

The Invisible Work That Feeds The Family

THE invisibility of women's work continues to be a problem in understanding women's economic role in the household and in society. One reason for this is the elusive definitions of work which economists and census commissioners have been giving. Another important reason for nonrecognition of women's economic contribution is the neglect of the household economy and the unorganised sector in which women play a major role. We still know very little



about the magnitude of unorganised industry both in rural and in urban areas.

Bidi making is one such unorganised industry, which is spread all over India, employs mostly women and children, and has not succeeded in attracting the attention of economists, administrators and policy makers to any significant extent. Yet it is an industry which feeds millions of rural and urban poor, mainly through the unrecognised labour of women.

This paper is based on an intensive

study of women *bidi* makers in Ghurpur, Phulpur and Bharwari *tehsils* of Allahabad district in Uttar Pradesh. Some villages were selected in these areas and a random sample of 264 households in these villages were surveyed through a questionnaire cum interview method.

Growing Industry

In this part of the country, *bidi* manufacture is a major industry. It is expanding as export markets are established in some western countries

where interest in *bidi* smoking is growing, perhaps due to medical findings that *bidis* are less harmful than cigarettes.

Since the industry is not subject to competition from urban industry, it does not need any protective treatment. It has no marked tendency to move towards towns. It exists in rural areas without any artificial support, unlike some other rural industries like spinning and weaving which receive government support.

The government estimates that the industry employs 2.5 million workers. Nearly 90 percent of them are women. Most of them work in their homes on a piece rate basis. Raw materials are supplied to them by contractors.

All the raw materials are produced in India. No machinery, foreign exchange or infrastructure is required.

Below Poverty Line

Taking the poverty line for the rural population at Rs 51 per capita per month, 75 percent of the population in our sample were below the poverty line. This is a high percentage compared with the prevailing estimates for the country as a whole, which vary between 40 and 60 percent. The difference is large enough to infer that those engaged in *bidi* making belong, on the whole, to the poorer segments of the rural population.

The majority of families in our survey were Muslim. Women of these families had no alternative employment opportunity. They shared the *bidi* making with the children and the domestic work with women and children of the family. Within the time available to a woman to allocate to *bidi* making, the only external constraint limiting her earning capability was the supply of tobacco and leaves by the contractor.

Although the Bidi And Cigar Workers Act, 1966, which covered home workers, made provisions for fixed hours of work, weekly holidays, paid leave, maternity leave benefits, and the Bidi Workers Welfare Fund And Cess Act, 1976, called for a levy of up to Re 1 per kilo of tobacco to create a fund for improving health care, housing and recreational facilities for *bidi* workers, these laws have not improved conditions for *bidi* workers, in this area. The contract system survives almost

unchanged. The workers do not have any employee relationship with the manufacturing firms.

Semiskilled Labour

The manufacturing process is simple and requires little skill. First, the *tendu* leaves are cut to the required shape, using a pair of scissors and a cardboard cutout supplied by the contractor. The cut leaves are moistened and left for about half an hour.

The required quantity of tobacco mixture is spread out on the cut leaf which is then rolled into a conical shape. The two ends are folded with the help of a wooden fork, and the tapered end is tied with thread. Bundles of 25 *bidis* are made up and handed over to the contractor who, in turn, delivers them to the *bidi* firm, where they are placed on racks and cured in an oven for 24 hours at a controlled temperature. On removal from the oven, the bundles are wrapped in tissue paper, labelled and dispatched to retail units.

In our sample households, women who make *bidis* continue to perform their normal domestic functions such as cooking, washing, cleaning. In our analysis, we identified the time spent by women on making *bidis* and on domestic work.

Major Earners

In discussions on rural development, the earnings of women through nonfarming activities are generally regarded as supplementary. In our sample, this was clearly not the case. For a number of households, the major share of household income came from the *bidis* made by women. This was particularly so in poorer households. In households with a total annual income not exceeding Rs 500, 86 percent of the income was contributed by women, while in households with a total income in the Rs 500-700 range, 95 percent of the income was contributed by women. In the next two higher income groups, Rs 750-1,000, and 1,000-1500 the contribution of



women was 79 percent and 77 percent. Thus, in the 25 percent of all sample households whose total annual income did not exceed Rs 1,500, the contribution of women to household income lay between 77 and 95 percent.

Many of the households in the Rs 1,000-1,500 range had no adult male members. They consisted of widows with children or women whose husbands had migrated to a city and, for all practical purposes, had deserted them.

Desertion is not uncommon, particularly by Muslim men who are permitted to have four wives concurrently, and who are landless and without property ties in villages which would bind them to the joint family. A major segment of our sample consisted of Muslims who were landless. For these families, the opportunity offered by the *bidi* industry is a means of survival.

No Alternative

For the men, there is a choice between alternative opportunities for employment, between which households allocate labour to maximise family gain. Women do not have any such alternative. Their contribution to household income rises mainly with the number of women in the household able to engage in *bidi* making and the time they can devote to it.

Many economists think that surplus labour and low income levels in rural areas of less developed countries is due to the low aspirations of the people, induced in part by an inward looking culture. This explanation rests on the belief that the prospects of household earning rising above subsistence level are not sufficient to arouse the necessary effort to secure the additional earnings.

The evidence in this survey clearly refuted this logic. It was found that women spent more time on *bidi* making as household income rose, and there was no evidence of a threshold beyond which their effort tended to slacken. This was the case even though the work day extended to as much as 11 hours. Whatever the reason for low income levels in these families, lack of aspiration is certainly not one of them.

An interesting feature of our sample



The dual task — home based workers

was that household income rose with the size of the household and that per capita income also rose. There is ample evidence that household income in rural India does rise with household size since most rural activities are labour intensive. But evidence that an increase in household size leads to a higher per capita income is rare. We attributed this phenomenon in our sample entirely to the participation of women in *bidi* making.

The availability of this employment to women and children lowers the dependency rate in the household and raises the contribution of women to the total household income to as much as an average of 45.5 percent.

Improved Status

The impact of *bidi* making on social status can be felt at two levels—at the household level, where it influences the standing of the family in the village community, and at the individual level, where it influences the standing of the women within the family. The two kinds of impact influence each other.

Since women take the major share of *bidi* making, their status is most affected within the family. Since most of them are Muslims, it represents the only employment opportunity that their social environment permits them.

Nearly all households felt they would not be able to maintain their existing standard of living without the income from *bidi* making. In our sample, we found that for 17 percent of the households, the axe would fall on food items. This suggests that these families hardly consume any other items at all besides food. Therefore no reduction in other items is feasible so food has to be cut as soon as income falls.

At the other extreme, 12 percent of households indicated that they would be able to take the fall in income without having to reduce food consumption. These were households with a higher income of which a larger share was allocated to nonfood consumption. About 70 percent of households expressed the fear that a withdrawal of *bidi* income would cause both their food and nonfood consumption to fall.

Since 70 percent of our sample households were living below the poverty line, a further decline in their income would indeed have distressing consequences. Therefore, the value of the opportunity to make *bidis* must rate high on purely economic grounds.

It is in this context that the responses to the question as to whether women should engage in remunerative work must be assessed. In our sample, 91

percent of the respondents gave an affirmative answer.

It is noteworthy that whether they are driven by the miseries of privation or drawn by the comforts of a higher level of living, there has been a major change in the acceptance by women of *bidi* making as an occupation. In our sample, there were only 16 percent of the respondents whose mothers made *bidis* while 83 percent belonged to the first generation of those who were now so occupied.

Two thirds of the respondents thought that women should have an independent source of income. This proportion tended to increase with a rise in income.

It is beyond doubt that a majority of the women felt that they were better off, both as members of the household and as women, and that they associated this with their having an independent source of income. That they were individually better off was revealed in their response to the question as to whether they were treated better in the household since they had been earning and adding to the household income. As many as 77 percent of our respondents clearly answered this question in the affirmative, and the proportion progressively increased with the size of their contribution to household income. In the highest income category, all women claimed that they were treated better as a consequence of their contributing to household income.

Another consequence of women having a source of income is the increased say they have in spending money. This is an unmistakable sign of their greater importance in household decision making processes and must be pleasing to them. In our sample, 72 percent thought that since they had begun to earn, their views on spending had acquired greater weight.

Here again, we found that the proportion of women experiencing this improvement in status increased with household size and income, and therefore also with their own contribution. To the further question as



to whether they got some money to spend on their own, 77 percent women answered in the affirmative, the proportion increasing with household income.

Another set of data has a bearing on the *bidi* makers' own status evaluation of the occupation. This evaluation in part reflected the social attitude to *bidi* making and in part the *bidi* makers' own reactions to the value of *bidi* making as an employment option. The questions asked were: Would you like your daughter to continue making *bidis*, and if your daughter were to marry a farmer with more land, would you still want her to make *bidis*? To the first question, 49 percent of the respondents gave an affirmative answer. Another 18 percent were not sure. Only 33 percent were clear that they did not want their daughters to go on making *bidis*.

More interesting was the fact that with a rise in household income, a progressively greater proportion of women wanted their daughters to continue making *bidis*. To the second question, only nine percent of the women answered in the affirmative while 73 percent did not want their daughters to make *bidis* if they married a farmer with a reasonable amount of land. But here again, those who would like their daughters to continue making *bidis* constituted a greater proportion at higher levels of income.

Those who wanted their daughters

to continue making *bidis* did so for two reasons : acquisition of a skill and as a source of additional income, the former accounting for 25 percent and the latter 70 percent, the remaining five percent being those who could not explain their reason.

The two reasons are in part overlapping but the thought process behind them can be distinguished. Those who emphasised skill acquisition were putting the accent on security, a resource to fall back upon in need. The others had a shorter range view, with the immediate flow of income looming large.

It is for lack of any skill that many women, especially among, the Muslims, cannot make a contribution to family income. Cultural restraints on them inhibit the acquisition of productive skills.

The status of women within the family is favourably affected as a result of their substantial contributions to the family income.

We did not find that women were withdrawn from work as household income level rose. On the contrary, work participation among women at higher income levels intensifies.

There also evidence of the economic role of women lifting the aspiration horizons of households. The majority in the sample, especially non Ashrafs and lower Hindu castes who constitute the majority of *bidi* makers, found that the additional income earned through *bidi* making was status raising.

The effect of *bidi* income in raising the economic and social status of women leads to new attitudes relating to the desirability of women earning, the value of their acquiring skills and the significance of their work involvement for family welfare. However, these new attitudes among women do not yet constitute a challenge to established practice.

(This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Asian regional conference on women and the household, held at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi, from January 27 to 31, 1985.)