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Life in Dhuliyān: The Tobacco Rollers in Pandemic

This study will try to focus on the life of tobacco rolling labourers during covid-induced lockdowns in Dhuliyān, an age-old riverside town in the district Murshidabad. This study is important to do because the tobacco rolling industrial labours suffers tremendous deprivation in terms of wage in one hand. On the other, they also face a health-related hazards like severe lung infections, and natal complications due to the tobacco dust inhalation and the posture they have to maintain to do the work for a long time in each day. I think, as the CFP has proposed to do micro-study of labouring class who are highly affected due to pandemic induced joblessness at a geographical location, this paper would immensely helpful to satisfy the criterion.

The indigenous petite cigar, which is called biri in Bengal, is always in high demand among male working class through-out the country. Murshidabad has a speciality in tobacco rolling for more than hundred years. The central geographical location of Jangipur region in Murshidabad attracted the Gujrati investors in late nineteenth century. Wide communication systems, railways and river routes, both made the business easier than anywhere.

Murshidabad does not produce any ingredients of biri though, it had played a severe role in producing biri by rolling tobacco beautifully. To produce the mixture of tobacco for biri, and the cutting of the biri leaves (known as Kendu leaves), rolling and binding – the labourers from some certain regions of Murshidabad are highly appreciated in making of the finish products. Initially the biri binding workshops were factory based. The ingredients and spaces were provided by the factory owners. That time male labourers were the major work force to this industry. In 1990s and early of the new century, as the construction sites in various parts of Indian cities developed, informal sectors widened its scope for recruiting labours, Murshidabad became one of the major regions to supply skilled and unskilled labours. This affected the biri industries too. By this time the factories are pushing labourers to do home-base tobacco rolling. The factory owners wanted to escape from giving taxes to the government and trying to loosened the control of the labour unions over the labourers. The increasing engagement of women in tobacco rolling in 1990s made a clear sway to the profits of the factory owners. Soon it turned into a completely home-based industry at a compromised wage rate.

To reveal the facts and the real issues among the labouring class in biri industry particularly in pandemic, I have talked with the labourers. To know the industry from a different perspective, I have also talked with people who are engaged as 'care-giver' to them. Both the kinds of interviews reflected three things.

During pandemic the wage was cut.

Many people wanted to get involve in this sector as many returned to their home as jobless. As a tertiary effect of pandemic precarity among the people in this sector, the domestic violence rate and child marriage rate grew higher than before.

Also, it was the only respite for few people as some cash flow retained in this time. It gave a negotiating space for women and girls as they became sole bread earner of the families. The labourers talked about the biri rolling is a beneficial for them as it gives some cash. The cash in hands of women and girls makes them independent. It gives a certain kind of agency to these girls, so that they can provide daily need of their families. In the most of the biri worker's households in Dhuliyān the male counter-part works as informal labour sector. They earn good if they go to the southern India or Delhi to work as construction labourer. Many of them works in the local agricultural fields or markets as daily wage earners, which are now facing again wage depreciation and uncertainty of getting works. So, the women and the unmarried girls in every household earns 300-500 rupees per week (in an average) which run their family needs on a daily basis. The migrant workers come once or twice in a year. They bring money to the families in a good sum which are necessary to maintain their house constructions or daughter's marriage. The daily wage earners bring money to home in a daily basis, but that is never enough to run a family which counts meals for 6-7 heads every day. The labourers of tobacco rolling, the women and the adolescent girls say that the money which they get from biri is very much needed for their families. The efficiency biri rolling also brings fortunes to the girls. Often the marriage negotiations take place on how many biri a girl can produce in a week. It reduces dowry and prevents the girls of being trafficked to other places.

From another perspective, the social activists and health activists are pointing out two major problems in biri rolling sector. They said that increasing number of adolescent girls in biri rolling is alarming. Because it takes heavy toll on a girl's health who will be give birth of children in future. It weakens heart and lungs. The posture of work affects knee bones and spinal cords of the workers. It also brings damages to the eye-sight. If a girl is exposed tobacco dust and inhales it since birth, it will certainly bring a weak health constitution. It could affect her child while in her womb in future.

Apart from the health hazard, these activists say that the women are not well aware of the increase of wage in recent time. Before lockdown, it was 152 rupees per thousand biri. Now it has become 172 rupees per thousand biri. But often it is seen that the women are rolling biri at 80-120 rupees. And they will never say anything to the munsī (the labour contractor in biri work) to increase the wage. A very few of them will ask actual wage, and they have to compromise it to get contract in future.

In this article I will see,

The difference between revised wage after pandemic and how much of it are paid to the labours.

How do the cash money make women empowered in their domestic space? I will try to find out this question because in biri sector women ran the family in most of the households during pandemic as their male members are migrant labourers. I will find out if any changes occurred after pandemic.

The most important question, how the cash flow of money abled women to prevent violence in domestic space and made them resilient?

