis. (Krishnan and Ray, 2011) The beedi industry in India produces 750 billion to 1.2 trillion sticks every year and beedis contain more tar and nicotine than regular cigarettes. India is home to some 300 major beedi companies and thousands of smaller ones. (Krishnan and Ray, 2011) More Indians have been found to be dying of beedi smoking than from all other forms of tobacco combined, according to studies by the World Health Organization and the Voluntary Health Association of India. (Krishnan and Ray, 2011)

The beedi rolling is generally done by poor households in backward areas where the workers usually have no other means of sustainable employment. Although beedi rolling began in the factory sector (in early twentieth century), over the last three decades, the beedi manufacturers have increasingly shifted the work from factories into the households. Currently, only about 10% of the beedi manufacturing takes place in the organised factory sector.

Beedi manufacturing takes place in almost all the major states of India such as in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Kerala and Karnataka. The cultivation of beedi tobacco is mainly concentrated in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, although it is also grown to some extent in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The beedi wrapper leaves are mainly (tendu leaves) grown in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar.

This is a study focusing on the situation of beedi workers in West Bengal. We visited selected locations in Murshidabad and Malda. Despite the terrible health costs of the

beedi industry, beedi manufacturers see themselves as benevolent people who provide jobs to illiterate, unskilled women in the 'safety' of their homes.

In terms of the Human Development Index [HDI] computed for the West Bengal Human Development Report [2004], the district of Malda ranked 17th out of the then 18 West Bengal districts and Murshidabad ranked 16.. Murshidabad has an average literacy rate of 66.59%, male literacy is 69.95%, and female literacy is 63.09%. The sex ratio is 958 and the child sex ratio in the 0-6 age group is 968. The majority population in this district is Muslim. Malda has an average literacy rate of 61.73%, male literacy rate is 66.24% and female literacy rate is 56.96%. The sex ratio is 944 and the child sex ratio is 950.

## II. Objectives

- To understand the profile of people engaged in Beedi work and the nature of the industry
- To explore and identify key concerns related to the welfare of Beedi workers (with a focus on health, social security, labour rights, child rights and gender based exploitation), from the perspective of various stakeholders.
- To understand the administrative structure of government programmes to address Beedi worker welfare and industry regulation.
- To map efforts (especially advocacy efforts) to address Beedi worker concerns by organizations, activists, unions or others, and understand challenges faced therein.

## III. 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. The study was carried out in December, 2016, in Murshidabad and Malda districts. Beedi rolling in Bengal began in Murshidabad in the 1930s. Malda, is adjacent to Murshidabad and beedi rolling is an important source of income.

The table below lists the different stakeholders and activities during the field visits. The focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with 10-12 women. Sometimes more women joined in as the discussion progressed.

Place	People met	Method
Jahangir Beedi Factory Private Limited, Murshidabad	Mustafa Ali Ashraf, Manager and Muhammad Sanowar Sheikh, PF Accountant	Interview
Shiv Beedi Manufacturing Company Private Limited, Murshidabad	Aijuddin, Manager	Interview
Tarapur Hospital, Murshidabad	Mr Arun Kumar Choudhury, Office Secretary, Murshidabad Biri Merchants' Association	Interview
Murshidabad	Aparup Das, Project Co-ordinator, Marfat	Interview
Murshidabad	Md. Azad, District President, Beedi Mazdoor and Packers' Union	Interview
Laskarpur, Murshidabad	Women beedi rollers	FGD

Jigri, Murshidabad	Women beedi rollers	FGD
	Abdul Salim, Munshi	Interview
Arjunpur, Murshidabad	Women beedi rollers	FGD
Tarapur hospital, Murshidabad	Sanjay Bhattacharjee, Medical Officer and Sribas Chandra Biswas ( Group D staff, who assists with welfare programmes)	Interview
	Mr. Shyama Prasad Kundu, Assistant Labour Commissioner, GoWB	Interview
16 Mile, Malda	Women beedi rollers (two groups)	FGD
17 Mile, Malda	Women beedi rollers	FGD
ShujapurGhaspara, Murshidabad	KashmeraKhatun, who runs the SHG on behalf of Reach India	Interview
	Adolescent girls	FGD

#### IV. Mapping the industry in West Bengal

Beedi manufacturing came to Bengal in the 1930s. It is said that Upendranath Sarkar and Bijoy Kumar Sarkar started off the trade in the state.<sup>7</sup> Nibaran Chandra Das and Dukhulal Das established the Mrinalini Beedi Company under the tutelage of Bijay Sarkar. Following in their footsteps, Matilal Jain and Hrishikesh Das established the Bandhab Beedi Factory.<sup>8</sup> As more and more beedi factories got established, people in Murshidabad began to learn to roll beedis – poor and illiterate people acquired the skill so that they could earn a living.

Beedi making as a significant occupation is presently found in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Coochbehar, Purulia, North 24 Parganas, Nadia and Purba Medinipur. Dakhin Dinajpur, South 24 Parganas, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Birbhum and Howrah also have a fair number of beedi rollers. It is the beedi industry that accounts for the major share of employment – more than 85% - in the tobacco industry.

Currently, India is the third largest tobacco producer in the world. The tobacco industry not only earns revenue for the state it also generates employment of a large scale. Murshidabad has the largest number of beedi workers in the state and many big beedi companies like Jahangir Beedi Factory Private Limited, Shiv Beedi Manufacturing Private Limited, Mrinalini Beedi Factory, Appu Beedi Factory, Gopal Beedi Factory are also located there. Patakabeedi is one of the largest companies and its average daily production is reputed to be Rs 13 crores.

At present, the Jangipur sub-division in Murshidabad is a very sought after area for beedi manufacturing. Locals say that businesses from across the country want to set up in Murshidabad, especially Jangipur and then pass off all their beedis as beedis manufactured in Murshidabad. There are no accurate figures available but it is assumed that there are 12 lakh people connected with the beedi industry in Murshidabad, and of them 7 lakh are in the Jangipur sub-division.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Mr Arun Kumar Choudhury, Office Secretary, Aurangabad Biri Merchants' Association

<sup>8</sup> Profile of Women Beedi Workers published by Association of Social and Health Advancement (ASHA, 2007) presents the sequence of events differently.

In a booklet entitled 'Making a Case for Women Beedi Workers in Murshidabad, West Bengal' published by Association for Social and Health Advancement (ASHA) it says that West Bengal has an estimated 14,84,670 beedi workers of which 11,61,870 are women. "A detailed survey of beedi workers in the state is required," said Mr Shyama Prasad Kundu, Assistant Labour Commissioner, West Bengal. "Such a survey will enable streamlining of documentation and better delivery of benefits to workers and their dependents. We will also be able to root out fake cards."

## **V. Process of production**

The beedi industry is a cottage industry and functions through a three-tier system – the workers, mostly women and home based..are provided 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. Technically, the beedi factories are not factories but companies because production occurs in the homes of the beedi rollers. Usually, the munshi visits a village and the workers come to collect their supplies and also give him the beedis they have made.

There is also a 'casual' system of beedi work called 'kena-becha' system (buying and selling), where munshis give beedis to 'small' companies and not to the 'big factories'. The wages paid are lower than the agreed amount for 1000 beedis. However, the big companies also buy these beedis clandestinely from munshis and pay less than they would pay for beedis from 'regular' workers. Needless to say, they are sold at the usual rates and the company makes its profit. Also, buying 'kena-becha' beedis enables companies to keep their production costs low and evade taxes. 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 work in the factory do the toasting of beedis. They are employees of the company. Labelling and packaging is done by workers on a daily wage. For at least a decade now, if not more, men have stopped rolling beedis as their main income earning occupation. Beedis are rolled mainly by women in Malda and Murshidabad. Workers are poor and belong to Muslim and SC communities. Beedi workers work from home The practice for a long time was that beedis were given to the munshi in the name of the head of the household, who was usually male. During the discussions in the field we understood that many men may still be registered as beedi workers but had migrated to other states as construction labourers. Therefore, government officials talk about 'fake cards' or 'fake registration', as they try to explain why many beedi rollers are unable to get their benefits and entitlements. Over the past few years, more women were getting cards in their own names. We will discuss the issue of documentation later in the section on concerns of beedi workers.

## **VI. Social Security and Welfare Schemes for Beedi Workers**

The Central and State governments, over the years, have enacted legislation 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. It provides for coverage regarding daily hours of work, weekly rest, leave with wages, maternity leave, benefits and welfare amenities such as drinking water, toilet facilities, canteen, etc.

The Act prohibits an employer or contractor from arbitrarily rejecting more than 2.5% of the beedis as sub-standard beedis. Rejection of 5% would necessitate making entries in writing, recording the reasons for rejection so that the workers have a record in writing. In practice however, the rate of rejection is higher.

The Act does not apply to the occupier or owner of a private dwelling house involved in the manufacturing process with the help of his family or anybody who is dependent on him, provided the owner or occupier is not an employee of an employer to whom the Act is applicable. Also prescribed in the statute are measures to promote healthy working conditions of workers at workplace in terms of cleanliness, ventilation, first aid, etc. Since most beedi workers in West Bengal are home based they do not benefit from this Act.

The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976 resulted in the creation of Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWWF) for the welfare of home based, informal beedi workers. The BWWF is administered by the Labour Welfare Organisation (LWO) under the Ministry of Labour and Employment and is financed through a levy of cess by way of excise duty on manufactured beedi, which is revised periodically by the central government. This cess applies only to registered companies manufacturing more than 2 million beedis per year.

Some other Acts applicable to beedi workers are:

- The Minimum Wages Act, 1948
- The Employees Provident fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952
- The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948
- Payment of Wages Act, 1936
- Maternity Benefits Act, 1961
- Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923
- Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972
- Chapter IV and Section 85 of the Factories Act, 1948
- Children (Pledging of Labour) Act, 1933
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- Self-employed or wage employed beedi workers in West Bengal are also included in the State Assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unorganised Workers (SASPFUW).

#### **i. Documentation for entitlements**

Many beedi workers have beedi cards issued by the Department of Labour, GOI, which enable them to access different entitlements. There is no clarity amongst beedi rollers whether the documentation is done for individual workers or families. It appeared that the 'head of the family' logic has been followed and mostly beedi cards and PF registration have been for men. In an earlier section, we have described that many men with beedi cards have now migrated out of the district or state for other work. Therefore, government officials say

that there are also many 'fake cards' since the cards are in the name of people who no longer roll beedis.

Munshis have an important role in ensuring that workers are able to register for Provident Fund. They are expected to document the names of the workers they engage and give them to the company. The company thus 'recognises' them as workers and the workers become eligible for Provident Fund. Each company has a code number and their munshis have sub-codes. The munshi is expected to facilitate the registration of workers for Provident Fund by filling in Form 2. Workers between the ages of 18 and 58 years are eligible to be registered for Provident Fund. They are also entitled to retirement benefits after the age of 58. Most workers are not aware that they are all entitled to Provident Fund and should be registered for it. The daily wage workers, too, are eligible for Provident Fund. Even those who register for PF are persuaded by munshis to withdraw the money after five years. It is not possible to withdraw the money before five years and the munshis begin to work on people as their PF registration gets close to the 5 year mark. Such tactics let the companies get away without paying PF and retirement benefits to workers.

#### **ii. Lack of information about registration process and entitlements**

There is much confusion amongst workers regarding the different kinds of documentation they have and the specificities of their entitlements. There are also no programs implemented by the government to ensure that workers are aware of their entitlements, and the procedure for securing them.

"I have recently got my beedi card," said Nirmali Mondol of 17 Mile, Malda. "The PF is in my son's name," she added. She was unable to explain how that had happened.

"My husband has died," said a tearful Rumela Bibi at 16 Mile, Malda. "I need to withdraw the PF money. I don't know what to do or whom to go to."

Several women in 16 Mile in Malda said that they had not got cards because it takes Rs 500 to get cards made. They were not able to say to whom they had to make this payment. Workers were not clear whether they had to renew the cards they had. They said that no one has told them about period of validity of cards and renewal processes, if any.

#### **iii. Access to Welfare Schemes and Entitlements**

Beedi workers and their families are entitled to various health benefits like free medicines and reimbursement of costs upto Rs 30,000 for minor surgery like hernia, appendectomy, ulcer, gynaecological diseases and prostate diseases. Workers are reimbursed actual expenditure on treatment, medicines, and diet charges incurred by themselves or their dependents for cancer. Transport expenditure is also reimbursed. Rs 1,30,000 is reimbursed for treatment of heart disease to workers. A worker is reimbursed expenditure upto Rs 2 lakhs for kidney transplant. A grant of Rs 1000 per delivery is given to female workers for the first two children. Workers are given Rs 500 if they undergo sterilisation. Interestingly, the grant for delivery is provided only to women workers and not to the wife of a worker and this is one reason why males are the documented workers. A financial assistance of Rs 300 is provided to workers for spectacles.

Beedi workers are also entitled to different social welfare benefits, other than health benefits, like, single parents are provided Rs 5000 for the marriage of each daughter upto 2

daughters, children of beedi workers get some financial aid for their education through school and college( Class I-IV : Rs 250 per year Class V-VIII: Rs 500 per year for boys and Rs 940 per year for girls Class IX: Rs 700 per year for boys and Rs 1140 per year for girls, Class X: Rs 1400 per year for boys and Rs 1840 per year for girls, Class XI-XII: Rs 2000 per year for boys and Rs 2440 for girls. A grant of rupees 3000 per year is available for beedi workers' children going to college and Rs 15,000 per year is provided for those attending technical courses).

There is more money offered for school going girls than boys because the assumption is that parents need more 'inducements' to send / keep their daughters in school and the state would like to encourage girls to complete their education. There is more financial support for 'technical courses' in college than for non-technical courses. We could not get a clear idea whether these 'technical courses' are clearly defined.

There is a scheme for setting up Community Centres in Residential Colonies of beedi workers. This will be done through the state government in a housing colony having more than 50 houses. A sum not exceeding Rs 1 lakh will be paid from the BWWF to the state government and Rs 20,000 will be paid for a TV set. Some expenses for visiting Holiday Home in Puri will also be reimbursed. We did not hear about any community centres and did not meet any workers who knew about the Holiday Home.

Workers are issued cards from the beedi hospital / dispensary to enable them to access health services, education and other benefits. All through 2016 there has been disarray in services offered by these dispensaries and hospitals, including the issuing of cards, because by March 2016 the dispensaries and hospitals were to have been amalgamated into the ESI. However, workers are unsure about the processes required for securing documentation and getting benefits. Many do not realise that they have to apply for benefits. They think the benefits will come as a matter of course. Again, workers are not clear about what benefits they get from the state government and what are the measures specifically for beedi workers.

The companies are not eager to ensure the rights of beedi workers. However, some have started charitable organisations and have programmes for the poor like distribution of blankets and sarees, support for school fees and books and weddings and funerals. The JehangirBeedi Factory, for instance, conducts these activities through the Altab Charitable Society. ShahjahanBiswas is the owner of JehangirBeedi Factory and his brother, Imam Biswas , a Director of the company, is a former MLA. This example highlights the economic and political power of the factory owners and raises the question why rights of workers in the industry are not protected but charity work for poor people is initiated.

## **VII. Concerns of beedi workers**

This section presents the concerns that beedi workers expressed during their discussions with us.

### **i. Beedi workers and wages**

The nationally accepted wage rate is Rs 169 for rolling 1000 beedis. In West Bengal, representatives of the Labour Commissioner, GoWB, representatives of the



BeediMerchants' Association (BMA) and trade union leaders meet for negotiations and arrive at the wage that will be paid. Wages are increased every year. The present wage being paid is Rs 126 per 1000 beedis. Factories explain this as Rs 105 + Rs 21 for bonus. Workers are paid for 950 beedis and not a 1000. In practice, workers are duped by munshis through a high rate of rejection of beedis. 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.

The agreement that is made for paying the 'present' wage is a bipartite agreement between the BMA and the TU. The representatives of the state government, though present, are not signatories to an agreement that fixes a wage below the wage officially declared by the government.

Those who supply 'kenabecha' beedis are paid Rs 100 per 1000 beedis. Beedi workers under the kenabecha system are not covered under the Beedi Workers' Acts and not entitled to beedi cards, PF and other benefits from the BWWF. There are women who work both as licensed workers and kenabecha workers and this accounts for some of the confusion around registration and entitlements that workers report.

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. Women demonstrated how beedi rolling is a family / community activity – if the younger children are there to help with cutting and rolling much time is saved. And of course, more hands at work means that a family unit rolls more beedis. This idea of the family activity is reflected in the registration process.

The munshis reject many beedis and the workers feel resentful of this practice. However, they have not been able to combat this 'rejection' which allows the munshi to pay them less than they deserve. Often, munshis also give workers less than the 800 grams of tendu leaves and 300 grams of tobacco that are required for rolling 1000 standard sized beedis. So, workers have to buy some leaves and tobacco from the munshi to cover the deficit.

Abdul Salim of Jigri, Murshidabad is a beedimunshi, who has been working for 20 years. At present he supplies to ShyamBeedi. He has been a panchayat member from 2013. He said that the job of a munshi is to bring material from the factory and deliver it to the beedi rollers, whom he refers to as 'labourers'. The workers then roll the beedis and deliver to him. He said that the contractors have no responsibility to ensure that beedi workers get benefits. He was not sure why beedi workers were not being issued cards. He did not know anything about the proposed amalgamation with the ESI. He said that the factory pays him his commission monthly – Rs 5.40 per 1000 beedis. Munshis visit the factory everyday because they deposit their daily collection. "It is in our interest to increase the wages of the labourers," he said. "Our commissions go up if wages increase."

## **ii. Health Problems Reported by Workers**

The nature of work of beedi rollers involves prolonged sitting with the trunk bent forward and the constant use of fingers. Talking to us workers reported health problems like calluses in hands, fatigue in the arms and numbness in fingers. Constant exposure to tobacco dust results in respiratory irritation. Tuberculosis and bronchial asthma among beedi rollers –

mainly due to the dust they inhale – is higher than that among India’s general population, according to research by the Mumbai-based Factory Advisory Services and Labour Institute, which is part of India’s Labour Ministry.

Throat aches, respiratory disorders, piles and pain in urinary tracts are common problems faced by large numbers of beedi workers said doctors and health staff at Tarapur hospital. Sitting for long hours causes back and neck aches, joint pain, as well as arthritis and gynaecological problems. Many report headaches, nausea, giddiness and burning of the eyes from long hours of work and exposure to tobacco.

“My throat always hurts,” said ManjeraBibi of Laskarpur, Malda. “I always have cough and cold.”

“Doctors ask us not to roll beedis when we are ill,” said MahmudaBibi.

A study entitled ‘Behind the Smokescreen’ conducted by Marfat documenting child labour in Dhuliyān, Murshidabad says that the incidence of back pain is the highest among children who roll beedis. This is because beedi rolling involves long hours of sitting in a cramped posture in confined spaces leading to immense strain on the vertebral column. The incidence of ARI and skin diseases is higher among children rolling beedis because of their greater exposure to toxic tobacco dust.

“Many beedi workers live till they are 75-80 years old. How can you say beedi is harmful? There are no chemicals involved in manufacturing beedis. Each big company is keeping kitchen fires burning for more than 60,000 families,” said one factory manager. He said that there were international efforts to ban tobacco and tobacco products by 2030. He was angry that many things cause disease, for instance, pesticides in vegetables cause cancer but there are no warnings against that. He thinks everyone is out to destroy the beedi industry.

### **iii. Children’s education**

No official estimates of child labour in beedi industry 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 all 11.75% of total bidi workers in Dhuliyān, Murshidabad were children below 14 years. Extrapolating this for Jangipur sub division where there are 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. 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.*

We have said earlier that beedi rolling is a family activity and children, especially girls, lend a hand with beedi rolling. Of course, many of them go to school and roll beedis before and after school and during holidays. However, it is an established fact in India that children from poor families, more so girls, are kept away from school if more hands are needed at home. Also, people often feel that education does not really give them more opportunities. Children begin helping with beedi rolling from the time they are five or six years old.

Most beedi workers admit their children to school. However, children begin dropping out from the middle school level. Many boys migrate for work. Girls who drop out of school begin rolling beedis full time till the time they get married. SulekhaKhatun of Laskarpur, Murshidabad is 18 years old and studies in Class X. NadiraKhatun (18) of the same village left school in 2015, when she was in Class VIII.

The Government of West Bengal has introduced the Kanyashree Scheme to end Child Marriage. The scheme has two components, namely, Annual Scholarship of Rs. 500/- (Rupees Five hundred only) and One time Grant of Rs. 25,000/- (Rupees Twenty-five thousand only). The Annual Scholarship is for unmarried girls aged 13-18 years enrolled in classes VIII-XII in government recognized regular or equivalent open school or equivalent vocational/technical training course. The One-time Grant is for girls who are 18 at the time of application, enrolled in government recognized regular or open school/college or pursuing vocational/technical training or sports activity or is an inmate of Home registered under J.J. Act 2000. At a meeting in ShujapurGhaspara in Malda, we met several adolescent girls – many were in school but there were some who had dropped out of school at various stages. Two young women who were over 18 and had completed their schooling till the Class XII level told us that they had received the Rs 25,000 grant from Kanyashree and had used the money to buy jewellery for their wedding. They felt it made far more sense to spend that money on wedding jewellery than spend it on further education or training. This is not an unusual story in West Bengal – use of Kanyashree money for buying wedding jewellery is reported from various parts of the state.

Many now say that chances of girls completing their school education upto Class XII are higher than that of boys because boys tend to play truant more as they have greater mobility, boys begin migrating out for work from the age of 14-15, while girls can go to school and help with the beedi work at home, and of course, the Kanyashree money is an incentive. Ground level studies are needed to test these assertions.

#### **iv. Access to healthcare, water, sanitation and food**

The Central Hospital for Beedi Workers is located in Tarapur, Malda. 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.

Beedi workers go to state hospitals or beedi dispensary / hospital for medical attention. They complain of uneven service. Also, some said that they have to wait very long in government hospitals and so it makes better sense to go to a private practitioner near their homes. They point out that beedi dispensaries/ hospitals are not crowded but medicines are often not available. “They give us a prescription at Tarapur but we have to buy the medicines elsewhere,” said MujgeraBibi of Jigri, Murshidabad.

People visit beedi dispensaries, government hospitals, private practitioners and also various kinds of ‘local practitioners of medicine’. They make their decisions based on factors like seriousness of ailment, time of travelling and waiting, cost of treatment and travel.

Workers are gradually beginning to build toilets in their homes. However, open defecation is still the norm. In such a scenario, women and girls have to carefully plan their toilet visits.

Menstrual hygiene and comfort remain a problem since there is hardly any privacy. Cleaning toilets, where they exist, also add to women's workload and increases the water requirements of each household.

No one could vouch for the quality of their drinking water. They also said that people occasionally had stomach and digestion issues but were not sure if it was because of the water they drank. Bathing and washing of clothes as well as pots and pans are done in the village ponds. The workers said that their wages were low and food remains a source of anxiety. Preparing food was the responsibility of women. Prices of vegetables, pulses, meat, fish and eggs were always rising and their wages were not commensurate with inflation.

### **VIII. Trade Unions and other organising efforts**

Workers in the beedi industry are home based workers and the very nature of their work makes them invisible and most of them are also women workers. Characteristics of home workers in the industry are poorly defined employer-employee relationship, scattered nature of workplace because every household is a workplace, low skills (beedi rolling is learnt at home from mother to daughter), no bargaining capacity (sometimes a worker may not even know for whom she rolls beedis and so does not know with whom she has to bargain), low wages, absence of social security, and other insecurities related to loss of livelihood. All this makes them some of the most vulnerable among the labour force. Protective labour legislation is absent, does not apply or cannot be implemented. Workers can protect themselves only when they are organised. Workers can be organised more effectively when they have a specific workplace, specific employer and specific terms of employment.

AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) is one of the unions that have attempted to organise beedi workers at the national level from 1920. They started when mainly men did the work in the factories. INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) is another union that works with beedi workers. They have taken up issues such as provident fund and wages. CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Unions) is active among beedi workers in West Bengal. INTTUC (affiliated to the Trinamool Congress) is also present in the West Bengal political landscape.

Some civil society organizations have also been working amongst beedi workers. Association for Social and Health Advancement (ASHA) has its head office in Kolkata but works in Murshidabad district. It is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation engaged ASHA has worked with women beedi workers and adolescent girls in Murshidabad in 40 villages across 21 gram panchayats for several years. ASHA works to build capacities of women beedi workers by mobilising them into groups and facilitating collective action so that they could assert their rights as women and as beedi workers. ASHA's work focuses on building women's leadership and enabling women to create a space for themselves in their families and communities by making their voices heard, accessing government facilities and entitlements and building links between formal structures and women's groups.

ASHA also works towards promoting the rights of girls who are highly vulnerable and get pulled into beedi making and are denied opportunities of education and development. Activities to empower girls are aimed towards breaking the intergenerational cycle of discrimination and oppression.

Marfat is a registered non-profit voluntary association founded in 2004. Its core team consists of economists, social activists, doctors, academicians and communication specialists. Since inception its focus has been on the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal, which ranks amongst the lowest in India in terms of various socio-economic and developmental indices. Marfat's major field level intervention involves ensuring health, education and cultural participation of children engaged in household bidi-rolling industry from the perspective of child rights. Other activities include cluster development of traditional silk weavers, capacity building of Panchayati Raj Institutions, promotion of secular traditional cultural ethos, designing of social communication campaigns and undertaking research work related to developmental issues.

We were on this field trip exactly a month after demonetisation. Beedi factories had reduced production. Many were closed. Workers were not getting their regular quota of work and the work they were getting had to be done for kenabecha wages (Rs 100 per 1000 beedis). Mohammad Azad, the District President of the BeediMazdoor and Packers' Union, which is affiliated to the CITU, told us that the district administration had issued a notice to beedi companies saying that they should not stop work because of demonetisation, and if they were doing so, they should inform the government. Md Azad explained that the companies were getting round this by technically remaining open but reducing production.

The MurshidabadBeediMazdoor and Packers' Union had held a public meeting with more than 3000 beedi workers on December 7, 2016 and presented a charter of demands to the Beedi Merchants' Associations of Aurangabad and Dhuliyān. They said that the increase in prices of essential commodities was making life very difficult for beedi workers. They placed the following demands:

- Beedi workers, irrespective of gender, should be paid the minimum wage per 1000 beedis stipulated by the government. Workers must be paid extra wages if they are asked to prepare bundles containing less than 25 beedis.
- There should be no middlemen between packers and the company. Wages must be fixed according to work done. Separate wages must be determined for polythene labels. Everyone should be included in the PF scheme and bonuses must be increased.
- The kenabecha system should end. Munshis can be appointed as supervisors and companies must take direct responsibility of all workers.
- Companies have to provide identity cards and wage records for all workers. All workers must be included in the PF scheme.
- All workers must get paid leave and bonuses. The workspaces within the company must be kept clean and hygienic.
- Production must be maintained at optimum levels. Production cannot be stopped on any pretext. Rejected material cannot be taken away by the munshi and adequate amounts of raw material must be provided to the beedi rollers.
- Earlier agreements have to be implemented in their entirety and a tripartite committee must be constituted to oversee the implementation.

- All those who work in the beedi industry including porters, packers, sorters and office staff must be included in PF, bonus, pensions and all other benefit and welfare schemes.
- Women workers must get all statutory maternity benefits and allowances.

Md Azad said that at least 1000 workers had assembled on December 7 and there were men and women in equal numbers. However, he said that more men usually came to programmes. It was not clear how there can be 'more men' when most of the beedi rollers are women. Yes, there are male workers in the beedi industry but are there enough of them to outnumber a significant section of women workers? TUs need to reflect whether they do enough to bring women workers into TU processes and decision making.

The production relations and contextual factors in the beedi industry have changed and become more complex but unions continue to use conventional strategies in organizing the workers as well as in dealing with the employers. It is ironical to note 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. Unions have also failed to sensitise the families of the workers by creating awareness of the vulnerabilities that the women face.

In 2011, there was a move from the government to emphasise the health consequences of smoking by putting pictures of skull and crossbones on beedi packets. The beedi unions were opposed to this move because they thought this was a means of closing down the industry. A large contingent of beedi workers from different parts of the country went to Delhi to demonstrate against the move and were able to stall it. From April 1, 2016, the Health Ministry's notification for implementation of the Cigarettes and other Tobacco Products (Packaging and Labeling) Amendment Rules, 2014 came into force. It prescribes larger pictorial warnings, covering 85 per cent of packets on tobacco products. The All India Beedi Industry Federation, a body of over 240 manufacturers controlling over two-third of total branded beedi production requested the Health Minister to reconsider this measure for the beedi industry. They said that such a measure would lead to a loss of livelihoods.

Over the decades the nature and composition of the workplace have changed substantially and problems have become complex and chronic. All parties concerned appear to have accepted these facts and are not able to find solutions. Many union leaders themselves feel that women would prefer to be home based workers, and consequently prefer to be invisible.

Workers today cannot afford to take up prolonged struggles. Unions also work to preserve what workers already have because the threat of losing even that looms large. The strategic position of the employer, the vulnerability of the worker, indifference of the state, all leave the union hanging on a thin thread and the workers accepting exploitation.

## **IX. Recommendations**

This study has indicated some important issues of the beedi industry that affect workers. The state must take steps to improve the situation for the workers and make existing laws and welfare provisions effective. Manufacturers must be held accountable by the state.

1. Proper documentation of each worker is needed: Workers are deprived of their entitlements to Provident Fund and pension because of lack of proper documentation. 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.
2. Regulation of manufacturers: 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 a branch of a big beedi business. This kind of corruption has to end.
3. Establish direct relationship between manufacturers and workers: A direct relationship has to be established between the manufacturer and the worker. 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, paying correct wages and meeting all legal obligations regarding entitlements and benefits.
4. Redefine role of the munshi: His role has to be redefined to promote workers' interests and not to exploit them. The manufacturer must make him accountable for workers' protection and welfare.
5. Strengthen education system: The education system has to be strengthened to ensure that children finish school upto Class XII. Good quality education must be provided to retain children in education. Completing school will give children skills and confidence and equip them to seek more opportunities.
6. Create job opportunities: More job opportunities have to be created so that people can choose. Rolling beedis cannot be the only wage work available. Other jobs will also increase the mobility of women as they 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.
7. Education on effects of tobacco: Manufacturers have to stop pretending that beedis are harmless. They affect the health of smokers but also of workers. Education about the ill effects of tobacco is required everywhere including within beedi factories, amongst the government and of course, with workers. Manufacturers must think of measures like masks, health check-ups, spacious workspaces, provision of toilets and so on for workers.
8. Government must go to the people: The state and state agencies must communicate effectively with people. They have to reach their services to the people. Information

about services, rules, new schemes and so on has to be communicated frequently and effectively.

9. Make the business transparent: A business that deals in tobacco must be committed to transparency. The public needs to know why such a business continues and who are the people benefitting from it.
10. Trade unions, NGOs and other activists engaged in organising beedi workers must **focus on women as workers**. Women workers have to come together to share and analyse their experiences both as women and workers. This will also enable articulation of experiences of violence and discrimination both within the home, at work, and in other places.

## **X. Conclusion**

The beedi industry presents this paradox. There are poor people, largely women, working long hours and earning little money. Their health gets seriously damaged. The effects of tobacco on smokers are well documented. So the product is damaging for those who are working arduously to produce it and for those to whom it is targetted. Of course, the people at the top of the pyramid, the company owners, make fortunes. Despite the harm caused by beedis, the industry is seen as benevolent and useful – providing employment to enormous numbers of poor women and men. Beedis enjoy huge tax exemptions. Research has shown worldwide that taxes on tobacco products are the single most effective way of reducing tobacco consumption and the related health and economic burden. It has always been argued that raising taxes on beedis will result in reduced consumption and consequent unemployment. Nandi A, Ashok A, Guindon GE et al argue that positive gains from higher taxes and reduced beedi consumption may well outweigh any temporary loss in economic activity. Again, the displaced workforce could be moved to a different trade or industry. The most effective way of phasing out this harmful industry has to be worked out. In the meantime, it is important to strategise how beedi rollers may gain other employment and also protect their own health.



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## **XII. Case stories:**

### **Case 1**

Village Name: Rasunpur Gram Panchayat: Ahiran, Block: Suti-I, District: Murshidabad

We heard the story of Mrs D (name changed) (35yrs) who is a beedi worker. Her husband is a migrant labour working in Kolkata. 8 years ago she got Ration card and an Identity card by paying a sum of Rs 300 to their local Munshi. She is getting the reimbursement for the education scholarship of her 2 children (1 boy & 1 girl). But, 3 years ago, when she tried to avail the same benefits for medicines, The Tarapur Hospital refused her card for the same. Reasons given that her card is invalid so signature is not given in the authority. Panchayat Raj Institute (PRI) Member suggested her to meet with the B.D.O to resolve her Identity card problem.

### **Case 2**

Village Name: Ahiran Thantala Gram Panchayat: Ahiran, Block: Suti-I, District: Murshidabad

Mrs M (name changed), aged 45 years is a Beedi worker in this village for a long time. She has 8 children (4 boys and 4 girls). Among the girls, elder two are married and the 3<sup>rd</sup> girl is 20 years old and is a beedi roller just like her mother. Youngest daughter is 13 years old and currently studying in class 7. Out of the 4 boys, elder 2 are married and living separately. 3<sup>rd</sup> boy is 15 years old and studying in class 10, while the youngest boy is 10 years old and presently studying in class 5. Mrs M has a valid Beedi ID card through which she got treatment at Tarapur hospital or Tuberculosis in 2008. Initially she had to make the payment herself but she received Rs. 4900 after a year from the hospital. She received a letter by post, following which she visited the Tarapur hospital and collected the money without any hassle.

### **Case 3**

Village Name -Ahiran Thantala. Gram Panchayat– Ahiran - Block - Suti -1 District: Murshidabad

Mrs N (name changed 36yrs) is also a Beedi worker whose husband is also a migrant labour in Kolkata. She has 4 children (1 boy and 3 girls). The eldest is the boy who is 12 yrs old and studies in class 7. Next is the girl who is 10 yrs old and studying in class 4, then a girl (5yrs) who is studying in ICDS Centre and the youngest girl is 3 yrs who is also going to the ICDS Centre. In 2010, she went to the Nimtita Clinic for availing the identity card and submitted the form along with required documents in 3 months and received a receipt stating the state on which she will get the identity card and she got it. Now she has applied in a school for her girl child but has not yet received the payment but she got free medicines at Tarapur and Nimtita clinic.

### **Case 4**

Village Name: Ajgarpadara Gram Panchayat: Banshabati, Block: Suti-I, District: Murshidabad

Mrs K (name changed (33yrs) is one of the many beedi workers in the village who was grateful enough to share her story. She was married when she was 16yrs old to her husband who is a migrant labour and works in Kolkata. She has 4 children (3 girls 1 boy). The eldest is the girl who is 16yrs old and studies in class 11, then a girl of 14yrs who studies in class 8 and after that her son of 8 yrs who is in class 5 and the youngest is a girl of 8yrs who studies in class 3. She got her house in 2006 which is duly registered and she has all the necessary

papers. And 14 years ago she got the identity card but 3-4 months back her card was declared falsified so she was not able to avail any benefits. The old card was made by their old Munshi who is now dead and the new card will be made by his son which has not yet been done by them.

### Case 5

Village Name: Nayagram Gram Panchayat: Kanupur, Block: Raghunathjung –I, District: Murshidabad

Mrs S (name changed (24 years) is one of the few beedi workers who are quite educated (class X pass). She was a four times scholarship holder (availed the scholarship from her mother’s card), getting successive scholarships from 2010 till 2013. Being literate she is in a position to analyze what benefits one can avail from the ID card & know how to ascertain her rights. She is married for one and a half years and her husband is a migrant labour and is presently working in Kolkata. Although being educated, she never

Year	Amount (in INR)
2010	450
2011	550
2012	1250
2013	1850

**SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNT**

had the scope to pursue alternate career options, primarily because being in a Muslim family; she is not allowed to work outside from home and at the same time is expected to manage the household activities first. She expressed her views regarding the awareness of availing the benefits of a Card Holder. She is also concerned about the existing bitter relationships between the Centre and the State due to which issuance of new cards had been temporarily stopped since 2012.

She is the first daughter of her parents and has two sisters and one elder brother. Her brother is also a migrant labour & both her sisters are equally literate, her younger sister is presently studying in Class XII: the highest feat achieved in her family till now.

### Case 6

Village Name: SonaripuriGram Panchayat: Kanupur, Block: Raghunathjung –I, District: Murshidabad

Mrs A (name changed(30 years) is also a beedi worker, having three girls (12, 6 & 4 years respectively) & a boy (8 years). She is married to a mason (40 years). At present she is not a card holder, despite applying for the same in 2010. In 2010, she went to Nimtita Clinic for the process to get registered as a Card Holder and also got hold of the application form. However due to a mishap at the clinic, it was shut down by the authorities and she was unable to submit the form. Years went by, she is still working as a beedi worker but unable to avail the benefits of being a Card Holder. At the same time, she is unwilling to avail the opportunities from the middleman because of the various cases of exploitation happening in the area.

### Case 7

Village: JagtaiGram Panchayat: Jagtai I, Block: Suti-II, District: Murshidabad

Mrs M (name changed(63 years) has also taken up the beedi making process as a source of livelihood. She is a widow, having a boy working as a mason & living separately. She has been a Card Holder since 2003, however in the voter-ID card; her name is misspelt. Although she had availed medical facilities earlier, but now she is deprived of the opportunity due to this fallacy. Her house loan also got rejected for the same. Furthermore

due to absence of BPL card she is also not entitled to get the Govt. Facilities. Currently she can roll an average of 300 beedi per day which is not enough to sustain her livelihood and needs immediate attention.

#### **Case 8**

Village: Chachanda Colony Gram Panchayat: Chahchanda, Block: Samserjung, District: Murshidabad

Mrs R (name changed)(42 years), currently working as a beedi worker is married to a mason, (50 years). They have six girls, of which three are married and the other three have adequate literacy levels (one is a class VII dropout and the other two are studying in class VIII & VI respectively)

Although she had a PF Card previously, she had withdrawn the amount in 2011. Presently she wants to renew the PF Card, but she is facing hurdles in the process due to lack of coordinations from Munshis. The Munshi, she contacted is claiming that since Mrs R cannot renew the card due to age related issues. However she is quite familiar with the process & knows that she has been deceived by these middlemen.

#### **Case 9**

Village: Kashimpur Gram Panchayat: Kashimnagar, Block: Suti II, District: Murshidabad

Mrs A (name changed)(24 years), a class IX pass-out is also a beedi worker. She was married at the age of 20 years. After marriage only she decided to register herself as a Card Holder. That time, a man claiming to be a representative of the card making process came to their village & collected the necessary documents (voter-ID cards & pass certificates) & money from them. However the man issued them fake cards and never returned back to the village. Since then she is waiting to find the right person to voice her concerns.

#### **Case 10**

Village Name Giasmore Gram Panchayat Sadikpur Suti 1 block District Murshidabad

Mrs S (name changed 32 years old. She was beedi worker. She making in 1000 beedi per day. Which value of Rs. 126. She has no Id card. Her education level is class two. She has married in 14 in years old. She stayed with her husband for one year already she was pregnant. Her husband was migrant labour and stayed of district. When he used to come to home, he tortured his wife Physically and mentally. Gradually the situation became un bearable to her she left in-laws house, she came to her parents house when her daughter was 7 month old. She did not lodge complain against her husband or apply any legal separation from her husband. In the meantime her husband got married to another girl. In the intervention of neighbor her mother in laws gave small piece of land to her. She was a beedi worker . She maintains her family with her own income. Her daughter is 14 years old. She reads in class vii. She has built a one room house by loan 35.000 ( Thirty five thousand) the other beedi worker who was SHG members organized by Bandhan Bank . Mrs S was not SHG members by organized by Bandhaan Bank because she has no guaranter . She paid the 1<sup>st</sup> loan by beedi making. Now 2<sup>nd</sup> time she get loan for a shop in her house. Gradually she paid her loan in one year 1000/- from her shop.

She had no ID card. She was a member of Alliance of beedi worker in Murshidabad. She collected the form from civil Nimtita Clinic. As per norms she submitted the form to Nimtita Clinic. Next time she went to the Nimtita Clinic. There were five hundred women standing

the line. Since it was getting very late and concerned officials left the place so women lost their patience and started throwing and breaking the glass. So no one received the card. Munshi get two mutho ( 50 ) beedi. She protest the extra beedi, The Munshi throwing the beedi and stop her beedi making.

### **Case 11**

Mrs C (name changed) was narrating her story while slowly swinging her child in cradle and at the same time rolling beedi. Her parental home is in adjacent neighborhood of ward no 2 of Dhuliyani Municipality. All the seven members of her family father, mother, two brothers and two sisters are engaged as *beedi* roller.

At an early age (15) she fell in love with her present husband. Despite resistance from both her parental and in laws house, the couple decided to run away and marry. Finally, parents of the couple accepted the marriage. Mrs C is now 17 years old and mother of a four-month-old girl. It was not a normal delivery. They had to pay almost Rs.30000.00 for the delivery in Jangipur hospital (almost 30 km from Dhuliyani).

Mrs C studied up to class vii in a local govt. school. She never liked to study much. But school was fun, she mentioned. Except her husband (21yrs) and brother in law, who are migrant labours, all the four women in the family (along with 2 sisters in law and the mother in law) roll *beedi*. She has learnt rolling beedi from infancy. By the age of 10 she had developed all the skill required to roll a *beedi*. It was so natural for them, she explained, '*one does not need to put much effort into that*'.

On an average, all of them roll 500-600 *beedi* per day. Otherwise they would face ire of family members. Less than 500 beedi is unacceptable. She is a minor, so obtaining a labour (*beedi*) card is out of question for her. But she knows that there are some facilities like PF - pension (*burā kale taka pabe*) for card holders. So, she will try to get a card for herself one day. She knows that there are 'people' who will do it against some money (Rs.500 – Rs. 1000 *hobe*).

Usually they don't face any problem in getting payment. *Munshi* comes in their locality and pay on spot after collecting the *beedis*. However, after demonetization (*Note Bondi - taka nie bank e jhamela*) situation was no more the same as before. They were not getting enough raw materials (quota) from *Munshi*, hence earning has been reduced.

She did not mention any specific health problem, except her tiredness which she started feeling from her advanced stage of pregnancy and it continues. Her family members are very supportive; they compensate her part of production with their extra labour, and they took over the responsibilities of daily house chore like cooking and cleaning from her. Otherwise she won't be able to find time to take care of her child.

## Case 12

Mrs S (name changed) is mother of three children (10, 8 and 3), in her early thirties. She came to Dhuliyān after her marriage. Her parental house was in Jangipur Town. She was married at the age of 15. She was never enrolled to school. Her parents were illiterate and they had never shown any interest for her study, she lamented. After managing routine household work, she manages to roll maximum up to 600 – 650 beedis per day. After sending the children to school, from 9 -2 is the main working hours for her. It takes almost 2-3 hours to cut leaves and arrange everything in order. Her husband – a daily labour, would not expect anything less than 600 beedi rolled every day by her ('noile hankai dibe' – will throw me out of the house).

She is not a registered labour, but her father in law is a card holder. Though she has never seen the original card, she knows a log book exists where Munshi (from Sundari Beedi Factory) put some figures, and she doesn't know what amount is written. Record keeping is not a priority, because cardholders don't see its utility.

*Being illiterate there is no question of understanding what is written in the logbook. In fact, no signature of Munshi, name or stamp was visible in logbook. Name of the labour on the logbook cover was also written very casually, often short / nickname has been used, official stamp was missing.*

Mrs S is sure that education helps. Whatever may be the profession, even for a beedi labour education helps. She does not want to bring her children in beedi. That's why she works hard to earn some extra money. She has realised that educating children has become costly. For proper education one needs money to pay fees in private school or/and private tuition. Children don't learn anything in Govt. Schools, she opined. This year she had already spent Rs. 400 for her elder son (10 yrs) and Rs. 300 for 2nd son (8 yrs) at the time of admission. Then cost involves in buying exercise book, pen, pencil, dress and daily tiffin.

During the entire conversation Mrs S never stopped rolling beedi, her 3-year-old son was clinging to her. At one point, he was asleep on her lap. But she continued rolling beedi with ease as if there is no distraction. While asked about impact of rolling beedi on her health, she said there is nothing special to mention. Of course, time to time she had to consult physician and took medicine, but that is true for anybody whether rolling beedi or not, she argued. On further probing she mentioned about headache, pain in joint but consider those are as natural part (inevitable) involved in any kind of manual labour.

However, she never went to Tarapur Hospital or Nimtita Dispensary for her treatment. Distance is the main cause she mentioned. She also heard that treatment in Tarapur is also not good either. She knows it is better to keep children away from tobacco, and of course it (tobacco dust) takes toll on health in later life. But, having no option left they must compromise with the situation.

### Case 13

Mrs S (name changed) was born and brought up in this locality. Her parental house is few kilometers away from the village now she lives in. They were poor and had a big family (8/10 siblings). She was youngest among the siblings. Her entire family rolled beedi throughout the day. Mrs S picked up Beedi rolling at the age of 7. She is illiterate and never went to school, in fact none of her brothers or sisters went to school. Her illiterate parents took no interest in sending their children to school.

She was married at the age of 16. To raise 7 children (4 sons, 3 daughters) the couple had to work very hard. Together, on an average, they rolled 3000 beedis per day. Her husband is now incapable of rolling much beedi due to age. Together they can now roll maximum up to 700-800 beedis per day. She mentioned that the wage was 50 paise (per 1000 Beedi) when she was a child. She herself worked at a rate as low as Rs.1.26 before.

Now all the sons and daughters are married and they live separately with their families. Mrs S and her husband have no land of their own except the small house (semi pukka) they live in. Though they are not under BPL category, recently they started getting rice @ Rs.2 per KG from Ration (Shop).

Mrs S informed that both she and her husband have Beedi cards (she could not show it as it was with her husband, who was not home). Her husband collected the PF about 5-7 years ago (she does not know the amount). However, her husband had to pay some bribe (where and how much she did not know) to get it. She felt without Mr M Munshi it would not have been possible to get the PF.

Apart from morbidities like fever or loose motion she mentioned about joint pain, respiratory problem (time to time) and poor vision. In many occasions, she got treated at the Tarapur Hospital. She accessed services from BPHC for minor ailments like fever or loose motion. For major problems (*'vari kichu hole'*) she preferred Tarapur. But she is not getting any treatment for her eyes (most likely cataract) this time around. Doctors advised her to go to Jangipur (Sub-divn. hospital) or Sadar Hospital (District Hospital and Medical College at Berhampore) as they did not have the service.

Apart from PF and medical benefit (free treatment) she is not aware of any other entitlements under BWFF. Getting payment was never a problem. However, she mentioned about some irregularities/problems after 'Notebandi'. Payment was delayed, supply of raw materials decreased (volume) and overall effect was less income for them. Now she is getting Rs.126 for per 1000 beedi rolled.

She feels that involving children in beedi is not the right thing. She thinks she was never been to school because of that. Though she had no other option but to involve her own children in beedi rolling, she tried to educate her children. All her children except the elder one, went to school up to class v-vi. Her youngest daughter studied up to class ix. Her sons no more roll beedi, they prefer earning as daily labour in big cities. If children do their study, there is a possibility of earning more and illiterates do not get good (better paid) job (*'mukhyuke ke kaj dibe'*), she opined.

#### Case 14

Mrs N (name changed), aged around 30 years, mother of 3 children (2 daughters and 1 son) started beedi rolling at a very early age at her parental home. It was natural for (many) children like her to pick up the skill casually while accompanying seniors rolling beedi in house. Nobody asked her to do so and nobody discouraged her either. From the age of 12-13 she was a full-fledged labour, could roll more than 1000 beedi per day.

Initially it was fun with the feeling of pride of being earning (important) member of the family, but now she feels she couldn't pursue education because she was rolling beedi. Same was the fate of her other 3 elder sisters. None of them went to school and the entire family was dependent on beedi. Whatever little property (land) Mrs N's father had was sold to arrange marriage of his daughters.

Mrs N was 18 at the time of her marriage. Her husband and in-laws too are beedi workers. None of the family members including herself have a beedi card. Couple of years ago she had paid Rs.500 to a middleman for a card, who told her that she will get her card from Kaliachak in Maldah. Now the middleman says that the Govt. has stopped issuing beedi cards. However, he did not return the money and assured her to get the card once the process starts. Mr M Munshi (another local Munshi) told her the same story that the govt. has stopped issuing cards for quite some time.

Other than PF, she was not aware of any other benefit/entitlements given to a cardholder. On further query, it was revealed by her daughter a student of class ix that, her friends got money because of beedi card (BWWF). Mrs N added that having beedi card also helps to get free treatment. Though they do not have to pay in BPHC either, but she has heard that the treatment facility and doctors are better in Tarapur Hospital. When she was asked about the kind of illness she wanted to get treated in Tarapur, she mentioned two specific events: (1) her second daughter was detected with jaundice last year and (2) her husband was severely injured in a road accident couple of years back.

She suffers from back pain, joint pain and headache. She was sure that more (illness) will come with the age. Her son is suffering from bronchial problem, but she is not sure if it is due to Beedi or not. Tobacco dust (*'beedir gas'*) affects children, she felt. That's why she tried to keep children away from it as much as possible and send them to school. All her children are studying in school, and she hoped her elder daughter should at least complete higher secondary.

Though Munshi could not do anything to get her Labour (identity) card, their logbook is maintained regularly by him. The logbook had no name or signature on it, still it is only 'official' document / reference of their entity as labour.

Though Mrs N could not read, she has full faith in Munshi regarding the calculation and payment made. She never faced any difficulty in getting the payment. The wage has increased over the years, but considering the market price of food item and other commodities Rs.126 is not enough, she felt. She heard that very soon wage will be Rs.191 for per 1000 beedi. That might bring some relief.



### Case 15

Mrs S (name changed) lost both of her father and mother at an early age. That's why her family could not afford to send her to school. Almost from the age of 8-9, she was a full time beedi roller. She was married at the age of 17 -18. Her husband, a mobile garment vendor, does not earn enough, hence she and her mother in law must roll beedi, she explained. They live in a small house of their own and have electric connection. Though they are poor, they were kept out of BPL category. Both she and her husband have bank a/c and Aadhar Card.

At present, she is getting Rs.126 for per 1000 beedi. In reality, she rolls 1100-1150 beedi to get Rs.126. It would be better if wage is hiked to Rs.191 as mentioned by union people, she hoped. On many occasion, raw materials provided by Munshis are of inferior quality and much less in volume than what is told (written in logbook).

Though they do not have a beedi card, she is also aware of entitlement of PF for Beedi Card holders. She knows about some treatment facilities available for card holders, but was not sure of its exact nature and scope. Sabina is not aware of other benefits / schemes for beedi workers.

She approached munshi (Patel Company) to help her get a card 3-4 years back. But, Munshi did nothing citing his inability. Also, her request to union people in this regard was fruitless. She heard that the govt. didn't issue cards for the last 2-3 years. If she knew where to go and whom to approach for Beedi card, she could have pursued.

Though Mrs S is illiterate, she tried her best to educate her children. Her son studied up to class x (did not appear in final examination) is now 21 and a migrant worker (mason). Her daughter, appeared for x final exam this year and is likely to pursue at least up to xii. Though her daughter adopted the skill and from time to time helps them in rolling beedi, Mrs S never ever encouraged or forced her children to do so. To meet up the cost for her children's education she has always worked hard.

Mrs S feels rolling beedi is exhausting. Pain all over the body has become a routine affair. Even after rolling beedi for so many years, she cannot stand the smell of tobacco (*'beedir gas sajhya hoi na'*). Though personally she is not suffering from breathing problem or eye problem, but she thinks that these problems (illnesses) are very much related to beedi rolling.

### Case 16

Mrs K's (name changed) parental home is in Salar. Rolling beedi was not very common like in this part (Jangipur) of Murshidabad. She was the youngest of her family and loved by all. They had some land and house of their own. But her father had to sell most of their land to marry her elder sisters off. By the time her marriage was arranged, they were poor and had no land to sale. She studied up to class vii. She did not give up study because of poverty. Education for girls was not given importance during her childhood days she explained.

She started learning beedi after marriage. She was seventeen then. Her mother in law and sisters in law used to roll beedi and she learnt it from them. Though she picked up the skill quickly, she still lacks the pace like others who learnt it in their childhood.

Though her in laws have been rolling beedi for years, they never had any beedi card in their family. She rolls beedi under the Munshi of one company owner Mr S, living in Kolkata, who sells without labels. When Mrs K approached the Munshi for Beedi card, she was told that there was no scope for issuing beedi card for the owner of such companies.

She is aware of PF and Medical benefits of Beedi Card holders. She also remembered few entitlements such as educational scholarship and housing for beedi workers mentioned in a public meeting recently organized by CITU in Jangipur.

Beedi (rolling) does harm. It is more harmful for children she felt. It not only harms physically, children give up their study because of beedi. She does not want her children to get involved in beedi rolling. Her husband, a migrant worker (skilled mason) also supports her view. However, to educate their three children (2 son and 1 daughter), they must spend at least Rs.3000 - 3500 per month for private tutor and study materials.

Rs. 126 for thousand beedi is not enough. She welcomed the demand made by trade unions to raise the wage to Rs. 191. She also complained about inferior quality and inadequate amount/volume of raw materials provided by the munshi; eventually which effectively reduced her income to Rs.100 for per thousand beedi, as she had to make up the deficit in production with raw materials purchased from local market.

Whenever she raised this issue to the munshi, some women (*relatives of munshi or obligated to munshi for some reason*) invariably disagreed to hush up the issue. Being entirely dependent on Munshi to get the contract, she or for that matter others too could not pursue it hard in fear of losing the job.

However, despite being vocal she never felt any animosity from the Munshi. Apart from some problem during '*notebondi*' she got payment regularly. Malpractice of providing inferior quality and less than the mentioned (recorded) quantity raw material is common with most Munshis. She thinks that possibly the owners have no clue about this malpractice.

While the others work for more than 8 hours a day, she can only manage up to 6 hours. She suffers from back pain, joint pain and headache. She heard it from others, that bronchial and respiratory problem like T.B. are highly associated with tobacco. And she felt it is true '*otherwise there is no reason behind offering free treatment for beedi labours*', she argued. Though they do not have beedi card in the family, Jangipur Sub Division. Hospital provides free treatment to all and more doctors and facilities are available now.

Without any better paid alternative to beedi rolling it is not possible to give it up. Wage hike may provide some temporary relief, but it (wage) would be never enough. Though she has no clue what kind of alternative livelihood skill should be appropriate in her locality and sceptic about the adults to switch to new profession, she is confident that given opportunity many young girls would pursue to change their vocation.

## Case 17

Mrs S (name changed) has 3 sons and 2 daughters. Her elder son and daughter are now studying in class xii and xi respectively. Younger son and daughters go to school too. They have their own house, inherited from in laws, but do not have agricultural land or any other property. Her husband is a daily labour who earlier used to roll beedi. With the help of two daughters, Mrs S rolls around 2000 - 2200 beedi every day. Even after rolling so many numbers of beedi, it is hard to run the family, she said.

Both Mrs S and her husband have beedi card. With the help of her husband's friend (political) She submitted her application in Nimita (a medical dispensary under BWWF) long ago and received the card. Though it took some time to get the card, she did not have to do anything personally to get the card. Her husband had already accessed his PF. But she is not getting the information (from Munshis) about her PF and how much money has been deposited in her account. Other than the Munshi she doesn't know who else to contact.

At present, she is getting Rs.126 for 1000 pcs of beedi rolled. Considering the rejected beedis (*'chant and potti'*) the quantity of beedi she must roll to get payment for 1000 pcs is around 1100 -1200.

Payment has always been regular (weekly) till 'note bondi'. For a couple of months, she earned much less than usual, as raw materials provided was much less than required. However, situation has improved and things are now normalized. Though she was in dark regarding PF related information, she did not find much fault with Munshi. Even inferior quality of raw materials and sometimes less than the actual quantity of tobacco given to her is not intentional she thinks.

Mrs S learnt rolling beedi from her parental home. They were 8 siblings. Their entire family was dependent on beedi rolling. She went to school up to class v. For discontinuity, she blamed her lack of interest/aspiration in study and the negative attitude of her family(and society) towards education of girls (*'barite – parai meyder beshi porte nai vabto. Amar o char chilo na, choto to'*).

She had no idea about beedi card and its benefit before marriage. Her husband, an 'intelligent' person, well connected with important people, knew it all (*'khub buddhi, sokoler sathe valo samporko, sob jane'*). Because of his insistence, she got the card.

For treatment of any illness she prefers to go to Tarapur, because treatment is free and the place is not far from her home. She complained of back and joint pain. She also opined that, tobacco dust (*'beedir gas'*) is harmful for both children and adult.

She was not aware of any student scholarship under BWWF. Her children could have accessed those, if she knew. However, she would try it for her other children.

She knows rolling beedi harms children. It affects their study. But for survival (*'peter janya'*) children must participate. In fact, otherwise it would be difficult to continue their study.

### Case 18

Mrs H (name changed) is around 50 years old. Mrs H parental home was in Barharwa (Sahibganj District - Jharkhand). She is illiterate and never went to school. Sending girls to school in her childhood was very rare in their locality. None of her family members were literate either. All together there are 5 members in her family. All her three children (2 daughters and 1 son) are now married. They have their own house with electric connection. They do not have any agricultural land. Though not BPL, they are getting rice at Rs.2 per kg, which is quite a relief she mentioned.

Before marriage she had no idea of rolling beedi. She had learnt to roll beedi after marriage from her in laws. Though she is rolling beedi for over 25 years, she still struggles to roll more than 500 - 600 a day. But both of her daughters (now married) could roll more than 1000 per day from the age of 10 -12 yrs. she declared with a sense of pride. Her husband, owner of a small grocery shop, was also a beedi labour. But he stopped rolling beedi owing to his ill health. Her husband can no longer sit on ground for a long time in a fixed position.

Mrs H was vaguely aware of beedi card and entitlements of beedi card holders. But, she knows it is useful. Having a card means a possibility of getting some facility from the govt. although she was not aware about the nature of facility. Neither she, nor her husband ever approached anybody for card. She said unlike others she rolled beedi mostly in her house and that is why did not have much scope to get the information. Rolling Beedi in group means exchanging many information.

Sitting for hours in a place was painful for a person with a heavy body like her (*'vari sorir, kosto hoi khub'*) she lamented. Back pain and joint pain became a chronic problem. May be one day, like her husband, she must give up rolling beedi because of pain. Though both her daughters are now married and her son work in Delhi and earn enough to sustain his family, they need money for treatment, family ceremony and many other things. She knew that it is her fate to continue rolling beedi so long her body permits.

Rolling beedi causes harm in some way or the other to both the children and adults. She was not very specific about the nature of harm, but she meant health hazard. Though her children went to school, none of them studied afire class v – vi, because they didn't like it. Like her, her husband is also illiterate.

She firmly believes that whether one has card or not, one needs to know people in place to get any benefit / entitlement (*'thik loker sath chai'*), otherwise nobody entertains. That's how the world runs, she said.

### Case 19

Mr M (name changed) is now 66 yrs. old. He used to roll beedi even few years back. An old resident of Pardeonapur, Mr M was actively involved with left trade union (CITU) till late eighties. Though the land he inherited from ancestors was enough to feed his family, they needed cash to meet up daily expenses. Rolling beedi was not remunerative enough, but because of flexibility of timing he had chosen it. He had a large family to maintain. Father of 9 children (5 daughters and 4 sons), Mrs M had no other option but to engage her wife and

daughters in beedi rolling. Mr M studied up to class vi. Disgusted with the new generation of politicians he disassociated himself from politics / trade union.

Pardeonapur was a part of Murshidabad till 1983. Repeated change of course of river Ganga, especially after construction of Farakka Barrage which devastated the place many times. Erosion and flood was always had been a threat to people of his village, and the threat continues, he said. The reason people picked up Beedi in this rural area because of this uncertainty in agriculture, he opined.

Mr M never applied for beedi card. As a trade union activist / organiser he felt that it would give a wrong message to people who are deprived from card, but he helped many to get their card. He remembers rate of rolling per thousand beedi in his childhood (1960s) was as low as Rs.1 .37. Though not enough but the current rate (Rs.126 per 1000 beedi) is much better than before. It could have been even better if Trade Unions continued their movement. Without labour movement nothing is going to change much, he opined. But he does not see this happening as he feels the TUs don't give them (beedi issues) priority anymore.

According to him Munshis are more exploitative than the owners. Invariably they cheat people by providing inferior quality tendu leaves and less than the actual quantity of tobacco. They also have a share in rejected beedi. To earn substantially Munshis have no other option but to cheat the labours, he rationalised. But Munshis are particular with payment, they never fail. In fact, during 'note bondi', Munshis of his area paid money to labours from their pocket to keep the production going.

His wife, around 60 years old still rolls beedi and is a Beedi card holder. One of his sons runs brand less (without label) beedi business. His daughter in law also rolls beedi. All his sons and daughters have studied up to Higher Secondary, two sons completed MA. He firmly believed that only through proper education one can bring improvement in his/her life.

Rolling beedi is hazardous, he knows. It affects both children and adults. Children suffer more, as it affects their study. Apart from joint pain and back pain, it causes bronchial problems he said. Possibly that's why one can find many TB patient in beedi area. Interestingly, he pointed out that due to malnutrition people suffer more. Families dependent entirely on beedi cannot afford quality food. For those who live in places like Dhuliyān suffer more because of that. In rural areas even land less people get some food from natural resources (like river, fallows).

## **Case 20**

Mrs R (name changed) was born in Pardeonapur. They were 6 siblings – 4 brothers and 2 sisters. She never went to school and she is illiterate. They had some land but not enough to sustain a family of 12-14. So, all the family members had to roll beedi, including her brothers.

She is a card holder. Her husband did everything for the card. She knows nothing about the process of getting a card or the benefits/entitlements associated with it. She mentioned that soon she will get her PF, the Munshi of Pataka Beedi company told her. However, she is not aware when, how or what amount.

Mrs R picked up beedi rolling when she was 12. Now she is 60 and continues to roll beedi. But now, she can't roll more than 800 to 900. But she and her daughter in law together can manage to roll 1400 – 1500 per day. Though she mentioned about her ignorance regarding entitlements for Beedi card, she recalls going to Tarapur Hospital (BWFF) for treatment. Recently she went there for cataract operation but they didn't have that facility there, so now she must go to some other hospital.

She never faced any problem to get payment from Munshi. Neither did she complain of any misdeed or ill behaviour from the Munshi. She also praised the Munshi for providing work and payment during '*Notebondi*'. She knew many had suffered during that time. She could not recall whether any of her children got any money from school because of beedi card.

Rolling beedi for years took toll on her health. Stiffness of finger is a major problem she said. She also complained about joint and back pain. In winter, she often suffered from respiratory problem. She did not mention any health problem of her daughters due to exposure to tobacco. But she feels that handling tobacco has bad effect on health.

## **Centre for Health & Social Justice (CHSJ)**

**Basement of Young Women's Hostel No: 2 (Near Bank of India)**

**Avenue 21, G Block, Saket, New Delhi 110017**

**Phone: 011-26535203, 26511425 Telefax: 011-26536041**

**Email: [chsj@chsj.org](mailto:chsj@chsj.org) Website: [www.chsj.org](http://www.chsj.org)**