

**The Bidi Manufacturing Industry in Murshidabad and the
Life of the Women Bidi Workers**

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Abstract: Bidi is a famous and cheap smoking product. The Bidi industry in India is predominantly an unorganized sector. As with many other types of smoking, Bidis increase the risk of certain kinds of cancers, heart disease and lung disease. Murshidabad, became the 'Bidi Hub' of the state. Jobless men and women gradually depend on this industry. Poor women start rolling Bidis when they are very young and start this work as a part of their game. Women Bidi workers do not get any chance to register themselves, nor do they get full wages. But their lives involved with this work, in this article, the Bidi manufacturing industry of Murshidabad and the life of women workers involved in this industry are highlighted in some detail.

Keywords : Bidi industry, Cultivation, Health, Smoking, Women, Workers etc.

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Introduction

Bidis and Cigarettes are the most common smoking tobacco products in India. Cigarettes are costly and Bidis are comparatively cheap; therefore, Bidi is the first choice of workers, farmers and others. As with many other types of smoking, Bidis increase the risk of certain kinds of cancers, heart disease and lung disease. 'Smoking is injurious to health', everywhere we can see the posters but about 48% (in 2008) of people in India consume Bidis, which has a market share of 85% of all smoking products.¹ It is wrapped in a tendu leaf with a string and adhesive at one end. Murshidabad, also known as the 'Bidi Hub' of the state, encompasses a vast area of Suti, Shamsheganj, Farakka and Raghunathganj in Jangipur

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subdivision. Around 1 million people in all these areas are directly and indirectly involved in Bidi making and trade. Girls start rolling Bidis when they are very young. This usually begins as a sort of game, with little girls imitating their elder sisters or mothers. They gradually slip into an informal apprenticeship and very soon become fully-fledged Bidi rollers, working an average of eight hours a day. Many girls see Bidi rolling as the obvious path for them to take: with limited formal education and little chance to make their own decisions. However, the Bidi industry of Murshidabad is a part of the culture of the people here and the lives of women unorganized workers associated with this industry. Although this industry faces various problems including shortage of raw materials, low wages for workers, and market instability; it proceeds with success. The source of income of many poor women depends on the sustainability of this industry.

I

The cultivation of tobacco started in southern Gujarat in the late 17th century. Hookah smoking was popular among local people. Because the hookah was tedious to carry around, a cheaper and portable form of the hookah was developed, called the chillum.² Bidis were developed soon after, possibly around the Kheda and Panchmahal districts of Gujarat, where cultivation of tobacco was high. It was during the severe drought of 1899 in Gujarat, which compelled many families to migrate in search of a livelihood, that the Bidi became a small-scale industry. The father of the modern Bidi and the industry is possibly Mohanlal Patel of Gomtipur District, Ahmedabad, who migrated from Gujarat to Jabalpur. Patel worked as an agent of small contracts in Bineki and Bargi towns on the Bengal-Nagpur Railway (BNR). Soon his cousin Hargovindas joined him. Mohanlal and Hargovindas would visit Jabalpur to get contracts and also trade in petty goods. At the time of Non-Cooperation movement, the Bidi received a further impetus when the educated class started smoking it instead of cigarettes, to show solidarity to Gandhi ji's *Swadeshi*. Several Muslim leaders like Hassan Imam openly supported the Bidi and said, 'Foreign cigarettes are *haraam* (illicit), use bidis instead of cigarettes'.³ Around World War II, the Bidi industry became an important and widespread cottage industry in urban shanties and rural areas. It was a part of the rations of the Indian jawan when he went to fight in foreign soils. The demand for Bidis increased at such a fast rate that the opening of new production centers became an everyday activity for Bidi manufacturers. Bidi gained widespread social acceptance in a short period and the industry became a role model for small Indian businesses. By the 1960s, with the coming of

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the power loom, many weavers were left without jobs and were forced to migrate back from these textile centers. Many of them found employment in the Bidi industry in the Telangana region, Andhra Pradesh. More than 60% of the Bidi workers in this region hail from the displaced weaver community (the Padmashalis), while the others are Dalits and Muslims.⁴ Since the 1980s' new epicenters of Bidi rolling emerged, like West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, where labour is cheaper. In West Bengal, the traditional handicrafts of Murshidabad district have gradually declined; jobless people have stuck to Bidi tying jobs.⁵

Almost half of the residents of Murshidabad are directly or indirectly involved in the Bidi industry. According to the last census (2011), 67 percent of the district's population is involved in cottage industries. It can be estimated that most of them are Bidi workers. They live in Farakka, Shamsrganj, Suti. In a survey by the district authorities (1996-1999), 88,000 child Bidi workers were identified. Research by Jashodhara Bagchi and Asim Mukherjee shows that there are three lakh Bidi workers in the district, of which 15 percent are child laborers. Most of them are girls.⁶

II

Bidi leaves are mainly collected from Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra. From the vast forests in these states, the workers get Tendu leaves as Bidi leaves at certain times of the year. Tobacco is mainly imported from other countries. There are many shops selling this leaf spice in the state. White *feti* yarn and *guli* yarn are also available there, which are used to tie Bidis. The quality of Bidis depends on the mixture of tobacco. On how much wild tobacco, Nippani tobacco, and sticks are given. The quality also depends on one more thing, which is the color of the leaves and the ripeness of the leaves. No Bidi trader tells others how the tobacco mixture is made.⁷

A cooperative has been formed for unity among the Bidi workers of Kandi in Murshidabad. They decide what the Bidi wages will be, how many leaves, how much tobacco will be required, which will have to be paid to the moneylenders. Apart from this, there are some workers who tie Bidis in some tea, paan Bidi shops. It is done by skilled and experienced workers only. Their wages are the highest in Kandi. In 2000, the workers of Murshidabad were entitled to get Bidi worker cards. The Bidi business has its unique logic

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and systems. The women and girls do not interact with the factory owner at any stage, making them open to exploitation. They work from home obtaining supplies from the contractor, or munshi, who acts as a middleman. However, movements were formed by Bidi workers against the moneylenders.⁸

Tobacco smoking caused the deaths of about 1 million Indians per year as of 2010, 70% of which occurred among individuals between the ages of 30 and 69. According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS India 2009-2010), there were 120 million smokers of age 15 years or above in India in 2010. With roughly 10% of the world's 1.3 billion smokers, India is the second largest consumer of tobacco in the world.⁹ Beyond the burden imposed on smokers, the Bidi industry also poses health risks for Bidi workers, especially women and children working from home. Issues of faith, work, gender, and education are deeply connected in Murshidabad. For example, decisions made by parents about work and the schooling of their children are usually gendered. There is a strong son preference in Muslim communities in Murshidabad. While there is no obvious taboo about girls going to school, people feel that boys have a greater claim to education, primarily based on the valued outcome of education, which is perceived to be high level employment. In this context, religion is often used as a justification for maintaining, rather than questioning established norms. Marriage is seen as the best place for women to be and is believed to ensure security and respectability for women. From very early on in their lives, girls are trained for marriage. Girls who roll Bidis are not workers in their own right, which again makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Before the age of 18, the girls are treated not as individuals with corresponding rights, but as part of a family unit, where one or both of their parents are registered as a Bidi worker and receive an identity card. This identity card enables Bidi workers to access benefits under the Bidi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976. The benefits for Bidi workers and their families include welfare schemes for health, education, maternity benefits, group insurance, recreation, and housing assistance and so on. There are also special schemes to encourage education for children of Bidi workers, especially for girl children. In many cases, the identity card is issued only to the 'head of the family', that is, the man, although three or four members of the family might be rolling Bidis.¹⁰

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III

We visited some villages of Domkal in Murshidabad district, where 89% of total population are Muslims. There are many backward and poor families in Domkal sub-division. Many women and children of these poor families worked and earned as Bidi workers. There are many Bidi factories in Murshidabad, viz. Bikram Bidi, Ashik & Jamuna Bidi, Maa Bidi, Janaki Bidi, Babita Bidi, Jyoti Bidi, Pataka Bidi, Nur Bidi, Mehek Bidi, Dolar Bidi and others, Domkal is no longer lagging behind other regions in Bidi making. The Bidi worker acts as both a liberator and an oppressor in the face of this web of rules and traditions. For example, women and girl Bidi workers gather in groups to do their work. As they work, women use this opportunity to exchange confidences, catch up with each other, give advice, and make plans. It is rare, however, to find a group of unchaperoned girls at work. There will always be one or two older women keeping an eye on the girls. As one woman in Murshidabad explained, 'We have to be careful with our girls. We cannot afford to let them wander. We are poor. People talk.' In some families, older women Bidi workers, in spite of religious and cultural rules and norms, can find themselves in a stronger position because of the income they earn. With many of the men in the community away for a large part of the year as migrant labourers, space opens up for women Bidi rollers to play an active role in family decision-making.

In a recent survey, the organization 'Tobacco Free Generation' has shown that in 13 percent of cases in West Bengal, children also tie Bidis along with other family members. It is understood that families have involved children and adolescents in this work due to financial needs. Bidi workers are deprived in many ways and are prone to diseases. Bidi workers are paid 30-40 percent less than the government-fixed wage 264 *taka* per thousand Bidis, the wage increased from 150-180 *taka* to 264 *taka* recently. But many of the workers do not get the increased rate. ¹¹On top of that, out of 1,000 Bidis, traders discard 130-150 Bidis due to various defects. This means that about 15 lakh Bidi workers in the state are not being paid the minimum wage for making at least 130 Bidis every day. More than three lakh workers in Murshidabad do not have PF. Occupational disease expert Kunal Dutta said that women Bidi workers have to sit in one position for a long time. As a result, they suffer from back and leg pain. Women over thirty start suffering from bone loss. This bone loss increases

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due to continuous sitting and repeated postures. Among male Bidi workers, those who 'toast' or tandoor the Bidi, dust and various gases (carbon monoxide) enter the lungs with their breath. This results in lung disease, shortness of breath and tightness (COPD). In a study on workers who worked with raw tobacco, scientists from a non-governmental cancer treatment organization found that genetic changes were seen in various cells of the workers' bodies, which are considered precursors of cancer. Further, the WHO recommends higher taxes on tobacco products as best practice for tobacco control. Moreover, previous Indian studies suggest that there is ample scope for increasing taxes on Bidi products in India which can go up to 100% of the current level, without any loss of revenue to the government. However, in India, even post GST the tax burden on Bidi is estimated to be 22% in contrast to 16% pre-GST; and unlike cigarettes and smokeless tobacco, there is no additional cess imposed on Bidis.¹²

There is evidence of exploitation of Bidi workers by middlemen, inadequate social security benefits provided to them and their families, lack of access to government programmes and growing poverty and vulnerability of families involved in the profession. Given that the majority of Bidi manufacturing units are in the unregistered sector, and almost all of the unregistered Bidi manufacturing is composed of 'Own Account Manufacturing Enterprises', it is evident that the majority of Bidi sector is small-scale and unregistered in nature, with little employment benefits. The exploitation of Bidi workers is more worrisome as wages over the years have in real terms remained stagnant and there is a move towards contractual employment and reduction in directly employed workers.

Conclusion

The study highlights that on an average in 2010–2011, a Bidi worker earned only about 17% of the wage of an average worker in the registered manufacturing sector. Thus, millions of Bidi workers are employed in a non-remunerative job and condemned to poverty in comparison to working in other sectors in the manufacturing industry. Many NGOs' involvement with Bidi rollers has led to an exploration of work conditions in the industry. It has encouraged women and girl Bidi workers to reflect on issues related to their status as workers, such as the processes of determining wages, the issue of minimum wages, and the effect of exposure to tobacco on the health of women and girls, and to reflect on their own future. It is especially important to say this at the end, most of the female children who work in Bidi factories are not registered as 'workers', as a result of which the factory owners or

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the government are indifferent to the health, education, and safety of those children and women. Bidi is a harmful product, and even if the government does not take any special initiative to shut down this industry or regulate production, at least more precautionary steps need to be taken to stop the exploitation of children and women involved in this work.

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