

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH HAZARD OF WOMEN BIDI WORKERS IN RURAL INDIA

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**Abstract:** Bidi workers more often are the most vulnerable sector of the society and a large number of them are absolutely dependent on bidi rolling in rural India. They are continue to struggle for survival despite low wages, steady exploitation by the contractors, lack of education and medical facilities and neglect in government policies. In India, most of the bidi workers are women who operate from their homes and are isolated from the rest of the industrial workforce and for this reason they are easy target for gross exploitation .Women workers tend to suffer from a number of occupational health problems. This study portrays the causes and also the remedial measures such as Awareness Programme, health education, proper implementation of different schemes to mitigate the problems of the workers etc. in this paper “occupational health hazard of women bidi workers in rural India”.

**Keywords:** Bidi industries, Socio-Economic Status, Health Hazards, Cottage industries, SHG, Women Workers.

## INTRODUCTION:

A bidi is a leaf rolled cigarette (also called the poor men cigarette) made of coarse uncured tobacco, tied with a string at one end. As it a cheap form of tobacco consumption, it is extremely popular amongst the lower economic groups and rural population of India and her neighboring countries also. There are approximately 800 million bidis are sold in India in each year, outselling by a ratio of 8 to 1. But it carries greater health risks as it delivers more nicotine, carbon monoxide and tar also. Bidi industry is an important cottage industry and provides subsidiary source of livelihood to agricultural labourer of rural India. This industry also has a significant role to the upliftment of socio-economic conditions of the women bidi workers in India (Giriappa, 1987). This industry is perhaps the biggest among the unorganized sectors spread all over the country, employing an incredibly vast army of men, women and children (Bagchi, et, al.1996). The bidi industry employs thousands of people most of who work under conditions which are harmful to their health.

## ORIGIN OF BIDI INDUSTRY IN INDIA

There is no definite information as to when and how the bidi-rolling industry began to operate in India. The tribal people of ancient India used to smoke tobacco in a pipe made from leaves of trees and gradually the practice of wrapping tobacco in a leaf (now called bidi) originated. It's mentioned that, tobacco had been cultivated in Andhra Pradesh during the region of Krishna Dev Rai. In the colonial period of the seventeenth century A.D., the production and consumption of tobacco began in India either by the British or by the Portuguese.

The cultivation of the tobacco dates back to 17<sup>th</sup> century when it started in Gujarat. After the introduction of hookah smoking, bidis were developed the Kheda and Panchamahals district of this state. A few soon later, some bidi rollers of this region had settled

down in Mumbai and gradually the bidis were spread out into the parts of the country. During the severe drought of 1899, in Gujarat, many families of bidi rollers had been forced to migrate to Madhya Pradesh and bidis became as a small-scale industry. The father of modern bidi and also the industry is Mohanlal Patel of Gomtipur district of Ahmadabad who migrated from Gujarat to Jabalpur (Varma and Rehman, 2005). Mohanlal and Hargobinda Das obtained their brand trademark in 1902. For the rapid expansion of the railway network between in 1912 to 1918, the bidis were also spread out to all parts of the country such as Vidharva, Telengana, Hyderabad, Mangalore and Madras region. According to the Govt. of Madras in 1947, the oldest bidi manufacturing farm was established as early as 1887 in Madhya Pradesh.

According to Madhavi (2006), during the Swadeshi Andolan (a civil disobedience movement by boycotting goods) which was initiated in 1920 by Mahatma Gandhi, bidis play the leads role of smoking instead of cigarettes. Around the World War II, the industry became an important cottage industry in India. During 1960s with the discovery of power loom, many weavers were left without job who were forced to take up the bidi rolling job, particularly in the Telengana region of the Andhra Pradesh.

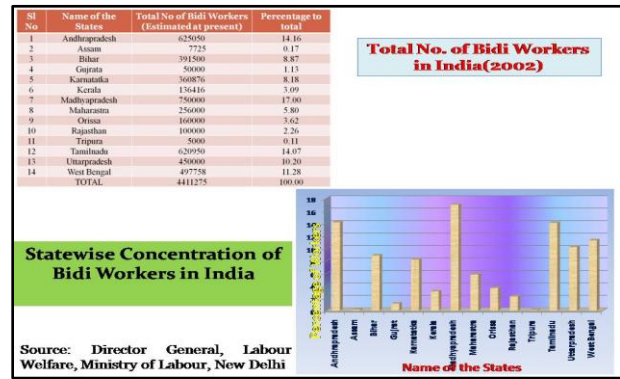
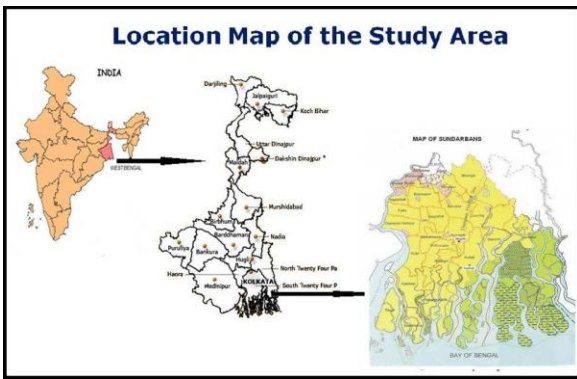
By the mid 1970s, the most important tobacco growing industry was concentrated in Gujarat and Karnataka (Avachat, 1978). The bidi-manufacturing clusters were as follows: Mangalore, Mysore, Nipani (Karnataka); Jabalpur, Sagar (M.P.); Thirunvell, Chennai (Tamil Nadu); Cannore (Kerala) and Nizamabad, Karimnagar and Warangal (Andhra Pradesh).

After 1980, the epicenter of this industry grew in the state of West Bengal, Bihar (undivided), and Orissa because of the availability of cheap labour and raw material. Presently, Madhya Pradesh account for the highest share of employment (17%) in the bidi industry, followed by Tamil Nadu (14%), Andhra Pradesh (14%), Karnataka (12%), West Bengal (11%) and Uttar Pradesh (10%).

However, history of development of bidi-rolling industry in West Bengal, particularly in Sunderban is not exactly known to us. According to O' Malley (1914) the tobacco was generally grown for domestic use only in this region. Two kinds of tobacco viz. 'hingli' and 'mandhata' were grown chiefly in the northern and north-eastern parts of district (Hunter, 1875). So it is assumed that the industry is existing for more than one century years. It can be deduced from the above facts that the present day workers are the third or fourth generation.

## **LOCATION OF BIDI INDUSTRIES:**

The world largest deltaic region - Sunderban is located on the extreme south-eastern fringe of West Bengal, covered by the world's largest mangrove forest. With the 102 islands the total area of the Indian Sunderban is nearly 9,600 sq.km. (which covers nearly 40% areas of total Sunderban) out of total area of 25,500 sq.km. and the remaining part covers the area of Bangladesh (Das,2011). There are 17 community development blocks in Sunderban of which 13 blocks are located in South 24 Parganas district while the remaining blocks are located in North 24 Parganas district. Because of the remote location and non-availability of job opportunities a large number of people, particularly women and children have been forced to take up the bidi rolling job. Most of the bidi workers belong to Kultali and Joynagar-I block.



## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. Since women and child labour form major labour force, the study aims at evaluating their contribution to rural development.
2. To evaluate the present scenario of the bidi industry as a cottage industry and the socio- economic condition of the bidi-workers of the rural India.
3. To analyses the growth and distribution of bidi industry in different parts.
4. To find out the possibilities of cooperatives and self help group (SHG) formation in the bidi industry.
5. To find out the present problems of the bidi workers and to access if the co-operative rolling could become profitable and at the same time less exploitative in system.
6. To propose the remedial measures of these problems and to suggest possible way out from this problem which may be help them for better life opportunities with the economic development.

## DATA SOURCE

Data collected both from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources mainly include collection of data through households' survey for some case studies.

Secondary data include data from the district statistical handbooks, Census Report of Govt. of India, Economic Survey Report and Other information regarding this industry and labourers were collected from the census of India, Labour Welfare Dept. of India and W.B. Govt. and also the several books and journals.

## METHODOLOGY

1. The statistical methodology consists of field survey by systemic stratified sampling with the help of the questionnaire and secondary data collect from census of India, Labour Commission and this various books and journals related to bidi works.
2. The cartographic methodology consists of preparing thematic maps on the basis of data and representation of statistical data in several diagrams for analysis.

## WORKING AND LIVING CONDITION OF BIDI WORKERS

**Nature and Process of Bidi Rolling:** The bidi manufacturing involves many inter-related stages. Firstly, the tendu leaves have been collected by the forest-based local people of various states of India and then after the auction it's been marketized to all over to the

wholesale contractor of bidi-workers concentrated states. Then, employers through middleman called contractor, supply the tendu leaves, tobacco, yarn and thread to the workers. The four main steps involved in producing a bidi are rewinding the thread, cutting the bidi leaves into a specific size and shape and filled with required amount of tobacco, rolling the bidi and folding the bidi-head (Dharmalingam, 1993). Then, generally, 25 bidis stick are made a bundle and for curing it's keep in the oven. Finally, the bundles are supplied to the contractors, who then branded and sold into the market.

**Bidi workers in India:** Bidi is typically Indian and are smoked in neighbouring countries also. By far, the largest producer of bidi is in India, accounting for about 85 percent of the total world production. The location of bidi industry is determined largely by the presence of cheap labour and availability of tendu leaves used in bidi rolling (Directorate of Tobacco Development, 1990).

Bidi rolling is one of the major informal sector activities in India. The Government of India estimates that, there are approximately 4.4 million full-time workers and another 4 million people engaged with bidi industry related job in India ( Varma and Rehman, 2005).It is also a remarkable fact that, among them, majority are home based women workers (nearly 70%) , who are live under poverty line. Therefore, there is need to improve the living and working conditions as well as to promote decent employment and income opportunities for women bidi rollers. In our country, the most female bidi workers are illiterate and in most cases unorganized and most cases they are highly deplorable .Due to the lack of other alternatives employment opportunities, a large numbers of women people of rural India have been forced to take this hazardous occupation.

#### **Implications of Bidi Rolling on Health:**

The employment size of bidi workers is next only to agriculture and handloom sector in India. The occupational life of women bidi workers are characterized by low wages, Piece related remuneration, lack of social security and absence of organization. Sarkar (2004), found that the conditions of the female bidi workers were deplorable as many of them had to roll bidi as there has no other employment opportunities for them. Beside this, the women workers exposed to occupational health hazard. The nature of works so monotonous that, after a few years the work becomes mechanical and most of the women are working under severe stress and exploitative conditions. The combinations of physical strain and mental worry and fear compound their risk to illness.

A large number of health problems have observed among the women bidi workers. According to a study on health problems of home-based bidi workers, the most common problems which occur are due, firstly to the inhalation of tobacco and secondly, to the posture which requires sitting at same place and in the same position for hours at a time. These problems includes headache, backache, neck ache, back-strain, spondilitis, swelling of the lower limbs and digestives problems as well as the asthma, tuberculosis, cancer etc. Ranjit Singh and Padmalata (1995) observed that, bidi rollers were affected by respiratory disorder, gastrointestinal illness, and gynecological problems and are susceptible to fungal diseases, peptic ulcer and diarrhea. They also have a high degree of leucorrhoea. A study conducted in Kerala has revealed that about sixty seven percent of workers reported suffer from one or more diseases and ninety five percent believed that, it was caused by tobacco fumes (Mohandas, 1988). Excepting the women workers, the family members, even the children are being affected by various bidi related diseases.

### Symptoms reported by the women bidi workers

Symptom Groups	Symptoms Described
Aches and pain related to bidi work	Backache, neck ache, headache, burning of eyes , pain in legs, numbness of fingers
Coughs	Exposure to tobacco
Giddiness	Giddiness, breathlessness
Stomach related pains	Stomach pains, cramps, gas, spasmodic pains leading to diarrhea
Others	Piles, urinary burning, white discharge, palpitation, wheezing, fevers, worry ,joint pains and swelling

Source: Gopal, M (1997): Labour Process and its Impact on the Lives of Women Workers, unpublished thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

### Remedial Measures for Health Problems:

Surya Narayan Rao, the president of the Central India Bidi Working Associations, states (1988) that, bidi workers of whom quite a large number are women are treated like bonded labourers. The invariably work anywhere between 10 to 12 hours per day. They live under deplorable conditions and are exploited very much. So in these situations, there should be need welfare schemes for women bidi workers such as:

- Imparting proper health education and awareness among bidi workers
- Health dispensaries should be settled in bidi workers concentrated blocks.
- Adequate medicines should be stocked in the dispensaries of the LWO.
- Require static-cum mobile/ static allopathic and ayurvedic dispensaries
- Schemes for reservation of beds in TB hospitals
- Schemes for domiciliary treatment of bidi workers suffering from T.B., cancer, mental disease etc
- Grant of financial assistance to women bidi workers for purchase of spectacles.
- Reimbursement of expenditure as financial assistance to women workers in respect of heart diseases, kidney transplantation.
- Lady Doctors should be appointed in sufficient number in all dispensaries.
- Enable organizing of unorganized home based bidi women into self-groups, community organization and / or under their membership based organization (such as Kerala Dinesh Bidi Cooperative-KDBC)
- Improve women's awareness of employment opportunities and widen occupational choices through entrepreneurial development programmes and participatory rapid appraisal exercises at local level to be conducted through their organizations
- As regard facilities for credit, the states policy needs to encourage banks need to set aside funds for providing micro loans (Bandhan micro finance in W.B.) to women without stringent collateral requirements.

- Promote access of bidi women to government's welfare, employment (such as MGNREGS, ICDS) and anti-poverty schemes through a single window approach at every district level.
- Provision of affordable, contributory, social insurance of women workers, with incentive components for encouraging education of girl child (along the lines of the Jana Shree Bima Yojana of LIC, Kanyashri of W.B.Govt.)
- Need to involve private sector industry in skill training and to promote alternative employment opportunities for women bidi workers – through fiscal and monetary and incentives (such as garments export industry in Mangalore), fish processing, herbal medicinal plants, food processing, jari works, and various small and cottage industry.

**Concluding Remarks:** Though the government has launched various welfare schemes for the bidi workers by passing several legislations, yet workers have been facing acute problem like disparity in minimum wages and lack of social security, the female bidi workers are carrying out bidi rolling along with their responsibilities. On the other hand, there is need to address immediate concerns of women who are currently engaged in home based bidi work and simultaneously address long term policy issues resulting from anti- tobacco and globalization trends. In a nutshell, for their future prospects, the government should try to arrange the alternatives employment in that sense; they can completely get out from this worse hazardous work.

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