

# Magic of Hands: A Study on the Lives and Work of Women Beedi\* Workers in Bardhaman District of West Bengal

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## ABSTRACT

Tobacco occupies an important place as a plantation crop after tea, coffee and rubber. The Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal are the leading producers of different varieties of tobacco. India enjoys second position in tobacco production as well as export, China occupying the first position. Among the varieties of tobacco, beedi leaves are mainly produced in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka while West Bengal specialises in cigar, hookah tobacco, chewing tobacco and snuff. Manufacture of these items undergoes a number of processes: production, processing (like leaf plucking, drying, rolling, etc.), packaging, and marketing. Of all tobacco products, Beedi making is one of the earliest and widespread in the suburban areas of towns and cities. With the passage of time, from a mere house-based work, beedi manufacturing became one of the informal industrial units of the country. Informal economic sectors are characterised by their informal mode of employment and utmost socio-economic exploitation of workers, women in particular. Women in informal industrial units form a marginalised class of workers and hence are easy targets of exploitation. Actual work of beedi rolling is done by women, a gendered formulation of work, which the paper will explore. The research article will thus, primarily focus on women beedi rollers in Bardhaman district of West Bengal, India and will throw light on their working and socio-economic conditions. It is a micro-level initiative which aims to incorporate itself in the macro study of different aspects of Beedi industry related to work and labour.

**KEYWORDS:** class, exploitation, gender, women worker

\*Beedi is a thin cigarette wrapped by hand in tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) or *Piliostigma racemosum* leaves and tied with a string at the end.

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## I. Introduction

Beedi making made its first appearance in Gujarat in the nineteenth century. Gradually it spread to Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and the other South Indian states. During the mid-twentieth century it developed as an industry. Beedi making became widespread in West Bengal from the 1960's. This necessarily attaches a historical importance to the industry since ages. Beedi making is a labour-intensive enterprise and operates as an unorganised sector. The processes involve a good number of workers, both male and female. It is a cottage industry which employs a large section of rural population immediately after agriculture and the textile spinning-and-weaving industry. The distinct characteristic of this industry is a sizeable number of women and children are employed. The All India Beedi, Cigar and Tobacco Workers Federation estimated that women comprise 90–95 percent of the total employment in beedi manufacture (Annalakshmi, p. 49). Women are considered to possess the expertise of beedi rolling because of their nimble fingers. According to the Report on Survey of Labour Conditions in Biri Factories in India, “the industry is mostly carried on in 3 distinct forms, viz., (i) factory or sardar system, (ii) contract or thekadar system and (iii) khep or gharkhata system.” (Annalakshmi, p. 1) Maximum number of women workers is engaged in the third system, where they make beedi sitting in their homes. In this work, mostly women take the lead, a prominent example of the concept of ‘work from home’, so to speak. Since the household is not a recognised industrial unit, hence workers engaged skip any kind of governmental survey and are easily excluded in the total number of employees engaged in beedi production. This procures a two-way benefit, thus categorising women’s labour in an economic setup, determining social status which in turn reveals the true facets of employers in unorganised units.

Coming to Bardhaman district of West Bengal, the survey on small-scale industries in Bardhaman shows that the beedi-making industry employed the highest number of female workers. It has been found from the Census report of Bardhaman that in 186 units about 628 people were employed in 1951 out of which 129 were female workers (Census, p. 146). Unfortunately, district statistical records could not furnish any information on beedi factories throughout the 1960s and 1970s due to absence of registered beedi factories in Bardhaman. The reason might be found in the organisational structure of beedi-manufacturing units. Production was largely clustered around small units and not the so-called 'factories'. A factory specifies an area with an infrastructure and setup for production, convenient environment for workers providing basic amenities and where production takes place on a certain scale. It has to abide by government rules and legislation. Undoubtedly, small units provide more employment than factories in regard to total employment in Bardhaman. On the contrary, the scenario is slightly different for Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra where survey reports show women are employed in large numbers in factories rather than in small units. This clearly shows that nature of industry varies depending upon demand, production and localised nature of workforce.

## **II. Area of Study**

In comparison to Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, West Bengal has less number of registered beedi manufacturing units. The decline may be attributed to the popularisation of *gharkhata* or home-based system of beedi production. Earliest evidence of beedi making in Asansol, one of the prosperous city of Bardhaman district can be found in the accounts of J.C.K. Peterson (District Gazetteer, p. 162). The prime study areas are surrounding suburban localities of Bardhaman town which is the hub of beedi-making units. Some manufacturing units are also found in Natunhat, Katwa, and Ausgram block of the district.

## **III. Research Objectives**

The principle objectives of research can be mentioned as:

- i. To identify regional specificities of beedi manufacturing units in Bardhaman district.
- ii. To study in details women's work as beedi rollers and various exploitations and challenges faced by them.
- iii. To analyse women's identity as a 'working class'.
- iv. To examine the welfare measures adopted for women beedi workers and how far they actually benefitted them.

## **IV. Methodology**

The research has been conducted using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. A survey was used to collect quantitative data based on statistical records in different governmental and non- governmental proceedings. Extensive field survey was conducted in areas having beedi manufacturing units to understand the actual nature of the industry and workers life. Structured interviews were conducted for qualitative data collection with different types of workers associated with beedi manufacturing and even some trade union leaders. Therefore, analysis of all statistical data together with interviews and field analysis helped the researcher to carry out the research work.

## **V. Discussion**

### **■ Nature of Workforce**

The basic nature of workforce was that they were rural people, often tribal, hence belonging to economically backward communities. In factories, women fall under the category of 'production-related workers'. Women are engaged in beedi rolling, packing and labelling. Female sweepers and tea makers are at times recruited in some units. For years the classical reason behind women being employed in such sector has been their easy availability for lower wages. Their deft and nimble fingers can do magic—from plucking tea leaves, spinning yarn to rolling beedi leaves.

Recruitment of workers generally takes place at factory gates. People possessing the ability to manufacture beedi seek employment from factory owners and their wages are met by the management. Those working under a contractor are employed by the former himself from the local populace. They receive their wages from the former. However, the percentage of workers employed through contractors are less compared to those employed in factories.

Before the implementation of the Factories Act of 1948, a large number of women were engaged in various industries in India. Their number began to decline post-1950s. This was true in the case of beedi factories too. The need to adopt different measures to provide a congenial environment for workers and to provide for basic amenities and special arrangements for women workers and their children led factory owners to do away with female workers to curtail extra expenses. Women themselves preferred working from the house, firstly, because they could thereby easily balance both their household and production work and, secondly, because working condition in factories was not conducive for them.

Workers related to managerial and administrative tasks were permanent employees. The rest were temporary workers. This difference was due to the nature of payment for the above categories. Fear of losing job was not great in initial years because the demand for beedi and supply of raw materials happened in a continuous chain. Workers in beedi factories commenced their work at 8 or 9 a.m. and continued till 9 p.m. Children were made to work eight hours in a day. Interval during work was not fixed and workers took rest anytime they wanted, though supervisors and managers always kept a strict eye on them. Not much by way of healthy atmosphere and sanitation facilities were provided. There was no fixed routine for a worker's weekly leave and most of the times they had to work throughout the week without a single day's leave. Conditions improved a little when the Factories Act was implemented in these manufacturing units. The Act fixed the working hours for adults and provided provisions for a healthy working environment—that is, a workplace with enough light and air, drinking water and proper toilets for workers, and health benefits. Separate arrangements had to be made for women workers. Other provisions of the Act included:

- i. Casual leave benefit was to be given to workers for 11 to 15 days per year.
- ii. One weekly off day to be granted with pay.
- iii. National and festival holidays were to be given.
- iv. Hour of work for an adult was not to exceed 9 hours per day and 48 hours in a week. The Act reduced working hour of children from 8 to 4.5.
- v. Maintenance of rest shelters and canteens for workers.
- vi. A crèche was to be opened where more than 50 women workers were employed.
- vii. Medical facilities in the form of hospitals, dispensaries, ambulances were to be provided.
- viii. Educational facilities were to be arranged for the worker's children and adult education centre to be opened.

Unfortunately, these provisions were hardly implemented in any such beedi factories in our country. Only a few provided drinking water and toilet facilities. Separate provisions for women workers were totally neglected. Survey of beedi factories in 1967 clearly showed the true facet of labour condition and industrial complexes. Leave benefits were enjoyed by permanent employees in a handful of factories. The actual beedi makers faced exploitation both in labour and wage. Though factories still employed women workers, they remained deprived of the minimum benefits. No factory provided a crèche or some similar arrangement for children below 6 years of age. The dubious attitude of factory owners towards female workers led to their decreasing numbers. As work load increased, the latter found it difficult to work outside for so long leaving their families unattended. More and more women started to work from their home. However, factory owners totally did away with provisions and benefits such as drinking water, leave, health benefits, etc. They became residual workers. Owners were only concerned with their products, delivered within the stipulated time.

Beedi workers suffer from various diseases, tuberculosis being the commonest. Continuous exposure to the smell of dried beedi leaves results in respiratory problems. Respiratory protective equipment is hardly provided by the authority. Unawareness among workers is also responsible for deteriorating health conditions.

#### ▪ Wage structure

According to wages, beedi production workers are classified as time-rated and piece-rated. In most factories, the piece-rated system was the prevalent method of payment. Wage is fixed per thousand beedis. Other workers are time-rated. The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 authorises central and state governments to fix minimum rates of wages for employees in industries employing 1,000 or more workers. Beedi industry qualifies for the above. In 1951 workers received Rs 2.10 per thousand beedis in the factories of Bardhaman (WBLYB 1957, p. 81). In comparison beedi workers in Howrah and Hooghly received as much as Rs 2.40. Survey of Wages show that figure slightly differed towards the beginning of the 1960s—Rs 2 to 2.25. The average annual earnings of beedi workers can be estimated to be Rs 474 towards the end of 1954 (WBLYB 1957, p. 87). The minimum wages received by workers in beedi manufacture in West Bengal according to the Minimum Wages Act 1948 is given below.

TABLE 1:  
Minimum wages received by beedi workers in West Bengal in 1954 and 1962

Year	Minimum wages (per 1000 biris) in Rs.—a.—p.
1954	1—12—0 to 2—4—0
1962	0—0—87 to 2—0—25

Source: *Indian Labour Year Book [ILYB] 1953-54 and 1962.*

However, minimum wage rates varied depending upon demand, size of factories and number of workers employed. The leading producers of tobacco products—Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra—had several large factories where women workers formed a large percentage of the total workforce. Though in Andhra Pradesh

maximum women workers were found in small industries, in comparison to West Bengal their figures were naturally high. For example, in Bombay minimum wage rate in beedi factories for the year 1954 varied between Rs 1.14 to 2.80 the highest in India. Wages may have increased through subsequent revision of the Act, but no data is available to corroborate our belief. Socio-economic conditions suggest that minimum wage rates were violated specially in home-based units. Indian Labour Year Book [ILYB] records, per-capita daily earning of workers employed in tobacco manufacturing including beedi was Rs 25.75, 17.38 and 23.29 for the years 1980, 1981 and 1982 respectively.

#### ▪ **Trade unions**

Factory legislation and labour laws require every worker to be unionised under a registered trade union. But how far women could be mobilised to participate in union politics remains unanswered and unclear. Since separate information on trade unions for Bardhaman district is unavailable, we will have to extrapolate from all-India statistics. Table 2 gives the total number of unions in India in beedi industry and their membership.

Table 2: Total number of unions in India in beedi industry and their membership

Year	Number of unions submitting returns	Membership (in 1000s)	Average membership per union
1960-61*	786	340	432
1961-62	111	95	852
1980-81	60	52	860
1981-82	29	6	191

\*Including other tobacco products

Source: *Indian Labour Year Book (relevant years)*

It is evident from Table 2 that number of unions decreased together with their membership. The decline may be attributed to the merger of unions or failure to submit returns. Though total membership decreased, average members per union increased. This indicated an inversely proportional ratio: number of unions decreased but their size became larger. However, no segregated data on male-female membership is available. Generally, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) were the leading trade unions in beedi industry. They operated along with their local units like Bardhaman Biri Shramik Union (Bardhaman), Biri Shramik Association (AusgramBlock I) and so on. Though unions tried hard to mobilise and include the poverty-stricken, exploited women workers, they failed to rescue them from the vicious circle. To take an example: every worker was to be provided with an employment card by the contractor to avail government benefits. Trade unions had protested the fact that most workers do not have it as factory owners and contractors are reluctant to provide details of workers in government records. This is the easiest way to avoid labour legislation and thus deprive the workforce of their rights.

The contradictory interests of the employers and employees set the stage for strikes, lockouts and industrial disputes. Beedi making is a labour-intensive cottage industry. Here different types of disputes took place. Firstly, in most cases strikes and work stoppages centred around the demand for increase in wage rates. Out of several workers' protests in beedi factories in West Bengal in the year 1957, seven strikes were serious in nature. Among them two were wage related and three due to personnel issues. Four of these had to be mediated by government labour officers and the Labour Directorate. Secondly, industrial disputes related to retrenchment, conditions of employment, leave, non-payment of wages, etc were also taken care of by the Labour Directorate. In these cases, some could be disposed of while others remained hanging for indefinite periods. In 1958 the total number of disputes rose to 55 where about 9052 workers were involved. However, number of women involved in these strikes and protests are not known.

## **VI. Findings**

#### ▪ **The work and working conditions**

The home-based beedi industry is the informal sector which employs by far the highest number of rural women. The industry flourishes in those areas where there are no alternative sources of livelihood. Women are compelled to work as beedi rollers to sustain their livelihood. Published literature estimates that about 76 percent of the beedi-making population is female providing half of the total family income. (Basu, Sarkar & et.al . p. 5) Utter poverty pushes them towards a hazardous occupation. These workers remain isolated from the total industrial workforce. Tribal and non-tribal poor women can be seen rolling beedis in their houses. Sometimes economically backward Muslim women also work as beedi rollers. Working conditions of beedi workers employed in factories and household are more or less similar. Small shabby ill-ventilated places accommodate several workers with no provision for proper drinking water and sanitation. Workers have to report by 8 or 9 a.m.

and could not return home until the work is completed. Women face both social and physical challenges—a very common feature of our gendered society. The only advantage for them is that they work from their homes. As mentioned earlier, women prefer this type of employment. Besides meeting the household chores, they engage themselves in beedi rolling. Especially mothers could easily attend to their small children while making an earning. The scenario features a home-based production system completely different from the concept of household industry.

In this system workers are tied to contractors, who supply them raw materials like tobacco, tendu leaves and thread. Wages are paid on piece-rated basis, i.e., per thousand beedis. At times a female worker takes help from other female family members including children. In this way children attain the expertise in beedi rolling. Inadequate working condition persists. As workers belong to economically backward classes, the places where they live are small, unhygienic and devoid of basic necessities. Often the same space is used for eating, sleeping and beedi rolling. Though the government has fixed the minimum wage for workers, they never get the same. The contractors exploit them by paying low wages and that too on an irregular basis. Moreover, they are not paid for low standard beedis and defective beedi pieces. Illiteracy, ignorance and the fear of losing jobs further took away gestures of protest. Year after year they become indebted to moneylenders or *mahajans* of the village. Economic loss is further aggravated by physical decay. Continuous exposure to tobacco dust causes cough and other respiratory trouble. The other ailments which women suffer are head ache, shoulder pain, eye problem, loss of appetite, intestinal disorder and allergies. Sitting in a same posture for 9 to 10 hours while beedi rolling result in musculoskeletal disorder and genetic problems in future generations. Women working for nearly 10 years suffer from asthma, tuberculosis, spondylitis, numbness of hands and limbs and weakening of eyesight, which become chronic as age increases. Added to this is their nutritional deficiency mainly causing anaemia. But proper medical aid is hardly provided by the contractors nor do they have the required money for treatment. Few workers who went for treatment in primary health clinics were discharged after nominal diagnosis. They were totally kept in dark regarding government benefits and welfare schemes. These do not reach these poor souls. Contractors take undue advantage of their poverty and compulsion to make huge profits.

#### ▪ **Welfare Measures**

In subsequent years, few welfare acts have been enacted by the government to ensure labour welfare especially in beedi factories. These include healthy working conditions, proper amenities and health benefits to workers so that their work becomes more productive, which is a pre-requisite of a healthy economy. The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act was passed in 1966 with the object to regulate working conditions and provide welfare to the workers. Its main provision for women workers includes fixing of working hours and prohibition of women employment between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. In 1976 the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act was passed to promote welfare of persons engaged in beedi establishments. The Act extended its provisions to both factory workers as well as workers producing beedi from their homes or engaged under a contractor and also to every worker whether skilled or unskilled. A fund was to be created and utilised by the government towards improvement of public health, prevention of diseases, improvement of sanitation facilities, educational facilities, etc. The benefits of the above welfare measures were never felt by the huge workforce working from their homes, completely isolated from the industrial setup. They were the victims of gross exploitation. The Act also recommended the formation of a Central Advisory Committee with many state-level Advisory Committees. These Committees should have at least one women member. To collect money for the welfare fund, the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act was passed in April, 1976. It also provided provisions to maintain hospitals for workers where a special TB ward was to be made. The Employees Provident Fund Act of 1977 extended its provisions to home-based beedi workers. But in a situation where workers do not receive their due wages in time, benefit of provident fund scheme truly becomes a ridiculous thought. In spite of these measures, the conditions of workers have not changed. They are continued to be exploited by factory owners, ill health and poverty being the ultimate truth of their lives. Surya Narayan Rao, the president of the Central India Bidi Working Associations, stated in 1988 that beedi workers of whom quite a large number are women are treated like bonded labourers. (Purkait and Sardar, p. 1500)

### **VII. Conclusion**

In conclusion it can be said that the beedi making industry, undoubtedly an unorganised sector has its own regional specificities. Location, demand and nature of workforce are the key factors which determine difference in wages. They absorb labour from socio- economic backward classes, tribals at times. Women played a pivotal role in beedi manufacturing by doing the strenuous work of beedi rolling with efficiency and delicacy. However, their worth as labour has always been undermined. Firstly, they were recruited because women in labour market forms the cheapest workforce hence can easily be exploited, and secondly, since they preferred to work from their homes, they never qualified as industrial labour. The *gharkata* system of beedi making is widely prevalent in Bardhaman district. Women did their work with utmost skill, but illiteracy, socio- economic



backwardness, lack of awareness and gender biasness deemed them 'unskilled'. They rolled beedis to earn for their living, to supplement family income. Survey clearly reveals that they are only concerned with the wage they receive against their labour. But whether it is their appropriate share they fail to understand. At the end of the day, they have to return to their houses and lit the fire to cook food for their family. This is how they become the prime victims of wage discrimination and it is here that owners and contractors economically exploit them by denying even the minimum wages. They receive no benefits at all, not even those working in industrial setups. Thus, welfare measures remain restricted only as written record. A very familiar scene is that the younger generations specially girls from a very tender age learn from their mothers the art of beedi rolling and most times helped them.

Regarding the question of identity as workers, the women beedi rollers of Bardhaman district are hardly aware of their rights and privileges. Their enrolment in trade unions is not documented but an assessment can be made that they were way behind such awareness. Class consciousness is a big term for those who are unaware of their individual identity as human beings. Women engaged in beedi manufacturing though had their own way of livelihood yet lacked the consciousness as a working class. Gender stereotypes in patriarchal society camouflage women's existence. Alike all other informal sectors, women workers in Beedi industry remained struggling within the labyrinth of class, caste, gender and wage discrimination.

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