



“We Are Made To Mortgage Our Children”

Interviews With Women Bidi Workers Of Vellore

members. A group of about 50 women had travelled to Madras to participate in the first anniversary celebration. I met this group of women workers and had a spirited talk with them. The very fact that they had travelled from Vellore, leaving their work behind, showed that they were active members of the Union. The following is a brief summary of discussions held with them.

The women reside in different colonies of Vellore. Most women and many men work for the *bidi* industry there. There are some factories but most women work at home. *Bidi* manufacturing is done through various operations, as if based on division of work. Only one operation is carried out at one place. Some of the women are engaged in rolling *bidis*, others in labelling them, some others in putting *bidis* in bundles and a few others in packaging them. Practically every one in the family, from a five year old child to the oldest, helps to make and process *bidis*. *Bidis* are sold under different brand names such as Goat, 100 Mark, LRK, 75 Jaffar *Bidi*, 100 Mark *Bidi*, TK *Bidi*, Lakshmi *Bidi*. The 100 Mark *Bidi* is probably the largest manufacturer.

Many of them have been working for more than 15 to 20 years without any break. The questions of leave, sickness benefit or bonus do not arise. Their work is not regular. Some of them get work only three days a week. Nobody gets work more than four days a week. Their work depends on supply of raw materials, and income depends on the number of *bidis* rolled or labelled. They are tightly controlled by the employers or contractors, who may refuse to give them work on any day of the week.

Each brand has its own marketplace. Workers have to go to the respective marketplaces to obtain work and their wages. Generally, when employers supply the material for 1,500 *bidis*, the material is not enough and there is a deficit of 300 *bidis*. The workers have to buy raw materials like tendu leaves, tobacco, to replace the missing material in order to roll and deliver the required number, 1,500 *bidis*. Sometimes women workers employ children to fold leaves, at the rate of Rs 2 a day. The women's net earning is, therefore, about Rs 4 on a working day which is 10 to 12 hours long. Their weekly earning ranges from Rs 12 to 16.

Working Women's Forum—an organisation of working women, has been working in Tamil Nadu since 1978. It has now been renamed National Union of Working Women (NUWW). The NUWW has recently launched a unit at Vellore, where 500 women *bidi* workers have been enrolled as

This survey was done for National Labour Institute, New Delhi.

“How do you manage with such low wages?”

Spontaneously came the response: “We mortgage children.” There were whispers in the group. We also looked around to gauge the significance of the statement. Then, a middle aged woman stood up and said: “I have mortgaged my seven year old girl, and eight year old boy to a Sheth three years ago for a loan of Rs 200. Two years later, my husband was mortgaged to the same Sheth for a loan of Rs 200. My two children and their father roll 4,000 *bidis* a day. They work all the time for the master. Their total wage should be at least Rs 20 a day. However, the Sheth has been paying them each Rs 2.50 a day, out of which he deducts half the money every day. My husband also gets the same wage as the children. The Sheth does not give them any food. They come home to eat. They work for him all the time and have to report daily to the Sheth at 8 p.m.”

We were startled to hear the story. In response to our query: “How is it possible?” there was a mild commotion in the group. Everyone began speaking to everyone else. They were surprised that we did not know about such a widespread and common practice. They said: “All of us are forced to mortgage our children. What else can we do? When we mortgage other items to the Sheth, we lose control over those items, like our utensils and jewellery. We don’t have these any more. We have only children. When we mortgage them, we lose control over them, as we lose control over other items.” The women then gave several other instances of mortgaged child labour.

An old sickly woman stood up. She is Kannamma. She said: “I took a loan of Rs 500 for the funeral of my husband, four years ago. He was a driver. He was killed in a road accident. In exchange I gave my 10 year old boy, 17 year old boy and 10 year old girl. Since then, they have been rolling *bidis* for the Sheth. They roll 4,000 *bidis* a day. Their daily wage should be at least Rs 20 a day. However, the three children

together have been getting Rs 12 a day. The Sheth has been deducting Rs 8 every day since then.” She was in tears while saying: “I have lost my children. I have not been able to pay Rs 500 as yet.” Another woman stood up. She is Saroja. She said: “Our grandchildren are also mortgaged. We are like bonded labour. We are slaves. We just give birth to children and then leave them to work for the moneylenders. We can ask no questions. We have to follow them, like slaves. Husband, children, grandchildren all work in this way. All are slaves.”

The employed working mothers were in real agony. It was writ large on their faces. In voices choked with emotion, they described how mercilessly their children are beaten by the moneylender employers. Most of the children are very young when mortgaged. It is difficult for them to work all the time. Sometimes they do not go. The Sheth then beats them severely. Their fingers are injured by caning. A woman added: “Children are beaten by employers when they don’t go to work for them. At times, we also beat our children and drive them to go and work for the Sheth.” She broke down while narrating this tale of woe and cruelty.

Dying In Bondage

“You have already paid much more than the loan you took years ago.”

“Yes”, the women replied, “We have paid much more to the Sheth but when we ask for our children back, he demands Rs 500 or Rs 200, that is, the principal amount of the loan originally taken. We never have so much money with us. Therefore we cannot get our children back. They continue to be mortgaged with the Sheth.”

Another mother added: “The Sheth put his fingers in the eyes of my daughter. He always keeps a stick in his hand and beats our children.” The next one said: “I brought back my daughter from the Sheth because he used to beat her and mistreat her. I then mortgaged her to a new Sheth for Rs 450 and paid this amount to the earlier

Sheth. The new employer behaved well for a month or so, thereafter he also started beating the child.” Another mother added: “I took my child to the Christian Medical Hospital. Doctors told me that she has TB. She is 17 years old. I cannot do anything. She has to go and work for the Sheth. The doctors have refused to treat her because we are not able to give her rest, food and medicine.”

“What brought you to the union, what did you get?” There was a chorus of voices. “The union will help us to get loans from the bank. We can then purchase raw materials.” They were aware of the Kerala Dinesh Bidi Workers Cooperative. When questioned, they said: “Workers of that cooperative get bonus, leave and Rs 12 a day as regular wage. We would very much like to join such a cooperative.”

“How will you get your children back from the Sheth?”

They had no answer. They looked at us, probably for an answer.

Visit To Vellore Bidi Areas

Vellore is 130 kms southwest of Madras. As one enters the township, widespread *bidi* manufacturing becomes visibly clear. There are big boards displaying different brands of *bidis*. In hotels and other such places, *bidi* calendars greet you. Workers can be seen sitting in front of their small hutments or shops rolling or labelling *bidis*.

We visited three important areas where women are engaged in *bidi* manufacturing. Virudhapatti is a famous *bidi mandi* of Vellore. Women and children are engaged here in rolling *bidis* for various brand names. We talked to about 30 women including some children in a small group meeting. Saidapet main road is another important area where women are engaged in labelling *bidis*. Women in Virudhapatti area specialise in rolling *bidis* and women at Saidapet specialise in labelling *bidis*. We met another small group of 30 women including some children here. The Vellore unit of the

National Union of Working Women had quickly convened a meeting of women *bidi* workers at their branch office. About 60 more women including some children participated in this meeting. Thus, we met more than 100 women in these three areas.

In Virudhapatti, both women and children continued to roll *bidis* while talking to us. Their fingers were all the time busy rolling the tendu leaf and converting it into a *bidi*. One could see that they were doing their job with great skill. At the same time, some of them were also talking quite actively. The children, if anything, were rolling *bidis* more efficiently, their fingers working almost automatically. At Saidapet also, women continued labelling *bidis* while they were talking to us. Here also, the children were engaged in doing the same task. The swiftness of their fingers in cutting slips of paper, labelling, putting gum, tying *bidi* with a thread, and in carrying out other operations, was quite conspicuous. It was interesting to note that women worked in groups at some central place in their housing colonies.

Most of the women had formerly been working on various jobs relating to *bidi* making. Some of them had some land in nearby villages, which was taken away for developing a new township. Most other women belonged to families of landless agricultural labourers. They were driven to town in search of work.

In the colonies visited, most of the families, particularly women and children, were engaged in "*bidi* manufacture. Most of the males were doing odd manual jobs. Some of them were engaged in pulling rickshaws, others sometimes worked as agricultural labourers. The males earned Rs 5 to 6 per day, whenever they got work. The work was quite irregular and they earned therefore only on three or four days of the week.

Workers Pay For Wastage

During discussions with *bidi* rollers at Virudhapatti, the women gave precise information about their income.

They have to pay 90 paise to someone to cut leaves for 1,000 *bidis*. They have to purchase thread themselves. Out of the tobacco supplied, one fourth to half a kilo flies away or is wasted. They have to purchase this at Rs 7 a kilo. Out of 1,000 given by the employee, there is usually a deficit of 150 to 200 leaves. They have to buy new leaves at Rs 5 a kilo.

Two members of a family together make 2,000 *bidis* a day. They are paid Rs 7 per 1,000 *bidis*. They get work only for a few days in the week. They have material only for 10,000 *bidis* a week. Their weekly gross earning is therefore Rs 70 a week. On an average, they have to spend Rs 12 a week in replacement of wasted or poor quality material and toward forced cuts which the employers impose while paying them for *bidis* rolled. Their net earning, therefore, is Rs 58 a week, that is, about Rs 20 a person a week. Their daily income comes to Rs 3 a person.

Living In Fear

At the Saidapet main road colony, women are engaged in labelling *bidis*. Practically every woman in this area is employed in labelling *bidis*. They work for 100 Mark *bidi* of Bhadshah Bai. Women work in small groups by getting together at some place in front of their huts in the colony. Every morning they go to the *mandis* and bring *bidis* for labelling. The supply depends on the sweet will of the employer or contractor.

The women here gave the following information about their earning from labelling *bidis*. They have to spend on gum at Rs 2.50 a kilo, and on thread 50 paise for 10,000 *bidis*. A strip of the brand name has to be purchased. They are paid a wage of 45 paise per 1,000 *bidis* labelled. They can label about 8,000 *bidis* a day. Of course, two to three women have to work together. Therefore, the earnings come to Rs 5 a day.

However, they may not get work every day. On an average, they get work only three to four days a week.

The employer or contractor is free

to reject the material. In that case, he may not give them further *bidis* to label. The women have this fear all the time. They have to employ some children for assistance in odd jobs. They pay each child 15 paise per 10,000 *bidis* labelled.

Child Labour

Several children were present in the group meetings. They carried their kits with them and were very swiftly either rolling or labelling *bidis*. They were working as efficiently as their mothers. It was reported that all children above five years of age work in this colony. The children can roll 800 to 1,000 *bidis* a day or can label 6,000 *bidis* a day.

Some of the children were going to school, primarily to get the midday meal. They would go before the meal, get the meal, come back and then continue their work. The working mothers described case after case of how they were forced to mortgage their children to the Sheths. Three such children, who have been mortgaged in lieu of small debts, were present in the meeting. They had come home to eat as it was 11.30 a.m. Even during lunch time, they carried their kits and were engaged in rolling *bidis*. These children were Tamizh Venden, a 14 year old, Shiv Kumar, a 16 year old boy, and Shanti, a 16 year old girl. Tamizh Venden has been mortgaged for the last four years in exchange for Rs 400. The other two children have been also mortgaged for Rs 200 each for the last two years.

Shiv Kumar said that his mother took a loan of Rs 200 two years ago. He can earn Rs 10 a day. But he is getting only Rs 3 a day. He works 10 hours a day, six days a week. Saturday is off, without any wage. He is illiterate. He has no idea as to how the money can be paid back. He has been continuously working with the money-lender employer for the last two years. No account has been kept of the loan or of the labour he has been doing for the moneylender.

Jyoti, a 15 year old girl, was

mortgaged for a loan of Rs 300 about six years ago. Since then she has been working with the money-lender employer. She has been rolling *bidis* since she was seven years old. The employer has fixed her wage at Rs 4 a day, of which he deducts Rs 2 daily, in lieu of the loan. She takes home Rs 2. However, this arrangement has been existing only for the last three years. For the first three years, she carried home only Re 1 a day. Shiv Kumar is Jyoti's brother. He is now 13 years old. A loan of Rs 200 was taken on him six years ago from the same money-lender employer. He has also been working for the last six years. The rates of payment are the same for him as for his sister.

The two children work at the place of the employer for some time and the rest of the time they work at home. They carry the material with them wherever they go. However, they have strict orders to report to the employer every evening at 8 p.m. with the rolled *bidis*. Their brand is Babu '*Bidi*'. They reported that five persons work in the room at the employer's place. Their mother also is a *bidi* worker who rolls *bidis* at home. She was also present at the meeting. She has no idea as to how she would pay back the entire amount.

"Only Listen, No Questions"

An old woman stood up and said : "I have mortgaged my child for Rs 100. My entire body is stiff. I have no rest, no help. The contractors are always after us. They withdraw material and we have no work. My daily earning is less than Rs 2. How can I exist on such income ?"

At the meeting and discussions at Madras and later at Vellore, women talked freely about their relations with their employers. "The rule is—just listen and do as asked to do. Take whatever material is given. Ask no question." Any question about the quality and quantity of material supplied, payments made for *bidis* rolled or labelled is a very serious disqualification which results in immediate dismissal from work. The



contractors just refuse to supply raw material, without which the women are helpless. "We have to listen to them, do what they say and they do not listen to us." This is how the women described their working situation.

We told the women *bidi* workers about the *bidi* workers' welfare fund. They had not heard about this programme. They have not availed of any such welfare benefit. Tuberculosis, respiratory and other diseases are quite common among them. They go to the Christian Medical Hospital to "get some injection." There also, doctors do not like to treat them.

When asked whether they

themselves were bonded or mortgaged when they were children, most of them said : "No. Conditions were not so bad in our time." Two young girls reported that their husbands had paid back the loan and freed them from the moneylenders. The women further said : "In our days, there was no such poverty and parents did not have to mortgage their children." □

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