



livelihoods

today and tomorrow

December 2017

‘Sukshetram’

Beedi Workers

Poor man's smoke; BEEDI! Beedi is a forest product. An agro-forest based cottage industry dependent on Tendu leaves collection and Tobacco. It is one of the highly labour intensive industries as the manufacturing process is done manually requiring special skills. Indian tobacco cultivation began in the late 17th century and beedies were first made when the tobacco workers took the leftover tobacco and rolled it in leaves. During 1930s, commercial Indian beedi industry saw rapid growth and also was driven by an expansion of tobacco cultivation at that time.



Poor man's smoke; BEEDI! Beedi is a forest product. An agro-forest based cottage industry dependent on Tendu leaves collection and Tobacco. It is one of the highly labour intensive industries as the manufacturing process is done manually requiring special skills. Indian tobacco cultivation began in the late 17th century and beedis were first made when the tobacco workers took the leftover tobacco and rolled it in leaves. During 1930s, commercial Indian beedi industry saw rapid growth and also was driven by an expansion of tobacco cultivation at that time.



A standard beedi contains about 0.2 grams of rolled tobacco flakes. Beedi making falls both under organized and unorganized sector. In our country, plucking of tendu leaves, their collection, storage and distribution amongst the beedi manufactures are handled by the State Department of Forests. A large number of workers in the unorganized sector are engaged in beedi rolling, sorting, checking, baking, labeling, wrapping and packing, which are covered under the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966.

Beedi industry falls under both organized and as well unorganized sector. Under organized sector, the beedi manufacturers are subject to Central Excise at the rate of Rs. 9/- per 1000 beedis. Whereas, the small beedi manufacturers in the unorganized sector, manufacturing up to 20 lakh beedis per annum are exempted from excise duty. Core of the beedi industry is marked by the Brand Establishments or Trade Mark Establishments. The above undertake functions of distribution of raw material, sorting, checking, baking, labeling, packing and marketing of beedis.

Rolling of beedis is the most labour intensive operation and is entrusted to home workers; mainly females. The main reason for the above is that by middle of 20th century beedi manufacture had grown into a highly competitive industry, with increase in beedi's popularity. During 1940s-60s, there was increased regulation in beedi making; thus, it became a cottage industry, with home-based women workforce predominantly employed only in beedi rolling, and males employed in other aspects of beedi production.



The females are directly handled by the Trade Mark Establishments or hired through Contractors. Raw material is supplied directly to the female workers and beedis are rolled through a network of collection centres; infamously known as Beedi rollers. The contractors are paid commission by the Brand Establishment. The beedi rollers thus engaged constitute

a majority of the employees in this industry. The type of establishments covered under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, include the establishments licensed under the Beedi and Cigar Workers Act, 1966.

There are also other large numbers of those factories functioning without the requisite licenses within the excise exemption limit of 20 lakh beedis per annum, which are also covered under the Minimum Wage Act, 1948. The Beedi establishments can be grouped under the following categories.



- Trade Mark Establishments or Brand Establishments Branches of the Brand Establishments;
- Distribution Collection Centres;
- Contractors Sattedars.
- Un-branded Beedi Establishments.

This industry has different types of employees engaged. As per the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, home workers, as well those working with the permission of or under agreement with employers or the contractors are employees. Any person engaged or employed in any premises by or through a contractor with or without the permission of the employer is contract labour. Conditions of beedi workers are very exploitative, and this industry was once a dominant one, after agriculture. Beedi workers are one of the most exploited sections. With increasing population, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, beedi industry appeared and continues to appear an easy way of earning a wage irrespective of age and sex. Men, women and children work in the beedi informal industry. It is one of the easiest ways to earn a livelihood; over 50% of the beedi workers are women, because beedi rolling is an art most suited for deft fingers or females.

This industry provides livelihoods to lakhs of families, but yet the economic condition of workers is far from satisfactory. The main reason for this is their exploitation by the employers and unsatisfactory policies of the government, and middlemen or/sattedars playing an important role. As the sattedars facilitate contact between the principle employers and the workers. In Ahmedabad, the women workforce in this industry is 80% and it is a home based industry. The informal industry provides economic security, which is, however, coupled with exploitation and innumerable health hazards. On the production side, four key steps are involved in beedi making and they are: a) rewinding the thread; b) cutting the beedi leaves; c) rolling the beedis; d) folding the beedi head. There are various laws that directly deal with beedi workers and they are:

i) The Beedi and Cigar Workers

(Conditions of Employment) Act 1966

(ii) The Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976

(iii) The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act 1976

One of the problems in this sector is to locate and estimate the number of beedi rollers engaged by these small beedi manufactures. As a result the workers are deprived of the benefits of the various labour laws and escape the notice of enforcement officers. This activity is one of the popular livelihoods especially in drought hit areas and backward regions in some parts of the country, and women constitute a very high percent of labour force. The sedentary position throughout working, unhygienic working conditions and constant inhaling of tobacco are the health hazards faced by women. Workers also suffer from high incidence of other diseases such as T.B., mycosis, cancer, skin problems, eye problems etc. In this industry, while women work at home, they attend to their children and do household chores too. Women’s deft fingers are more suited to work for beedi rolling.

One question that can be answered is as to – “why is it that this industry is run from homes and employing women?” The simple answer is a factory system would mean regularization of conditions of work and payment of minimum wages and other benefits as per the law, which would also involve substantial expenditure on premises for the work. Thus, it is manageable to run from home. Working conditions under which the beedi rollers work are unsatisfactory. The beedi workers though are covered under various labour laws and legislations, which cover welfare of beedi workers. On the contrary, conditions continue to be far from satisfactory. The following details give us a brief picture of beedi workers’ conditions:

- Labour laws are evaded by the traders by resorting to various tactics.
- There is no employer and employee relation.
- Conditions under which the women beedi rollers work is very poor and unhygienic.
- Children at workers’ homes are exposed to all the hazards of tobacco.
- Quantity and quality of raw material supplied is inadequate and low respectively.

Though the provisions of the Factories Act, 1948 are applicable to beedi workers but they have been flouted by the employers by splitting their establishments into smaller units. A special feature of the beedi industry is that work is done through contractors and by distributing work in private dwelling houses where the workers take the raw materials given by the contractors, and handover the finished product to them. Employer-employee relationship not being well defined, the Factories Act could not be effective. One or two state governments passed special Acts to regulate the conditions of work of these workers but they too were not effective since the industry is highly mobile and tended to move to an area where no such restrictive laws prevailed. Consequently, the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 was passed. This Act provides for the welfare of the workers in the beedi and cigar establishments and seeks to regulate the conditions of their work. The Act, however, has a limited coverage as it does not provide (20) for medical, educational, recreational facilities, etc. Hence, the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976 was passed providing for levy and collection by way of cess, a duty of excise on manufactured beedis. The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, was passed in 1976 to provide of the constitution of the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund from out of the cess collected by way of excise duty on manufactured beedis. It further provides for the financing of measures to promote the welfare of persons engaged in beedi establishments.

- Women go to forests themselves to pluck the tendu leaves; as the work is tough and is a time consuming job.
- Poor implementation of Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946 and the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961.

Over the past few years, there is a recession in the industry, which can be attributed to various factors such as chewing of gutka by the people instead of smoking beedi; the policy of prohibition on smoking in public places; there is 15% to 20% decrease in growth of tobacco, and it has been replaced by bananas and potatoes; there is increase in cigarette smoking by 10%; status symbol associated with cigarettes; new technology coming into picture which can produce 6,000 cigarettes per minute etc.

Problems faced by beedi workers need to be resolved by a multipronged approach, adequate raw material should be provided to the workers, quality of the material should be good to reduce the chances of rejection. Workers should be given proper training to enhance the quality of product, registration of workers should be done, provision of identity cards so that workers can avail benefits. Awareness of laws and facilities available to them under the law should be given. Arrangements for free education of children should be made and provision of various social welfare facilities and increase of maternity benefit to beedi workers should be taken up. In changing times, this industry is dying and alternative livelihoods or funds should be formed for the beedi workers, who are on the verge of losing their work due to anti-tobacco campaign. ❖