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MAJOR FACTORS RELATED TO THE OCCUPATIONAL SITUATION OF WOMEN ENGAGED IN BEEDI INDUSTRY OF MURSHIDABAD DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Women in Murshidabad district of West Bengal have contributed to the beedi sector right from its inception till date and also for the continuous improvement of the sector. The working hours are very high, and they spend 14-16 hours a day earning income to support their families. The wages they receive is less than the wages set by the minimum wages act. The women were less aware on the claims against health insurance, loan allowance provident fund which adds benefit to the bidi sector. The women being home based workers do not claim for better working conditions. There is no considerable investment made by the beedi industry on such labour force. The women supply a continuous and stable work force to industry. The work is learnt by every member of the family and thus continues without interruption. Since beedi employs large numbers of women workers, it adopts exploitative practices which affect women workers in general. The home workers are exploited more since they have no operative trade union forum as in the organized sector. This paper intends to explain the limited and confined lifeworlds of the women beedi workers of Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Though they are involved in beedi making sector with minimal wages for generations, there is no shift of occupational structure. Most of the beedi rollers are having low socio-economic status and living in poor housing condition. Due to exposure to the tobacco there is hazardous health condition of the women beedi workers particularly the women and young girl children. Besides, this paper also employed non participatory observation to bring out the ground reality of their everyday social lives. This paper further has tried to throw light on the women beedi workers of Murshidabad district of West Bengal and how they are being exploited and how they are in perpetual poverty due to their lack of education, unemployment and under-employment, less mobility and socio-religious practices.

Keywords: Beedi Workers, Unorganised Sector, Working Condition, Women and Children.

Introduction:

Beedi sector is an informal, unorganised, home-based high labour intensive manufacturing industry in India. This traditional agro-forestry based industry provides large number of workers in India, after agriculture, handloom and construction (Government of India, 1995). This sector encompasses workforce involved in the collection and processing of the two main raw materials, *tendu* (beedi wrapper) leaves and tobacco. Government sources have estimated that there were about 5.5 million workers in the bidi rolling industry spreading over 16 states, majority of who are home based women workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment Report 2001). But trade unions claim that there are over 7 million beedi workers. However, the Standing Committee on Labour, Ministry of Labour and Employment (2005) reported that there are about 4.5 million workers engaged in beedi industry in India with largest number in Madhya Pradesh (18.3 %), followed by Andhra Pradesh (14.4 %) and Tamil Nadu (13.8 %) (Dube and Mohandoss, 2013). beedi industry is predominantly a home-based industry in India which employs over 4 million people, the lion share being women. The industry is mostly unorganized. In this industry work is done through contractors and by distributing work in private dwelling houses where the workers take the raw material given by the contractor and handover the finished product to him. The organisation and distribution of work within the home-based production offers less protection to workers, and leads to the non-recognition of issues of occupational health of workers.

Working conditions of the women beedi rollers in Murshidabad District of West Bengal:

Women constitute a very high percentage of labour force in beedi industry as work is done generally from home and women can do it while at the same time attending to their children and other household chores. Beedi manufacturing is a highly labour intensive unorganised sector where women and girl children are mainly involved in beedi rolling. On the other hand, men are mostly involved in sorting, checking, baking, labeling, wrapping and packing where they get higher wages than beedi rollers. Deft fingers of women are more suited to beedi rolling & women are considered to be more sincere and hardworking. Beedi rollers work generally under unhygienic, dingy and overcrowded places having little facilities for safe usable water, toilet or washing as these people are very poor. They cannot afford these facilities due to their financial condition. They spend hours blending or rolling tobacco under conditions that are harmful to their health. The working hours are often indeterminable. Use of child labour is a regular practice. Common occupational health problems faced by the beedi workers are mostly Skeleto-Muscular; Respiratory; Gastrointestinal; Neurological problems.

Major factors related to the working conditions of women engaged in Beedi Industry:

- Wage differentiation, turnover of equal work and more submissive nature of women are important attraction for the employers to employ women in the beedi industry.
- Unorganised women workers cannot enter formal sector jobs because of low education and training.
- The factors aggravating pitiable conditions of migrant workers are lack of sanitary facility, unsafe conditions, and exploitation and gender discriminations.
- Migration has serious impact on wage rate. Those who come to the towns for the first time have to be satisfied with lower wages as well as poor working conditions.
- Women mainly work in unorganised sector to supplement the family income.
- *Beedi* workers are exposed to dust, nicotine, causing respiratory diseases and infertility in young women.
- Immobility of labour, seasonal nature of employment, lack of job security are the greatest impediment of women labour that keep them confined to low paying, irregular and local avenues of employment.
- Women workers are facing economic exploitation due to ignorance, tradition-bound attitudes, lack of skill and illiteracy, extremely unsatisfactory working conditions in the form of heavy physical work, lack of job security, long working hours, lack of minimum facilities at workplace, ill-treatment and bondage, temporary or casual nature of employment and poverty due to low income, high level expenditure, lack of assets and indebtedness in unorganised sector. The women folk get lower wages than men which is not at all linked with the quantity or quality of work; it is simply because of gender bias.

Conditions of Women Beedi Workers- Scenario of Murshidabad district of West Bengal:

According to 2001 Census 7.30% people are engaged in Household Industry in West Bengal, where in case of Murshidabad district the percentage is 20.42% (out of 20.42% workers 7.23% are male and 64.66% are female). The district has been placed first position in West Bengal in case of workforce engaged in the Household Industry. At the beginning of the last decade, a substantial amount of agricultural land of the study area had been smashed as a result of the Ganga (river) erosion. Then people became land-less and dropped their interest in agriculture. As a result, these people caught beedi rolling for means of subsistence. The census statistics also reveals that the percentage of agricultural labourer had decreased by 14.52% during 1991 – 2001, whereas the percentage of household workers had increased by 6.73% during that period. Beedi is a labour intensive household industry which requires minimum skill and there is abundant of labour, so beedi rolling became popularized and recognized as major livelihood option. So, the present study concentrates on beedi industry only.

Beedi, deemed to be the “poor man's cigarette” or the “poor man’s smoke” in India, is made by rolling about 0.2 grams of tobacco flakes pouring to a tendu leaf. In India, about 34 per cent of tobacco consumption is in the form of beedi. Smokers, mainly in the low-income categories, consume beedi. The size of the market for beedi is much bigger than the market for cigarette. Beedi primarily caters for the domestic market although it is also exported in small quantities. The manufacturing of beedi is a highly labour intensive process. Apart from earning revenue for the State, this industry generates substantial employment. In the beedi industry, a large number of unregistered and home-based enterprises exist with factory-based manufacturing enterprises. The beedi industry has long back history of shifting from factory based production to home based production and the total production system in the study area is the only home based industry. The factory owner (the principal employer) is able to use the labour of whole family as workers by using this system, and in the meantime, he can evade the strictures passed on the establishments by the Factories Act. In this way, he is free from any obligation towards his labour, while exploiting them to the maximum. In general, the principal employer operates through a number of middlemen called ‘*Munshi*’. In this system, workers are being supplied raw-materials through *Munshi* and all the family members including children contribute their labour to roll maximum number of beedis. This ensures more income; it is two times more than their natural production ability only because division of labour. And children gradually become efficient worker as they are also involved in the process with their elder family members most of the time. The female members of a house take a vital role in the home based process of production. Normally a worker requires 4 to 5 hours time for production of 800 beedis, but it totally depends on efficiency of the worker.

Problems faced by Women Beedi Workers- Scenario of SUTI block under Jangipur Subdivision of Murshidabad district of West Bengal:

It has been observed that most of the women beedi workers in Jangipur block of Murshidabad district of West Bengal are drawn from low castes like scheduled tribes, more from Muslims and a very small percentage of poorer sections from the general castes. The inadequate income, various unauthorized deductions, less payment than the agreed wages, etc. degraded the socio-economic status of women beedi workers in Jangipur of Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Moreover, beedi workers, more particularly those who are working in the informal/unorganised sector, are facing many problems. There is a wide gap, from the point of view of benefits, between the beedi workers in the organized sector and those in the unorganized sector. Some of the problems that women beedi workers in Jangipur block of Murshidabad district of West Bengal face are:

- Low wages of payment which is, usually, under piece rate system and the piece rate is very low.
- Exposure to tobacco related health hazard.
- Superior strength of employer and this strength is used to exploit the poor beedi workers.
- Inadequate social security.
- A poor growth of Trade Union movement.

However, the governments (both the central and state governments) have made some attempts to protect the interest, and for the welfare, of women beedi workers in the form of enacting Laws, establishing boards to give effect to the policy decisions of the governments, etc. The most surprising and unfortunate thing is that beedi workers themselves are not aware of their legal rights and privileges. Despite various security legislations, the socio-economic condition of the women beedi workers in Jangipur block of Murshidabad district of West Bengal in the unorganized sector has not improved. On the other these poor beedi workers are being exploited by the powerful employers and by their agents/contractors.

Conclusion:

Women in Murshidabad district of West Bengal have contributed to the beedi sector right from its inception till date and also for the continuous improvement of the sector. The working hours are very high, and they spend 14-16 hours a day earning income to support their families. The wages they receive is less than the wages set by the minimum wages act. The women were less aware on the claims against health insurance, loan allowance provident fund which adds benefit to the bidi sector. The women being home based workers do not claim for better working conditions. There is no considerable investment made by the beedi industry on such labour force. The women supply a continuous and stable work force to industry. The work is learnt by every member of the family and thus continues without interruption. Since beedi employs large numbers of women workers, it adopts exploitative practices which affect women workers in general. The home workers are exploited more since they have no operative trade union forum as in the organized sector.

Murshidabad district has a historical significance in case of household industry. During ancient period, rural based household industries and crafts were admired by the Hindu emperors as well as the Nababs. Murshidabad was famous for ivory and sandal wood craft, Shola pith, Silk sari, Jute, Sankha, Bell-metal and brass utensils. The silk was famous in the name of 'Murshidabad Silk'. But now, the district has lost its glory. Ivory work has been completely abolished and other renowned household and cottage industries are in dying stage. But now, beedi industry is flourishing during last three decades and the centre is Jangipur Sub-Division of this district. Loss of agricultural land due to the Ganga erosion and Farakha barrage feeder canal, easy availability of labour and minimum requirement of skill have made the industry more popularized.

The particular paper has mainly highlighted the effects of beedi rolling on health and education of working children and also trying to reckon the magnitude of exploitation of the children engaged in beedi industry. Apart from these, there are wide future scopes to address the problem of the child workers in household based beedi industry in the Murshidabad district. It appears from the present paper that the problem may also be addressed from different angles e.g. scope of alternative livelihoods and its effect on management of working children in beedi industry; to find out the loopholes in various acts and poor implementation of Laws and Legislation in order to control the problem of child workers in beedi industry in particular and beedi workers in general; to understand the various social exploitations including the sexual abuse with the child workers as well as other beedi workers.

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