

PRACTICALLY the entire bidi industry of India depends on tobacco grown and processed in Nipani which is a region on the Maharashtra – Karnataka border. The trade yields crores of rupees in excise duties to the government and fabulous wealth to a small group of tobacco merchants. In Nipani, it employs about 2,500 workers in bidi making and another 5,000 in the tobacco processing factories.

Almost all these workers are women. To walk through the town, into the small huts where the bidis are rolled or through factories choking with the fumes of the pressed and sorted tobacco leaves, is to realize how much it is a women's town and how much these tobacco profits are built on women's labour. In the factories especially, the conditions seem to be those of early industrialization – women working from nine a.m. to midnight or later with only minimal breaks, working without face masks to protect them from the deadening tobacco particles in the air, and with little protection from petty tyranny and sexual harassment.

The atmosphere of these factories, where most work is carried on without ventilation, is so suffocating that visitors normally break out in coughing as soon as they step in. If the owner is asked how the workers stand it, he may well reply: "Oh, they often vomit regularly for about a month." As for the night shift, that is illegal but "we pay off the factory inspectors."

Things were much worse, especially as far as sexual oppression was concerned, until the women recently started organizing. "We've had a bidi workers' union for about four years", says Subhash Joshi, a young lecturer who is one of the main organizers. "We've had successful struggles for bonus and maternity benefits, and although the owners continually refuse to give work to women who are known union members, we still have a solid core of about 500 permanent members." Bidi making is a putting-out industry notorious for its exploitative conditions everywhere and it is very easy for the owners to tyrannize the workers individually and get rid of those who are thought to be troublesome.

GAIL OMVEDT

## Women Roll Bidis, Factory Owners Roll In Wealth

The processing factories proved even more difficult to organize. These work on a seasonal basis and many of the workers are women from poor, landless village families. Their work helps their families to survive the slack season. During the work period, their schedule had been to run in from their villages before the nine a.m. deadline, often eating as they ran, then a day shift of about nine hours and then the second night shift which frequently lasted till around two a.m. Only then would these women be free to go home. For the village women, this meant walking one to five miles home at night. For all of them, it meant an additional hour or two of cooking and finishing their inevitable shift of housework before they could finally sleep.

Revolt against this exploitation finally began last March when several women

who returned late after lunch break were not taken back. This would have meant the loss of at least a day's pay and perhaps more, until they could "please the boss" sufficiently to regain their work. This time, though, all the women in the factory spontaneously walked out. After some time they sent for Subhash Joshi. "I warned them that if they joined the union they would have to face every kind of harassment and pressure. They said: 'We're ready.' Then they met all the women after work that day, when the midnight shift was over. The next day 80 factories were closed in Nipani and 7,000 women were out on the streets!"

A contract was quickly signed in which the women won their main demands: recognition of the union, no victimization three days' strike pay and, most important,



a guaranteed eight hour work day for a wage of Rs. 5 – which most of them had been earning earlier only by working 12 to 16 hours a day. The initial victory had been won and the jubilant women went back to work.

But things proved not so simple. As rising prices wiped out the workers' wage gains, many women began to return to work on the night shift for an additional Rs. 2.50. The owners launched an offensive. By shifting some of the production to the villages, where they could get cheaper labour, they were able to counter the Nipani union. They began to close down factories either permanently or intermittently. Several struggles began, including workers' occupation of factories and gheraos or threatened gheraos of the factory owners. In October-November, one of these struggles resulted in a crisis. Ironically, this came only a few days after the union had won a major victory – the award of the first small Diwali bonus to the tobacco workers.

On November 9, cases were levied against 34 workers and 7 union activists for their involvement in the occupation of the closed-down Sambar factory. A vacate order was served on them. "We left the factory and sat in the streets, waiting for the owner to come and close his factory", relates Joshi, "He stayed away until November 13 and then came with 100 policemen. The women accosted him as he came out of the factory and the police lathi charged them. As the women fell, the police simply grabbed the owner and put him in their jeep. But the women were so furious that they chased the jeep all the way to the police station and there they were teargassed. They dispersed, but while they were trying to wash the teargas out of their eyes, the police charged and beat them again."

The result was that several women were hospitalized, section 144 (which forbids gatherings of more than five people) was levied, and the union leaders who had gone to the police station for negotiations were suddenly arrested and taken to the magistrate in the taluk town some miles away. During the three days

they were held, there was widespread rioting in Nipani, factories were closed and there was stone-throwing and burning of buses, often by the bitter, unemployed sons of the workers who were venting their anger on the entire establishment. A "peace committee" led to the opening of the factories but the workers and union activists are still facing serious legal cases.

### **"We're Against Malik-shahi"**

Women crowd into the small rooms of the old stone Nipani house. Sitting in the semi-darkness of kerosene lamps, they speak bitterly about their struggles: "The police always takes the owners' side. We organize – they lathi charge us. The goondas beat us up – they leave the goondas alone."

A union activists says: "Some of the



women are saying that they should go and beat up the owners. What do you think?" A worker activist, ceaselessly rolling bidis under the flickering kerosene lamp, says: "Why don't we take out a *dindi*?" To them, a *dindi* simply means a big march to the centre of power and they are thinking of going to Chikurdi, the taluk town where all the labour commission and court work goes on. For inspite of Nipani's economic importance, as a border area town it suffers government neglect which has proved profitable to and been fostered by the tobacco barons.

Discussions go on, meetings go on, strikes go on. Currently the workers in the Devchand Shah factory, owned by the biggest tobacco merchants in town who has also given his name to the college in which Subhash Joshi and other union supporters teach, are out on strike. Some of the students of Devchand College, mostly merchants' sons, have been demanding the removal of Joshi on the

grounds that he "defamed" the students by protesting against rowdy behaviour at a recent student gathering. The women were furious when they heard this and many were ready to march to the college, where battles might well have flared up between them and the students. They were dissuaded by the union activists. "After all, if they do throw me out, I'll be able to work 24 hours for the union", said Joshi, "But don't worry, that won't happen." It is noteworthy that the women are learning some lessons in the process of their struggles. They are learning the need for unity with agricultural labourers, unemployed youth and workers in other areas. The union is now planning a medical project and a night school.

Most importantly, the women are becoming conscious that their struggle is "not only against one *malik* but against *malikshahi* itself – against the whole system of exploitation." Increasingly, Nipani, which lies at the far southern end of Maharashtra's sugarcane belt, is emerging as a small but important centre of workers' struggles.

### **"We Cut Our Hair – And Nothing Happened!"**

Among these struggles is the struggle against the devdasi practice. Belgaum and Bijapur districts in north Karnataka and Kolhapur district of Maharashtra are the main areas affected though the custom prevails in district further away too. It is mainly the low caste families who dedicate their daughters. The girls so promised are considered sacred to the goddess, they are forbidden to cut or comb their hair which grows into a long heavy mat, and they are supposed to be sexually accessible to any man who asks them. Not all these women become prostitutes – most struggle not to, but often fall into prostitution for the same as any woman does – economic hardship. Nevertheless, such women are especially vulnerable to the recruiters from the redlight areas of Bombay and elsewhere, and sociologist S.D. Punekar once estimated that there were about 13,000 women from north Karnataka alone, working prostitutes in Bombay.

Struggles against the devdasi practice have gone on since the dalit movement of the lower castes first emerged in the 1920s. Ambedkar's movement succeeded in nearly ending a similar tradition of *muralis* prevalent among the mahar caste, and the dedication of girls to Yellamma has been more or less illegal since the Devidasi Preventive Act of 1934. But the practice has continued unbroken, though now it is mainly matangs, Marathas and some muslim women who become *jogtins*.

In a way it was natural for the union to get into this struggle since the custom is so prevalent around Nipani that devdasis can be seen constantly walking the streets and many are employed in the tobacco factories as well. In 1973 a group of Dalit Panthers was formed and a "one village, one well" campaign was taken up in

nearby villages with the aim of giving dalits equal access to the village water supply. It was young activists from this movement who turned to organizing the tobacco industry workers. A coalition of militant dalits and young socialists helped the women workers to build their union. Today the secretary is a socialist, the president is a local Republican Party of India leader and the union is affiliated to the Belgaum district CPI bidi union.

Some of these activists were involved in the first effort to organize devdasis when a conference was held at Gudhinglaz in Kolhapur district during the emergency in 1975. Some leading social workers were in jail then, and the conference met with only a limited response. It did help bring the problem onto the agenda of a developing women's movement, but there was little

concrete effect other than to force the dedication of girls "underground" – so that the ceremony is now held at the priest's home rather than publicly at the temple. Then on June 15, 1980, after the first wave of tobacco workers' struggles, a second conference was held at Nipani. The tobacco worker women played a major role in organizing this conference. The devdasi factory workers came out to the meeting and other women workers also took the initiative in calling the *jogtins* they know from their own villages. Over 600 women were present at the conference. In a country in which unions are often accused of being organizations of a privileged section of workers who fight only for bonus and higher wages, and ignore larger issues, the struggle of these tobacco workers is noteworthy in many ways. □