
Life worlds of the bidi workers in Murshidabad district of West Bengal: A qualitative assessment

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Abstract: *Bidi manufacturing is a highly labour intensive unorganised sector where women and girl children are mainly involved in bidi rolling. On the other hand, men are mostly involved in sorting, checking, baking, labelling, wrapping and packing where they get higher wages than bidi rollers. This paper intends to explain the limited and confined lifeworlds of the bidi workers in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Though they are involved in bidi making sector with minimal wages for generations, there is no shift of occupational structure. Most of the bidi 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 bidi workers particularly the women and young girl children. Based on the in-depth interviews in Jangipur block of Murshidabad district of West Bengal, this qualitative study aims to bring out the insights of the everyday life worlds of the bidi workers. Besides, this study also employed non participatory observation to bring out the ground reality of their everyday social lives. The study found that the bidi workers are being exploited and are in perpetual poverty due to their lack of education, unemployment and under-employment, less mobility and socio-religious practices. However, more and more public as well as Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) interventions are necessary for their socio-economic and occupational upliftment.*

Keywords: *Bidi Workers, Unorganised Sector, Lifeworlds, Women and Children, Qualitative Method.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bidi 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* (bidi 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 bidi workers. However, the Standing Committee on Labour, Ministry of Labour and Employment (2005) reported that there are about 4.5 million workers engaged in bidi 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).

Bidi industry is spread across the country but mostly located in states like Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka in India. Bidi manufacturing units are also found in in Gujarat, Kerala, Orissa, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Assam. Most of the bidi making work is carried out in rural and semi-urban areas under the contractual, homebased, piece rate system. However, the making activities vary from place to place in terms of size of bidi, gender and child composition of workers and so on (Giriappa, 1987; Prasad and Prasad, 1985). Most of the bidi rolling workers belong to weaker socio-economic groups with poor household; usually having no other means of sustainable employment. Women and children are predominantly involved in this bidi rolling activities accounting for around 90 per cent of all homebased workers. The bidi rolling is primarily carried by Schedule Castes (SC) and Muslims OBC who lost their traditional source of livelihood (weaving, potteries etc.). Muslim women dominate the bidi rolling activity because of socio-cultural structure considering it as the most acceptable 'home-based' work (Bhatty 1987; Koli 1990; Mohandas and Kumar, 1992; Gopal, 2000).

2. BIDI-A BRIEF HISTORY

The word bidi is derived from 'beeda' (a word in Marwari – a dialect of Hindi predominantly spoken by the trader caste from Marwar of Gujarat and Rajasthan), which is a betel leaf-wrapped offering of betel nuts, herbs and

condiments. The beeda is a symbol of esteem, and display of respect and reverence across the Indian subcontinent, and the bidi gradually started being equated with it. The Indian medicinal systems, especially Ayurveda, also prescribe inhalation of the fumes of medicinal herbs, rolled in leaves. The myth of tobacco's medicinal properties along with parallels in Ayurveda, led to easy acceptance of the bidi in sub-cultures.

There is no historical record of the exact period during which the practice of smoking tobacco rolled in leaves started in India. The cultivation of tobacco started in southern Gujarat in the late 17th century. Hookah smoking was popular among local people. Men of the same caste or sub-caste gathered around in the evenings to share a common hookah. Because the hookah was tedious to carry around, a cheaper and portable form of the hookah was developed, called the *chillum*. Bidis were developed soon after, possibly around the Kheda and Panchmahal districts of Gujarat, where cultivation of tobacco was high. Labourers would roll leftover tobacco in leaves of the *astra* tree (*Bauhinia variegata*) and smoke at leisure. Communities across India experimented using leaves of mango (*Mangifera* spp.), jackfruit (*Artocarpus* spp.), banana, sal (*Shorea robusta*), pandanus (*Pandanus odoratissimus*, kewda) and palash (*Butea monosperma*). Initially, communities in Gujarat made bidis only for their own consumption, but their increasing popularity inspired some to make it into a home-grown business. Soon bidis made locally became more popular than hookahs, largely because bidis overcame the obstacle of sharing the hookah, as individuals could smoke without hurting caste and religious sentiments, and also because they were portable and did not require assembling and extensive preparation to light up. The early business model of the bidi industry in Gujarat involved the businessmen and their workers rolling their own bidis, putting them in a *thali* (tray) and selling them along with tobacco and matches in local *haats* (weekly markets). Gujarati families that had settled down in Bombay saw the potential of the bidi business and soon started manufacturing bidis on a larger scale. Bidis penetrated into other parts of the country outside of Bombay, but until 1900 bidi manufacturing was largely restricted to Bombay and southern Gujarat. 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.

When it was discovered that Leaves of *Tendu* tree are the best for making bidis, the bidi industry became an important and widespread cottage industry in urban shanties and rural areas. *Tendu* was found abundantly around the degraded forests of Jabalpur, and was far better than *astra* leaves. The *tendu* tree grows in the degraded deciduous forests of peninsular India. More importantly, *tendu* leaves were widely available soon after the tobacco crop was ready and cured, when most other trees had shed their leaves. The *tendu* leaves have all the characteristics of an excellent wrapper material – they are large and pliable, and do not crack on rolling when dry; their leathery texture was more acceptable than the veins and rough textures of other leaves; and they matched well with the taste of tobacco, without interfering with the tobacco flavour.

Bidi rolled in *tendu* leaf soon found wide consumer acceptance. The rapid expansion of the railways in Central India in 1899 opened new tobacco markets to this region. Between 1912 and 1918, the rapid expansion of the railways established more such clusters in Vidharba, Telangana, Hyderabad, Mangalore and Madras. The bidi cult rapidly spread to all parts of the country, gaining a strong foothold in the informal urban and rural economies. The habit of smoking trickled down from cities and towns to remote villages with the development of the railways. While new clusters were being created rapidly, several old clusters like Vidharba dissipated. Even strongholds like Madhya Pradesh, which accounted for more than half the bidis produced till the 1980s, have lost out to new epicentres of bidi rolling like West Bengal where labour is cheaper.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the above mentioned context the present study intends to address the following research questions:

- a. How the bidi workers are confined in their limited life worlds in that particular setting?
- b. Why they work in bidi industry and are not shifting other work force?

4. OBJECTIVES

The main purposes of this study are

- a. To look into the everyday life world of the bidi workers.
- b. To examine the reasons of their perpetual poverty.

5. DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

This qualitative study is based on primary data collection. The data were collected through in-depth interview method. 6 in-depth interviews were conducted with the help of in-depth interview guide. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared for the interview. The semi-structured interview method has been used because it allowed some flexibility to the ordered questions according to the issues from the respondents. This technique is very helpful to fulfil the objectives of mapping life worlds of the bidi worker's community.

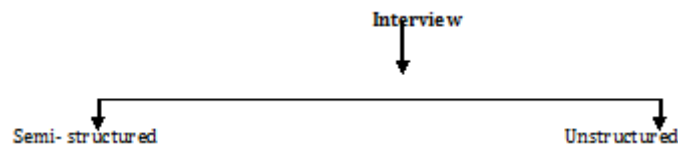


Fig 1: Flowchart of interview method.

In addition to it, non-participatory observation technique was also employed for the insight information. Besides, metal mapping was conducted to get expressions and opinions of social behaviour from different respondents. Study area has been shown through a map prepared with ArcGIS 10.1 software.

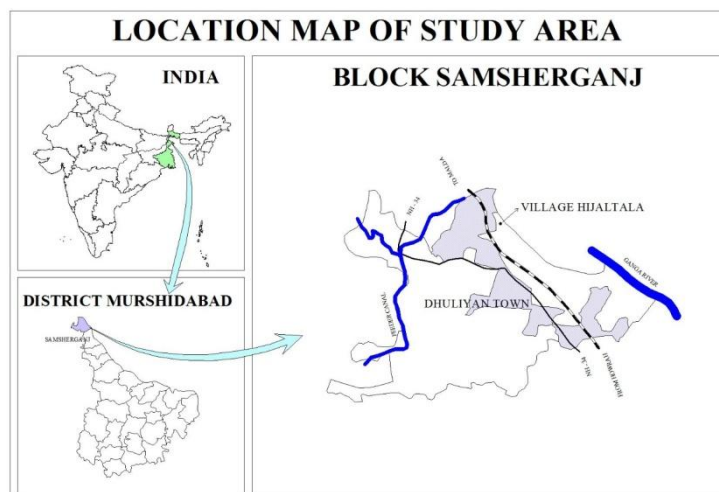
All the in-depth interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. The interview documents were analysed with the weft QDA, a software tool for the analysis of textual data such as interview transcripts, field notes and other documents.

6. STUDY AREA

Murshidabad district of West Bengal has been selected as the study area for the research. The main reason of highly concentration of bidi workers in this region is that there is availability of low waged women workers. The whole region is dominated by the Muslim community and they are poor, less educated and engaged in manual labourer for their livelihood. Murshidabad is home to many of the big bidi companies and has the largest number of bidi workers in the state. At present, the Jangipur subdivision in Murshidabad is a very sought after area for bidi manufacturing.

Selected Block for the Study:

Jangipur is the northern most sub-division of Murshidabad district. Dhulian Municipality, where the largest bidi manufacturer of the district, i.e. '502 Pataka', is located in this particular division only. Thus, Samsherganj block, where Dhuliyān Municipality is located, is the selected block for the study where substantial proportion of population engaged with the bidi industry. There, the total bidi rolling population in Murshidabad is about 0.6 million, of which about 90% of the workers are women and children. Among the women bidi workers about 72% belong to the Muslim community.



Source: The author

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The lifeworlds and everyday geographies of the bidi workers centred around the world of bidi making activities. The literal meaning of the term 'lifeworld' is "as lived" prior to reflective representation or analysis. In other words, the 'lifeworld' is a grand theatre of objects variously arranged in space and time relative to perceiving subjects. The lifeworld can be thought of as the horizon of all our experiences, in the sense that it is that background on which all things appear as themselves and meaningful. The lifeworld cannot, however, be understood in a purely static manner; it isn't an unchangeable background, but rather a dynamic horizon in which we *live*, and which "lives with us" in the sense that nothing can appear in our lifeworld except as *lived*.

The life worlds of the bidi workers are confined within their everyday activities; they occasionally access beyond their limited social spaces. This is because of their nature of works that compel them to intact that space. As one of the participants while explaining the everyday life and accessibility to social spaces expressed that

"After getting up in the early morning I sit for cutting leaves up to 8 or 9 o'clock. Then I pack the leaves for rolling bidi. Then I go for market and after that I sit for rolling bidi. I rolled up to evening then go for submitting bidi to karkhana. Then I go market for nothing and after coming back I sit for rolling bidi. We cannot keep relation with the high class people who are engaged in services and business. They have different world and have different attitudes towards us. We have to live within ourselves. Once one becomes rich, we cannot maintain the earlier relation. Still our society is good and cooperative because all people in harmony. if someone falls sick other people help him as people think that all are poor and they have to live together".

This is the situation of most of the bidi workers in that particular setting. The everyday life worlds of women are more limited than men. Men sometimes go for local club (a single roof building for gathering of local people for entertainment like playing carom and cards) whereas women do not have access that spaces as well. However, the life worlds of the bidi workers can be frames as below.

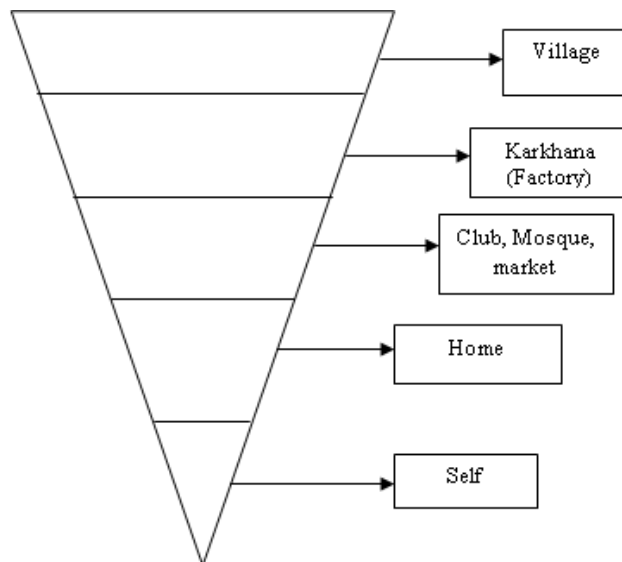


Fig 2: Life worlds of the bidi workers

Source: the author

The major reasons of rolling bidi are illiteracy and ignorance, unemployment and under-employment, poverty, indebtedness, lower rates of wages, in adequate social security, agrarian social structure, lack of basic facilities and amenities such as education system, health services etc. However, bidi making has different sections of works. The division of labour or mode of employment has four categories based on the status of the work viz. (i) bidi checkers (ii) bidi labeler/ packers (iii) helper and (iv) bidi rollers. All four types of occupation do not carry similar earning potentials. For instance, the maximum average daily earning of labeler/packer is 42% higher than the maximum average daily earnings of bidi rolling workers. Even, the male participation rate is higher in the first three types

which considered being higher in post having higher earnings prospects. The whole bidi making process and spaces used can be tabulated as below:

Table 1: *Different activities for Bidi industry and concerned spaces used by workers.*

Activities	Spaces	Work done by
Bidi Rolling	a) 'varanda' or corridor, beneath the tree.	a) Women and their daughter.
	b) In some shadow place outside the home.	b) Young men and boys.
Distributing raw materials and collecting bidi from bidi rollers	a) Corridors or 'Baithakkhana' of their own houses.	'Merchen'. (Middle men)
	b) In a particular shadow place of other houses in the village.	
Bidi checking with helpers	In factories	Specially trained men.
Bidi baking	In houses of people and 'vattis' of particular company.	Men and boys.
Bidi packing	In factories	Men and boys.

Women have contributed to the bidi 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 bidi 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 bidi 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.

8. CONCLUSIONS

It has been observed that most of the bidi workers 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 bidi workers. Moreover, bidi 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 bidi workers in the organized sector and those in the unorganized sector. Some of the problems that bidi workers face are

1. Low wages of payment which is, usually, under piece rate system and the piece rate is very low.
2. Exposure to tobacco related health hazard.
3. Superior strength of employer and this strength is used to exploit the poor bidi workers.
4. Inadequate social security.
5. 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 bidi 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 bidi workers themselves are not aware of their legal rights and privileges. Despite various security legislations, the socio-economic condition of the bidi workers in the unorganized sector has not improved. On the other these poor bidi workers are being exploited by the powerful employers and by their agents/contractors.

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