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Problems and prospects of beedi workers in Murshidabad district

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ABSTRACT

Murshidabad district is the epicenter of beedi industry in West Bengal. In the socio-economic and geographical context, beedi industry is one of the only sources of livelihood for many people in the cottage industry of this district. It goes without saying that the industry and the connected working community are facing problems since its inception as a cottage industry, an essential ingredient for smoking. Since, this industry is an unorganized cottage industry, workers face various issues at work. No significant solution to the problems of beedi workers in all districts of West Bengal has been done. Their main problem is with wages. This involves various structural problems of this industrial production which have been discussed in this research paper. At the same time, the prospects to reduce of this problem has also been highlighted.

KEYWORDS: Beedi, Murshidabad, workers, tobacco, leaves, wages

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I. INTRODUCTION

Murshidabad emerged as an independent district in the state of West Bengal in the year 1947 when India got its Independence. This district has been witnessing many historical traditions. Since ancient times this region has been the focus of Bengal politics. Nawabi Amol was the era of economic prosperity in this district. Later, during the British period, the extraction of wealth, migration due to partition, breaching of River Ganga with floods etc. had a profound impact on the socio-economic aspect of this district. Bengal was divided in 1947 as a result of partition. Location of Murshidabad is on the border of East Pakistan, recently known as Bangladesh. A large number of crowd gathered in this district after partition and liberation war in Bangladesh. Many cottage industries emerged here and there in the district to earn a living for this additional population, one of which was the beedi industry. Many poor working communities in this district got involved in beedi binding.

The impact on socio-economic aspect is noteworthy due to the majority of Muslim community in Murshidabad district. Women in this community are prohibited from working outside their houses due to screen practices. That is why the number of women among bidi workers is more and they belong to the Muslim community. The workers here are also interested in breeding in the hope of getting help from children. It is found in survey studies that a beedi working couple generally have at least 4-5 children in the district. Some of the couples having even 10-11 boys and girls in their families. Their mindset is like more the family members, more will be the daily income for them. This is how all the family members get involved in bidi binding.

Exploitation and deprivation of workers by the industry owners and munshis is one of the reasons for the problem of workers in Murshidabad district. Munshi system is very prominent in the beedi industry of this district. They are the mediator between workers and owners. They collect raw materials from owners and give it to workers for beedi binding. The workers submit beedies after binding and get their wages accordingly. Sometimes Contractors or Munshis sale raw materials to the workers and in return purchase beedi from them. This sale-purchase system is existed in this district. In this system the workers are not under the factory act and factory owners have also no responsibility to the workers. Naturally, they do not get benefit from labour welfare fund also. Moreover, they are deprived of their dues on various pretexts. This financial crisis adds to other problems. In this way Workers suffer from exploitation, deprivation of the exclusive capitalist class and contractors.

The main cause of any problem is economic, which is no exception to the beedi workers in this district. The fate of the workers, who work for 10-16 hours a day, gets a nominal wage. Fasting and semi-fasting are their usual habits.¹ The acute poverty compels their children also to get involved in beedi binding. At an age when a child is supposed to play with the care of his parents, they start assisting their parents to earn some extra money by binding more & more beedis. Instead of being familiar with caste syllables from the time they learn to speak, they become familiar with beedis, tobacco and leaves. The fate of these children who have been malnourished even before birth do not even start their school days. They don't get a chance to enjoy the sweet days of childhood.² As a result, these children are immersed in the darkness of illiteracy. Later, as they attain maturity, superstitions become a part of their lives.³ Workers who are used to live in such a superstitious life, gets no idea about a developed society outside their world.

Beedi workers suffer from various diseases related to their profession. The food habits and accommodation of these economically stressed workers are very poor.⁴ They live in small huts with great difficulty. The interior of the huts are wet, damp, and unhealthy to live in. The workers very often suffer from colds, chest pain, asthma, tuberculosis, etc.⁵ is a regular phenomenon.

The British government had appointed an inquiry committee to find out the condition of these beedi workers. In 1931, the committee submitted a report on beedi workers after surveying them, saying, the place where beedi workers sit and work is a stinking, airless place, can be termed as closed boxes. There is no window for light and air ventilation, workers use to sit and work in wet damp places. There is no place to urinate. There is no provision for drinking water or dumping garbage, so the workers' workplaces are the origin of infectious diseases.⁶ Despite this report, many inquiry committees have been formed on labour problems, but the condition of the workers has not really changed.

The beedi workers who work inside the factory premises are also not having a good environment. They sit in a very narrow place and tie beedis. The place is hardly airy. There is no rest room in the factory. There is not even sitting place for having food. The condition of women workers is even worse. They are used to work with young children. There is no provision for their children to be kept elsewhere. It happens very often when a female worker, who is working all day long with her baby in her arms. That is why children are being affected with tobacco nicotine from an early age.

The process of making beedi is done in a phased manner but the workers have to sit and work in a row during beedi binding. The finger is pressed during cutting tendu leaves with scissors. It is seen working for 14-16 hours a day, repeated pressure on fingers causes scars as well as stiffness on the fingers. Not only that, there is a special movement on the finger while twisting the beedi with a thread, which puts pressure on the ligaments of hands.⁷ Pressure on the neck and waist are also very common. While packing beedi bundles, one foot has to be trayed and the other leg has to sit on its knees. This is how thousands of beedi bundles have to be packed in a few hours sitting. Naturally, other physical activity is lost for these workers and they become old at a very early age.

Professionally, beedi workers get diagnosed with various diseases. Constant injuries to the fingers, neck and waist cause muscle decay in those parts. In addition to this, arthritis, spondylitis, neuralgia, etc. are diagnosed very often. Since the workers do not have a proper understanding of these diseases, naturally they are unaware of the remedy of such diseases. So, once someone invites such diseases, there is no way out of it. Muscle cramps, cramps, pain, etc. were the routine cases of such beedi workers.

Living in unhygienic conditions with various professional problems, and ignorance over health, are the main causes of illness for workers. They usually suffer from diseases like diarrhea, dysentery, gastritis; indigestion etc.⁸ Sitting in one place for a long time reduces digestion. Not following regular diets and insufficient sleep leads to various problems related to gastritis and indigestion.

The other incurable disease that beedi workers usually suffer from is loss of sight. Doing anything continuously puts pressure on the eyes, no exception for beedi workers. Moreover, these workers work with insufficient light at night. Women workers, in particular, make beedis at night after completing household works. This leads to loss of sight at an early age.⁹ This is why many people are seen using spectacles at an early age. Usually they do not opt for treatment due to financial reasons even if they are diagnosed with short of sight at a early stage.

The education among beedi workers is very low. Naturally, superstition grasps their lives very easily. They suffer from various diseases and at the same time they prefer to rely on maduli, amulets, brooms, massages, burns, ojha, etc.¹⁰ in the hope of miracles to happen and get rid of the disease. As a result, instead of eliminating the problem, it escalates the issues. In addition to various occupational diseases, workers suffer from various problems of heart, kidney and lungs.¹¹ Apart from these diseases women workers also suffer from issues related to womanhood.

Motherhood at a young age aggravates their problems. The other reason for their illness is the large size of the family. The habit of smoking in the middle of work among all coworkers makes their lives more vulnerable to health issues.

Beedi workers hardly have social security. They are used to spend their days in a state of fear & despair. The owners and munshis of factories use to exploit them on various pretexts. These poor laborers become victims of murders and fights. The condition of young girls are the worst. On one hand, the pressure from their parents, and on the other hand, the threat of the Munshis always warn the young women. Thus, such a low wage when they hand over to their parents, they get nothing but scolding. They are even sexually abused. In such a situation, girls are forced to live in extreme suffering, being persecuted and humiliated from both sides. Some even choose to commit suicide when the situation becomes unbearable.

Now, on the other darker side of the society, some of the workers gets involved in various anti-social activities. There is corruption among workers in the darkness of illiteracy. With the curse of poverty, young women not only fall into the trap of contractors or munshis, but many married women also gets involved in various illicit relationships. Male workers are addicted to drugs in general and habitual in creating nuisance at home and even physical torture on the women or wives on a regular basis.

Another type of exploitation the women workers in the beedi industry faces is gender-based wage discrimination.¹² It is shameful that even after the feminist movement, this discrimination still exists. This pay disparity exists in all sectors in labor intensive industries. Women are considered weaker than men, and wages in the beedi industry are determined not on the basis of physical capacity or efficiency on the basis of number of beedis are made, but there is a disparity in the wages of men and women of same capacity in this industry. In 1975, the minimum wage per thousand beedi was Rs. 7/- for male worker, while the female workers were paid only Rs. 3/- per thousand beedi.¹³ Workers in urban areas are also subject to pay discrimination on the basis of gender. This pay disparity is not only in Murshidabad district but is prevailing in all districts of West Bengal. Many women laborers are earning their living by tying beedis in various slums of Kolkata, which were also equivalent to factory workers. Nirmala Banerjee has researched on the beedi workers in Kolkata to show how women workers were deprived of their dues. Her study reveals that, "In Calcutta, in the beedi rolling industry men and women did identical task, but men get Rs 8 per 1000 bidis plus a daily dearness allowance while women get only Rs 3 per 1000 bidis,

while essentially the work was the same. The main difference was that the men do their work in bidi factories while the women do the same task at home".¹⁴

II. PROSPECTS

Beedi workers need to burn a lot of oil to get rid of their troubled lives. The first thing that can be done is the improvement in the financial condition of the workers. Poverty is the main culprit in this sector or society. The condition of these economically backward workers is pathetic. The economic problems of any community aggravate other problems in society like illiteracy and unhygienic life style. This situation can be changed as a short-term measure if daily wages are increased and paid timely. As a long-term measure, some alternate source of income to be initiated by the government.

The idea of leading a healthy and better lifestyle does not fit these workers. It needs knowledge & awareness. Field studies have revealed that though monthly income is fair in many working families, the lack of education leads them to an unhealthy lifestyle. The seeds of poverty are deeply rooted in their bone marrow. Spreading the light of education among the workers is needed. Education brings awareness and leads to perfection. It is necessary to change the mindset of the working family and guide them for a healthy life. Without increasing the size of the family, taking proper care of the mother and child before birth, regular immunization of the child as they grow up, awareness among workers through programs such as not employing child labour, freeing them from various social superstitions, etc. their social & economic condition can be improved drastically.

Abolition of Munshi system is a necessity today to abolish poverty among the workers in this industry. It is expected that the end of this practice will help improve the workers socio economic condition to great extent. Labour exploitation can't be eradicated overnight but we can take the first step forward to reduce it whatever extent possible. Improvement of these workers is not possible unless this Munshi system is abolished.

The condition of health of these beedi workers is very critical. They always remain with the contact of tobacco, the main raw material of beedi. They get contaminated with nicotine, main ingredients of beedi. This nicotine is the main factor for dangerous diseases like cancer.

Government has taken various projects for eradicating the problems of beedi workers. Schemes like, 'build your own house', scholarships for

education for the children of beedi workers, free medical treatment etc but the workers hardly get the benefits of all such schemes. Mrs. M. Karlekar has also mentioned in her study that "Though bidi workers are governed by the bidi and cigar workers act which aims to regulating working conditions not only in factories but also in private homes, its rarely enforced".¹⁵ So, it is the need of the hour to take the proactive role by the factory owners, contractors/ munshis, as well as govt. to address the problems of such workers so that they can lead a hygienic and healthy lifestyle.

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