



Children At Work: A Case Study Of Beedi Rolling Industry In Malda District

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ABSTRACT:

Safety, security and welfare of the children are indicators of a progressive society. Though Constitution of India makes provision for free and compulsory education to all the children below the age of 14 years and subsequent legislations make employment of children below 14 years a punishable offence, yet child labour is rampant. Not even protectors of law, DIG of police restraint from employing child labour. The recent news of employing girl child as domestic help and physical abuse of the same child in Howrah, West Bengal, is an eye opener. Beedi Rolling industry is one of the few industries where large scale child labourers are employed. The district of Malda has a number of Beedi Rolling factories where large numbers of children are engaged. This paper will make an effect to understand the dynamics of child labour in Beedi rolling industry and related issues will be addressed.

KEYWORDS:

Child Labour, Beedi, Casualization of Labour, Informalization of Labour Force, Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act.

INTRODUCTION:

The most reliable pointer to the character and culture of a society is the way it treats its children. Childhood is considered to be the dawn of our humanity. It was promised in the constitution of India, Article 24, "No child below the age of 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment". But it is an alarming fact that one third of world's child labour are found to be in India which is around 17.4 million as per official estimation (Kulshrestha, 1994, p. 57).

The Article 39 of Constitution of India ensures that children are not exploited and abused and they can avail opportunity which is needed for their physical, mental and ethical development. Article 24 says, "The state shall Endeavour to provide, within a period of 10 years from the commencement of this constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". Unfortunately, among 10 crore children in the age group 6-10 years, approximately 3.3 crore have never entered in the school. As a matter of fact many of them, who entered in the school, dropped out even before

Please cite this Article as : Himika Mukhopadhyay ,Children At Work: A Case Study Of Beedi Rolling Industry In Malda District : Golden Research Thoughts (Sept ; 2012)



completion of fourth standard. It's not only amazing but distressing too that even in Delhi some 2 lakh children are out of school (Gupta and Kalu, 1987, p. 86). Even after introduction Sarva Siksha Mission and Mid-day Meal schemes, situation of drop-out has not improved considerably.

The Government of India has enacted much legislations which prohibit children from working in the particularly 'dangerous and hazardous' activities. Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act (1986) are particularly relevant in this context. Even after a decade of enactment, preponderance of child labour can be seen in many unorganized and informal sector activities (Burra, 1991, p.102).

Privatization-Casualization and Child Labour: With the ongoing economic reform one can find some relation of incidence of child labour with the process. 12 million children at their tender age contributed 20 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP) in the mid-ninteies (Sandhya, 1994, p. 45). What is more alarming is that when 12 million children are at work, some 23 million adults are unemployed. Some studies put the figure even higher. "About 65 million children are working 8-10 hours a day that many adults who are, hence, out of employment" (Agnivesh, 2001, p. 6).

Table 1: Share of workers by employment status in India, 1991-92 to 1996-97 (Percent)

Year	Self-employment	Regular	Casual
1991-92	50.3	23.4	26.3
1992-93	56.5	12.7	30.8
1993-94	54.8	13.2	32.0
1994-95	55.6	12.2	32.2
1995-96	54.6	13.0	32.4
1996-97	54.6	12.9	32.5

Source: S. P. Gupta (1999), adopted from EPW, 16th February 2002.

With the economic environment of privatization there is going to be more casualization of labour force. The casualization of labour force and growth of informal sector is certainly going to encourage incidence of child labour. It is in this context that the study of child labour is important. Pais (2002, p. 669), while analyzing casualization of workforce and its recent trends observes, "The growing casualization ... concern. It's, therefore, important to examine this process of growing casualization of workforce." The further ads, "A growing literature seeks to demonstrate the links between specific policies of liberalization such as deregulation of the labour market, export promotion and trade liberalization, with the process of casualization, informalization and minimization of labour force." (Pais, 2002, p. 670).

National Sample Survey (NSS) data on employment shows that while the percentage share of regular worker has reduced considerably from 23.4 percent in 1991-92 to 12.9 percent in 1996-97, the share of casual labour has increased remarkably from 26.3 percent to 32.5 percent.

Swami Agnivesh, a social activist, in writing says that around 350 million workers in the unorganized sector live in the conditions of deprivation and chronic uncertainty. Mukhopadhyay (1992, p. 13) argues that at a given level of employment, increasing casualization suggests that people are getting lower quality of works. "Lower quality of works means lower income. Under this stressed condition poor families will search for new earning hands. Consequently, their children, more in number, will find themselves at the work place" (Singh, 1990, p.150).

Among other unorganized sectors, where lot of casual laoburs is engaged, Beedi rolling is one of them. Carpet weaving, Gem polishing, Slate cutting, Lock manufacturing, Pottery industry, Match and

Firework industry, Brass ware manufacturing, Zari and Silk weaving/work are some of the industries where child labours contribute a major part of workforce (Anwaruzzaman, 2001, p. 42).

Longer duration of work with poor working environment coupled with hazardous nature of activities put a serious threat to childrens' health. Operation Reasearch Group (ORG), a Gujarat based Non-government Organization (NGO), points out that over 83 percent of the children working in urban areas work for seven hours or more. In 1986, 25th February, the Financial Express carried a report which shows that as high as 67.5 percent of child labours work between 11 to 15 hours a day in Calcutta. A survey in 1996, conducted by the author, among the child labours working in Glass industry at Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh shows that as high as 66 percent child labour start working below the age of 8 years, and 68.5 percent of them work eight hours or more which may start at 06:30 am and continue upto even 09:30 pm flouting all labour laws (Anwaruzzaman, 1996, p.76).

CHILD LABOUR IN BEEDI ROLLING INDUSTRY IN MALDA DISTRICT

Malda district is primarily a rural district with over 90 percent of its population living in rural areas. Naturally agriculture and allied activities is the mainstay of economy. Manufacturing industry is almost non-existent in this district. Only a few medium, small and micro processing units and some units of Khadi and Village Udyog and Household industries found in the district. The number units and workers engaged in these units are given in the table-2. The district is industrially so poor that with around 20 lakh work seekers, industrial sector can provide only little over 22 thousand job.

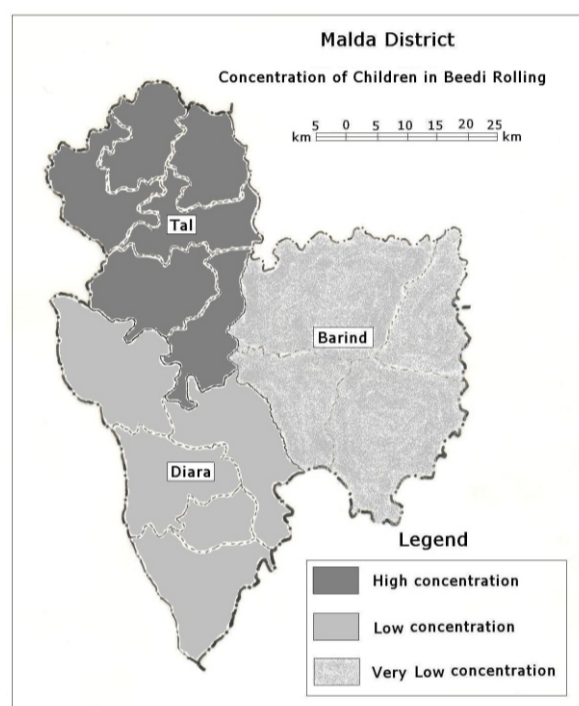
Table 2: Number of industrial units with their employees, Malda district (2006-07)

Type	Number of units	Number of Workers
SSI	2,908	19,820
Micro	84	900
Micro+Services	116	1,125
Macro	115	1,317
Macro+Services	199	1,762
Total	3,223	22,707

Source: District Industry Centre (DIC), Government of West Bengal, Malda (WB).

Causes: It has been mentioned earlier that Beedi Rolling is one of the industries where lot of child labours is engaged. Malda is one of the districts not only in the state but all over the country where thousands of children are employed as child labour. Agriculture, Tea Stalls, Road Side Hotels, Eating Joints, and Domestic helps etc. are some of the activities where traditionally many children are engaged. But in recent years, last 30-40 years, beedi rolling has come up like any in the district. Beedi rolling is an industry which is heavily dependent on women worker and child labour. The payment system as followed in the industry is piece rate basis i.e. for rolling of 1000 Beedis a wage of amount rupees 40.00 is paid. The nature of job is so tedious that male adults are often not interested to opt for the job. More over there is hardly any scope of speeding up and thus earning higher amount. Generally a person irrespective of their sex or childhood/adulthood can roll 1500 beedis that fetch rupees 60.00. For a male adult person it is not at all lucrative when he can earn rupees 100.00 to 150.00 a day while working in sectors such as construction and even agriculture. Thus with no other option open to the child labour, they are attracted to this activity.

The Diara region of the district comprising Baishnabnagar, Kaliachak, Manikchak, and English Bazar police station areas where beedi rolling is a very popular activity. Kaliachak II and III and Manikchak blocks have largest concentration of Child labours engaged in beedi rolling industry. These three blocks are devastated by recurring bank erosion (Ganga's bank erosion) and perennial flood etc. Loss of fertile and productive land, live stock, and shelter etc. coupled with high density of population and lack of alternative job opportunities has made the situation worse. High growth rate of population (both natural and immigration from Bangladesh) along with low intake in others sectors of economy and virtual absence of rehabilitation drag these tender aged to this hazardous occupation. Beedi merchants lure the parents by offering some advance which poor families can not afford to refuse to accept. Once the advance is accepted the families are trapped into the vicious cycle of indebtedness and some times near bondage.



NATURE AND EXTENT:

A survey carried out by the author among beedi workers during February-March, 2009 in Malda district shows that the district has an estimated 1,25,000 labour force engaged in beedi rolling of which approximately 80 percent are from Kaliachak I and III and Manikchak blocks. Overwhelming majority i.e. 88 percent of total 1.25 lakh beedi workers are females which shows that predominantly females are engaged with this occupation. It is particularly so because females can supplement the family income even after their regular domestic works. It has been found that a labour engaged in beedi rolling earns on an average rupees 40-55 which is not a meager amount contributed to the family income.

Considering 15 years as upper limit to be considered as child labour, it was found that around 25,000 children i.e. 20 percent of total workforce are children. Among these working children approximately 90 percent are female child where as only 10 percent are male counter part. Children normally start working at the age of ten or even below that. During survey quite a few cases were found when children at the age of seven to eight years have started working. Though the average age of beedi workers is found to be approximately 27 years, they are working, on an average, for last 15 years. That means they have started working at the age of 12 years, but as a matter of fact worker in earlier days started quite late because they needed more time to learn the art of beedi rolling. Moreover beedi rolling was not

available to them as limited villages had this practice before 25 years and thus they engaged themselves quite late. Today beedi rolling is a household occupation of most of the families and hence hardly requires any time for formal or informal learning.

CONDITION OF WORK:

Children at their tender age are engaged in beedi rolling for 12 to 14 hours a day to earn rupees 30.00-50.00. This work is a very hazardous one so far the occupational health is concerned. Continuous exposure to Tobacco for over 10 hours daily is a major cause of higher incidence of Tuberculosis (TB) and other respiratory problems among them. Almost every worker who is engaged in this work for last five to ten years or so has developed backbone problem and their eye sight is also weakened. Thus preponderance of TB and other occupational health hazards are very common.

Children working as beedi roller are exploited lot. Contractors pay some advance amount which they often fail to return and as a result they are trapped into the vicious cycle of indebtedness. The situation is so bad that even if they realize that they are being exploited, they neither can leave the contractor nor they can protest. Exploitation starts with the deduction of cost of Tobacco and Tendu Leave (two main raw materials) for shortage, which is almost inevitable, from the wage. Often some part of the wage is deducted because beedi rolled by a particular worker may not match the standards and specifications of the contractor. The whole Beedi manufacturing process gives neither any guarantee of work nor wage. Any labour may be sacked any time as per the will of the contractor. Inevitable absence from work due to illness etc. does not have any system of payment. Though the pension scheme have been officially introduced, yet it is almost impossible for an individual worker to get it overcoming extensive bureaucratic hurdles and exploitation by middlemen.

There is no union to press their demand. The piece rate basis of payment encourages employment of child labour on the one hand and works as a tool of exploitation on the other. Adult male labours generally do not prefer, as revealed by the survey, this job because they can not speed up, even if they want, for higher earning. They may not be satisfied with the low wage amounting rupees 40.00 to 60.00 a day.

THE WAY OUT:

The root of the problem lies in the poverty and unemployment of the adults. Even with the official definition of the poverty line which excludes minimum clothing, shelter and education, over 40 percent (national average 26 percent) of 33 lakh population (Census of India, 2001) live below the poverty line. Apart from the agriculture, which is already under excessive pressure, there is hardly any scope of gainful employment generation. The scope of small scale industry, cottage and handicraft etc. may also be explored. Particularly mango processing and silk weaving have lot of potentiality. Therefore, the productive and gainful employment to adults is the only way out along with stringent implementation of legislation relevant to prohibition of child labour.

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