



They don't Smoke But they can't Breathe

Sarada Lahangir

“My affliction is not the problem of my life. The chief cause of my ailment is of rolling 400 to 500 Beedis a day, for which I have been a victim of the dreadful disease, having goiter in my neck since three years. Doctors said it needs surgery but where do I get money to have the surgery? I accepted this as my destiny”. 35 years old Kalpana Bhue, a Beedi worker of Kadalimunda village of Sambalpur district lamented.

Kalpana has been rolling Beedi since her childhood. “I have learnt to roll Beedi from my parents. We were four siblings. My mother was rolling 1000 to 1200 Beedi per day but she fallen sick and diagnosed with TB due to regular expose of tobacco and died when I was studying in Class IX. After her death I had to be dropped out from the school because there was no body in the house to look after the household chores as well as to contribute in the family income so I started rolling Beedi. Two of my elder brothers were married and they migrated with their family to eke out livelihood. My father is an aged. Due to Alcohol habit and his sickness he could not work now. I have to take care of my father and my grandmother. Every day I could roll 600 to 700 Beedis which ensured me the earning of Rs 500 to 600/-per month. I know this job is hazardous but Beedi rolling is my compulsion”, she explained.

28 years Basanti Bhue from Padia Bahal village of Sambalpur district is another Beedi roller who is suffering from TB since two years. Her pale and weak body itself speaks her misery. “I am having cough, backache, and feeling restless sitting hours in one place and rolling Beedis. I can't leave this job because it feeds my family. We are landless and had no source of income. My old father hardly gets 5 to 10 days of wage in a month. It is me and my mother who eke out our living from this Beedi rolling. Earlier I could roll 1000 to 1200 Beedis per day and earned about Rs.1120 to Rs.1200/-per month at (Rs.40/-per 1000 Beedis)but it has come down to 500 to 600 Beedis per day and earning Rs.560 to 600/-per month, due to my illness.” Basanti told.

There are thousands of women Beedi workers in Sambalpur, Jharsuguda and Deogarh districts of western part of Odisha whose lives go up in smoke. During my random visit to few villages of Sambalpur and Jharsuguda districts, I found that in many houses, some or all members of the family are doing something bowing their heads upon their winnowing-platter (which is locally called as Kulaa) and are rolling “Kendu leave” or “tobacco-leave” for making “indigenous -cigarette” called – “Bidi”. This work of Bidi making is carried on by all sitting upon their open court-yard, usually called verandah in a row or

circle from 8 A.M. to 9 P.M. taking only one to two hours break in between for the cooking and doing household chores. The whole family mostly the women and children do this job in addition to their daily routine household works like cooking food in the kitchen, washing clothes, helping male members in their work and so on, to earn something to support their family, which is the chief object of this job.

As Kalpana and Basanti's fingers nimbly tie and roll Beedi after Beedi, it's evident that Beedi-rolling is a grueling process. Beedi-rollers like them put dried tobacco powder inside a small kendu leaf, tightly roll the leaf, and secure it with a thread. It is estimated that an average Beedi-roller rolls about 500 to 1,000 Beedis a day at a huge cost of mental and physical abuse, penury and financial enslavement, and health problems.

Health problems have become a part and parcel of the Beedi workers lives. The tobacco dust that they inhale can result in chronic Bronchitis and TB in the long run. Majority of the Beedi workers of Sambalpur and Jharsuguda districts complain of breathlessness and Asthma among other problems.

The Beedi Workers (Condition of Employment) Act 1966, and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act 1976, offer many schemes for Beedi workers that covers health aspects. For instance, an ID card holder is liable to get up to Rs.7,000 as reimbursement in case of treatment of Tuberculosis, and Rs.10,000 as group insurance in case of death. The schemes cover the entire treatment for Cancer, and a heart problem gives Rs.1.30 lakh and Rs.2 lakh for kidney problems. Unfortunately, most of the people are not aware of it. Secondly there are other factor which deprived many Beedi workers in the area like Kalpana and Basanti from the welfare schemes.

Kalpana and Basanti don't have the identity card as Beedi worker though both are making Beedi since their childhood. "Several times we have been pleaded for the card to the contractor or the Munshi who is taking Beedi from us but he is just promising and doing nothing. As a result now I could not avail the government benefit" Kalpana lamented.

"40 percent Beedi worker in the area doesn't have the identity card. As a result they can't avail the welfare scheme meant for them", alleged Mitrabhanu Podh, General Secretary, Nikhil Orissa Beedi Workers Federation.

"The reason is very simple, Beedi companies with help of the middlemen, Munshi or contractor not let them to make a proper card. Because if there will be more card holders, the company has to pay more Provident fund". He added.

Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment Department has set up three static cum mobile medical units for the Beedi workers in Sambalpur district. They are situated in Rengali, Parmanpur and Sambalpur towns. Basically all the welfare schemes of the central government are being implemented through these hospitals and the doctors in these hospitals are the implementing authority of the welfare schemes meant for the Beedi workers. According to the Government enrolment in these three hospitals in Sambalpur district there are 99,000 Beedi workers who have the identity card. But according to the Beedi union leaders the number of Beedi worker in this district is not less than 1.5 lakh. Out of which 70 per cent are women 20 per cent are children and rest are male Beedi workers.

Mr. Gokul Meher, General Secretary Sambalpur Beedi Karigar Sangathan, alleged "there are 27 licensed Beedi companies,

operating in Sambalpur district. Apart from this there are six to seven number of fake unlicensed Beedi companies operating from the area and exploiting the Beedi workers with the help of the contractors or Munshis. All the Beedi companies manipulating their records to save the tax. Thousands of Beedi workers denied the identity cards in the area which is ultimately benefiting the Beedi companies and the contractor. The number of Beedi workers working under the Beedi companies shown in their record is varying the actual numbers of Beedi workers in the area”.

When we randomly visited one small Beedi company who has obtained license in the name of Mayur Beedi, we found that according to its record only three contractors are enrolled in its record and under them only 114 Beedi workers are working. That means company is supposed to deduct the Provident Fund of 114 Beedi workers but its manager informed that they are deducting the PF of only 8 Beedi workers because others don't have card. Secondly the Beedi companies are also misleading the government about their actual production to save their cess.

Mayur Beedi Company's Manager Mr.Ghanshyam Patel informed that their production is only 50000 Beedi per day. That means it is about 15 lakh Beedis per month. But again he contradicts by saying that they are producing 120 cartoons Beedi per months. Each cartoon contains 27000 Beedi.If we calculate then it will be 32 lakh 40 thousand Beedi per months.

A local contractor working under the Badsha Beedi company, off the record admitted the fact that they neither show the actual production not the number of workers. The card holder Beedi workers getting Rs.80/- per 1000 Beedi when the Kendu leaves is given by the Beedi workers

themselves and if the company will give Kendu leaves then it pays Rs.40/-per 1000 Beedis. There is no fixed rate for the Beedi worker who does not have card. This is a tip of the ice berg.

Meanwhile Mr.Pranab Kumar Patra, District Labour Officer, Sambalpur told that "there is not such kind of complaint they ever received about the denial of identity card or so."Actually these Beedi industries are solely coming under the Central Government schemes. We have very little scope to do. We just enforce the law if we find any irregularity within the premises of the Beedi industries but as mostly it is home based we felt helpless. He told Beedi is an important industry in India. It is one of the noted 'village-small-scale-industries' and a huge number of poorer people live on the income derived from this industry.

The peculiarities of this industry are that it does not require any heavy machinery. Very small tools are required to carry on this trade. This 'cottage-industry' has now become a 'family-profession' for almost all the members of a family get involved in this business. It is chiefly concentrated in all the Eastern Indian States, Assam, West-Bengal, and Odisha.

Beedi companies are flourishing like anything but its workers live in penury. Kalpana and Basanti are symbolizing thousands of women Beedi rollers in the area, whose poverty, lack of awareness and lack of alternative source of income forced them to be a part of this exploitative business. They don't smoke but they can't breathe.

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