

Report of State Level Consultation on

# **PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF BEEDI WORKERS IN TAMIL NADU**

6 April 2017



Organised By:

National forum for Beedi Workers - Tamilnadu

A State Level Consultation on “Welfare of Beedi workers in Tamil Nadu” sponsored by National Forum for Beedi workers was jointly organised by Navajeevan Trust Tirunelveli, and D. Arul Selvi Community Based Rehabilitation, Vellore, Tamil Nadu on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017 at ASHA Nivas, Nungambakkam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The programme started with registration (9.00 – 9.45am) and around 80 people working with beedi workers and other unorganized labourers, social and health activists, research workers, organizers and sponsors were participated. The participants have introduced themselves and represented around 16 districts across Tamil Nadu State and include participants from Kerala, and Karnataka.

## WELCOME TO THE CONSULTATION

**Mr. B. Nalan**, Director, Nava Jeevan Trust, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu has given welcome address and introduced the need for such state level consultation for the welfare of beedi workers. In his welcome address he stated that in Tamil Nadu, most of the beedi workers concentration is found more in Tirunelveli district followed by Vellore. As far as in other districts, for example in Thoothukudi & Kanyakumari, their number is not reported and hence they are not covered under social welfare schemes as a result not availed of all benefits for beedi workers. Further, he briefed the role of Trade Union (TU) in preventing beedi workers from all forms of exploitations and organizing and uniting as well them under the umbrella of social welfare. He remembered the active role played by TUs in salary / wage hike (from Rs. 3/- to 195/-) for beedi workers in previous years.

## INAUGURATION

The **Inaugural Session** was chaired/moderated by **Dr. Chandra**, Executive Director, D. Arul Selvi Community Based Rehabilitation, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

Comrade **U. Vasuki**, National Member, AIDWA has delivered inaugural address. In her inaugural address she stated that 90% of all unorganized sector workers consist of women as they are unable to fight for their wage rights and are preferred by employers. As a result the process of feminization of work has become unavoidable. It is sad to note that beedi work is also not free from such process.

All government policies of privitisation are anti-poor policies and hence affect the poor in particular the unorganized labourers. Both national and state governments maintain silence on the responsibilities in free health care and education. They aggressively promote privitisation of all essential welfare services abdicating their responsibilities. Communal conflicts encouraged by some politicians aggravate the problem of women and children and affecting national integration. In an all women's consultation held, they expressed that there are no definite guidelines for the protection of rights of women and children and they are unable to tackle exploitation and sexual abuse.

As far as beedi industry concerned around 5 lakh workers are involved in beedi rolling and allied activities across the State. It is their prime source of livelihood. By livelihood she means as 'self-respect'. Due to feminization of beedi works the problems in wage, PF, pension (if provided at meager level), gratuity, sexual harassment irrespective of age are prevailing. She emphasized 'ration system' to protect the living standards of beedi workers. For the past two to three decades privitisation has become the policy of both Central and

State governments thereby promoting the welfare of employees; not employers. Recently, demonetization has affected adversely the weaker sections those who are engaged in daily / sundry works for daily wages. Unless unorganized women-beedi workers take up the leadership and fight for their rights and entitlements there will be no relief /or end to their troubles. To accomplish this she has suggested the following:

- Struggle for improving living standards of unorganized beedi workers needs to be unified and to be inclusive;
- The struggle techniques has to be evaluated and need of the hour is 'holistic approach' (socio, political, cultural, religious, economic dimensions has to be given of due importance)
- If possible, merge with other sections' struggle for their rights; and
- Gender balance / equality has to be given of prime importance.

**Prof. Dr. V. Vasanthi Devi**, Former Chairperson State Commission for Women and Former Vice-Chancellor, M.S. University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu has delivered key note address. She shared her experience with beedi workers while she was Vice-Chancellor of Manonmaiam Sudaranar University in Tirunelveli. Form the observation she stated that women are assigned of lower strata works; about 90% of the beedi workers are women; four-fifth of total beedi workers are in Tirunelveli district; as no male member from their family is ready to work beedi industry is the only source for their livelihood so that it become "home-based industry" and hence it is the home for all kind of legal / employment violations. Despite of Minimum Wages Act, they are given of around Rs. 196/- per 1000 beedies which evidences the prevalence of piece

rate / wage in beedi industry. It is important to note that such inadequate wage pulls other members from the family, for example even children attending school, in beedi works. Therefore, it is obvious that wage deprivation in beedi works enhances child labour. Almost all the beedi workers especially women involved are working at home itself in poor and unhealthy environment and hence it bring hazards to their health. Therefore, such home-based industry has to switch over to factory-based to ensure the extension of welfare measures for them. To improve the living standards and working conditions as well she suggested the following:

- As the dominance of agents / middlemen / contractors is found more it has to be abolished so that it would be possible to bring them in organized sector thereby to cover the beedi workers under welfare measures and prevent from all forms of exploitation and harassment.
- As both poverty and unavailability of viable employment forced them to beedi works for meager wages alternative employment opportunities has to be made available.
- Skills to be imparted to prevent women involved in beedi works from all sorts of exploitation and harassments.
- Their health status to be improved.
- Attention also to be paid to improve the conditions of family members also.
- They need help from all quarters and to be motivated to take initiatives to claim their rights.

### **SESSION - I - Mapping of Beedi Industry in Tamil Nadu: Key Findings:**

The ground realities of beedi workers and beedi industry in Tamil Nadu were briefed by **Mr. Joe John**, an independent researcher. The key findings of his study cover the following:

- Prevailing wage rate
- No. of beedies to be rolled per day
- Quality of raw materials
- Achieving target in a day / week
- Repayment of ‘debt (*kadan*) beedi’ if day / week’s target not achieved
- Livelihoods availed from government retail / ration shops
- Health hazards / problems prevailed due to beedi works

Further, he stated that the unavailability of cess / or decreasing trend in cess collection in every year affects the extension of welfare schemes / or made the schemes are in pending / make unnecessary delay / or creates unavailability. The employers through contractors / agents / middlemen used to threaten the beedi workers by stating that

*“if you demand / or fight for more wages / or increase in wage we will shift to Andhra Pradesh; because there we have to pay only Rs. 60/- per 1000 beedies”.*

As indebtedness is common among beedi workers, either they are not ready to come forward to fight to get their rights or demand to increase the wage for them.

## **SESSION : II - Registration of Beedi Workers and their Access to Social**

### **Security:**

The session on “*Registration of Beedi Workers and their Access to Social Security*” was moderated by **Mr. Vidyasagar**, Former UNICEF Consultant, Chennai (10.45 – 11.45am).

**Mr. Mohan Mani** from Centre for Workers Management, New Delhi delivered a lecture on “Registration of Beedi Workers”. He stated that problems in registration will occur normally due to the following reasons:

- Unavailability of forms
- Unavailability of person to introduce
- Conflict among beedi workers

As far as problems in availability of provident fund he noted that due to sub-contracts beedi workers are not available of PF; because sub-contract closes the room for formal employer – employee relationship. While stating the problems related to availability / extension / coverage of welfare schemes, he pointed that

- all control over the welfare schemes is with Central government;
- no budgetary allocation in State government resulted decrease or drastic cut extending welfare schemes for beedi workers;
- cess amount for every 1000 beedies (Rs. 5/-) is not adequate to meet the welfare of beedi workers; the fact is that employers did not reveal the actual number of beedies produced in order to escape from paying cess;

- the ironical fact is that at present the number of registered beedi manufacturers is decreasing on the other the unregistered beedi manufacturers' number is increasing; it affects the collection of cess from the manufacturers.

While concluding he stated the following steps to follow for Trade Unions to fight for the welfare of beedi workers:

- it is indispensable to know that how the wage of beedi workers is fixed;
- it is important to track the history of wage revision;
- ensure that the wage is provided properly to the beedi workers;
- to abolish exploitation and to prevent from harassment probing the role played by contractor / agent / middlemen in beedi manufacture is crucial.

**Status of Beedi Workers – *Voice from Field:***

**Mr. M. Rajangam**, Vice President, All India Beedi Workers' Federation (CITU), Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu stated that in India beedi manufacturing is one of the prime occupation in rural areas and beedi industry is existing for centuries. The raw materials for beedi manufacturing are produced in Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. Around one crore people have involved in beedi rolling and allied works across India of which 75% of the involved directly while the workers involved in beedi works indirectly constituted the remaining 25% in the total. But the government estimated that about 45 lakh people only involved in beedi works.

Of the total beedi workers found in Tamil Nadu four-fifth of them are found in Tirunelveli district. At the time of Independence, of the total labourers

involved in beedi works about 90% was constituted by males; nowadays as the work is feminized and the available wage is low many of them left for other works and hence females outnumbered males with 90% in the total workforce. In 1966 by efforts of AK Gopalan, a Communist MP, Kerala Beedi workers protection law was enacted in Parliament. The objective was to prevent malpractice and exploitation by contractors and sub contractors. The main contents are

- The company contractors must have license to do work
- Workers must be registered and must be given log book / passbook.
- Beedi industry employers must pay excise duty.
- Workers should be given of service card.
- Maternity leave for 12 weeks has to be sanctioned to the women involved in beedi works.
- If dismissed, provision for appeal has to be made availed.
- Should be covered under Leave eligibility
- Central govt 's beedi workers welfare fund has to be availed to all workers involved in beedi works.
- Minimum wages has to be provided and providing dearness allowance has to be ensured.
- Provident fund and Gratuity has to be provided

Further he stated that as per law the workers who completed 18 years of age are eligible to become a registered employee. Unfortunately majority of workers are not aware of the rules and their rights and become subjects of exploitation. There is a great need to create awareness among the workers.

Trade unions need to be strengthened by enrolling more members and active participation of workers is needed. The ground reality in beedi works is that the workers have no direct contact with owners of beedi companies. Some companies offer loans in the name of advance and deduction will be made from their wages and hence making the worker more and more dependent on them.

**Questions from the Floor:**

- What is the reason for providing PF only on completion of 30 years of age onwards?
- How we can increase Cess?
- What is the threshold to provide PF / or how many beedies to be rolled to become eligible for PF?

**What Brought Out from the Session?**

What brought out from the session was summarized by Mr. Vidyasagar is given under:

- Social welfare benefits for beedi workers is not reached to all workers involved in beedi manufacturing;
- Cess is not collected properly; and
- Social welfare schemes for beedi workers are extended and implemented only in the districts where their concentration is found more; and not in the districts where their number is less.

**SESSION : III – Regulation of Beedi Companies and Legal Framework for Contractors:**

The session was moderated by **Dr. R. Marutha Kutty**, Professor & Head, Dept. of Sociology, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.

**Comrade Mr. Karumalayan**, Deputy State General Secretary-CITU, Tamil Nadu in his address stated that at the present political milieu can poor / weaker section avail the benefit of either existing legislations or social welfare measures for them? He emphasized that due beedi industry / manufacturing how the environment gets affected? And as far as possible the percentage of pollution made by beedi industry has to be measured. He compared government's policy of '*outsourcing*' with '*sub-contractors*' in beedi industry. Both are one and acting like the same; the government is ready to give up its responsibility and in this context how we can expect the employers will take up the social welfare responsibilities. If we are clear about this then only we can understand that why welfare measures are not available to all the poor / weaker sections of the society especially workers involved in beedi works. What the government is doing, as he stated, that the funds for social welfare is getting diluted.

Beedi workers have no access or no contact with Trade Unions and have a notion that if they approach any TU to support them we might lose the source for their livelihood. What is the need of the hour to beedi workers, according to Mr. Karumalayan, is class consciousness. He has concluded with an appeal that all unorganized workers particularly beedi workers has to unite to implement Trade Unions' contract with government.

In his plenary address **Comrade Mr. R. Mohan**, Secretary, Tamil Nadu Beedi Workers Federation stated that beedi employers can be divided in four categories viz.,

1. Employers involved in beedi manufacturing in Tamil Nadu
2. Employers involved in beedi manufacturing in Kerala
3. Employers involved in beedi manufacturing in Karnataka
4. Employers involved in beedi manufacturing in Gujarat

All they manufacture beedies through the means of contract. Again he divided the contract(or)s into the following types which facilitates beedi manufacturing:

1. The contractors who receive only raw materials from employers
2. The person working in a beedi industry may be a contractor
3. From a primary contractor to sub-contractor

Among the popular beedi manufacturers Ganesh Beedi, Seyad Beedi, and Kajah Beedi are more popular and produce over 3 crore beedies per day and earns more than Rs. 10 lakh as profit per day.

He further stated that while comparing with other States of India the highest wage (Rs 196.37/-) is provided in Tamil Nadu. However, it is to be noted that the wage varies from one district to another depending upon the size of the beedi. Few manufacturers provide Rs. 215/- to per 1000 beedies without PF, pension, medical allowances etc. it is important to note that as per law if the manufacturer rejects beedies received from the workers he has to pay wage for such rejected beedies. But in reality due to lose of employment nobody can demand wage for such rejected beedies. Therefore, it ensures a basement for dual exploitation viz., labour and sexual. He added that the Government of

Tamil Nadu collect Rs. 54/- towards VAT to per 1000 beedies but no amount is spent for the welfare of beedi workers; while Central government collect Rs. 17/- of which Rs. 5/- spent for beedi workers' welfare. If we have an unified approach we can protect the beedi workers from all sorts of exploitations.

**Questions from the Floor:**

- How we can abolish contract / sub-contact system in beedi manufacturing?
- What are the possible means to come out from the beedi work?
- If the minimum wages is possible in Kerala, why not in Tamil Nadu?
- What would be alternative work?
- Can we eliminate child labour in beedi industry?

**SESSION : IV – Strengthening Enforcement:**

The session was moderated by **Dr. N. Kannan**, Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.

**Mr. Meenakshisundaram**, Labour Inspector has briefed the history of Beedi and Cigar's Act; and stated that it comes under Factory Act. Further, he explained more the provisions of Beedi and Cigar's Act with Objects and Reason. According to him, the Act permits the employer to reject 5% in total beedies if any fault found and such rejected beedies has to be returned to the worker(s); if not wage has to be paid for such rejected beedies. **R. Krishnan**, Advocate, Tirunelveli has briefed the need for inclusion of beedi workers under PF and the methods and strategies to include them in PF. For effective implementation of welfare schemes for beedi workers official machinery has to be strengthened through full-fledged staff structure.

## **SESSION : V – Occupational Health and Women Beedi Workers:**

The session on “Occupational Health and Women Beedi Workers” was moderated by **Prof. Dr. Sankari**, AIDWA, Tirunelveli.

**Dr. R. Manivelan**, State Technical Consultant, National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness, Madras Medical College and Rajiv Gandhi Govt. General Hospital, Chennai said that there are many occupations causing health hazards. The little efforts of govt. are trying to help workers in organized sectors. The company owners are not cooperative in this programme; if occupational health problems are identified remedial measures are expensive and compensation is high. Their interest is only on profit so one can imagine the plight of unorganized sector workers. A separate wing will be established for unorganized workers. It is planned to visit workers every Saturdays offer preventive and curative services. Major occupational health problems of beedi workers are aches, pain due to sitting in same posture for prolonged hours, skin problems, kidney and respiratory problems.

### **Questions from the Floor:**

- What is the difference in injurious matter while smoke beedi / cigarette?
- I’m smoking and rolling beedi for the past 40 years; but I’m fine..how can you say beedi is injurious to health?
- Will TB affect beedi workers alone?
- Will inhaling of tobacco for prolonged years lead to illness?
- Is uterus cancer to women due to their involvement in beedi works?

**Prof. T. Rajamanickam**, President, Tamil Nadu Science Forum, Chennai has cleared many the doubts on health problems based on the findings of an empirical study. He has highlighted from the study that mostly adults who are in the age group of 31-40 years involved in beedi works; almost all they have completed primary education only; working for about 10 hours per day; their weekly income ranged from Rs. 500-1000/-. Almost all they are working at home / or nearby common place; they themselves formed an ‘informal beedi rolling group’. From dawn to dusk they are with tobacco, beedi leaves and other related materials.

Cough, Neck Pain, Back Pain, Knee Pain, Leg Pain, Finger Numbness, Eye Inflammation, Stomach Pain, Gastric Trouble, Head Ache, Ulcer are common among them. A significant proportion of women are suffering of Asthma, Throat Inflammation, Difficulties in Breathing, Arm / Shoulder Sprain, Leg Swelling, Difficulties in Sitting, Hand Sprain, Eyes Tears, Eye Defect, Constipation, Tachycardia, Giddiness, White Discharge, and Infertility due to beedi works. He has suggested the following means to combat the hazards of beedi works:

- Commute to hospital for regular health check-ups;
- Ensure hygienic working and home environment;
- Take nutritious food to increase immune power.

**Way Forward – Group Discussion and Sharing Plenary:**

**Mr. Nalan**, NJT has chaired the sharing session on way forward made the session open for suggestions from the participants. The suggestions received from the participants are given below:

- There is a need to make the workers know about rules and welfare programmes for beedi workers.
- Govt. health and education services must be made easily accessible for them as they cannot afford private services.
- Regional Forums of beedi workers to be formed and workers to be educated about rules and regulations.
- The importance of labour unions with large no of workers to realize their rights must be stressed.
- NGOs, beedi workers and govt. representatives must be members of the forum.
- Unite Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi districts and organize meetings regularly at State / Regional level
- At least Two-day quarterly meetings to be held, with an objective to review the activities and programmes to be done. Though such meetings extension of exploitation can be explored to sensitize beedi workers.
- A memorandum of demands to be prepared and presented to govt. and follow up for action.

***The consultation ends with the following concluding remarks:***

- Efforts will be taken to organize beedi workers at state and regional level;
- Tie-up with other Forums / Trade Unions will be made;
- As far as possible accurate data on the workers involved in beedi manufacturing will be collected.

- District-wise focus on welfare of beedi workers will be given of due importance.

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