

"Bidi" and SEWA

Bidis are indigenous cigarettes smoked by the lower middle class and the poor sections of the country. Rolling tobacco in particular leaf called the Tendu leaf makes these cigarettes. As per the annual report of Ministry of Labour for 2001, the bidi industry is estimated to provide employment to 4,41,100 people in the country, out of these, fifty thousand people are in Gujarat alone. In Ahmedabad some 15000 workers are supposed to be engaged in the bidi industry. Ninety percent of the bidi workers in the country are the home-based workers. Most of them are women. They obtain raw materials- Tendu leaves and tobacco from the employers/contractors; roll bidis and hand-over the finished product to them. The workers also work according to the sale purchase system so that the employers can show them as working on their own account, as self-employed workers and not as those employed by them, and thus save themselves for providing any welfare benefits to the worker.

In the unorganized sector, the bidi industry is among the few trades, which are regulated by law – The Bidi and Cigar Workers Welfare Fund Act, The Bidi and Cigar Workers Act are there to protect the interest of bidi workers. The minimum wages for bidi workers is fixed on the piece rate per thousand bidis. In Gujarat the piece- rate is linked to the dearness allowance i.e. the D.A. Every six months if the DA is revised the minimum wage for the bidi workers is to be changed accordingly.

Under the Bidi Welfare Fund Act, the bidi workers receive scholarships and school uniform for their children, maternity benefits, free health services, housing and life insurance along with sports and recreation services. Fund for all these social security services come from a cess levied on all employers in bidi industry.

SEWA's Intervention-

SEWA started organising bidi workers in 1978 when a poor bidi roller, Chandabibi, from Patan (a town some 90 km. away from Ahmedabad) approached SEWA to help her in her struggle against her employers. She was earning Rs. 4 a day. There was a hospital for bidi workers and their family members, but she could not get any benefit from it. The doctor won't allow them in the hospital without an identity card issued by the employer; the employer won't issue the identity cards to the bidi workers to skip from the legal responsibility. The employers would change the names of the bidi rollers frequently. Thus none of the bidi rollers would get the benefits given to him/her under the law. The bidi rollers would suffer poverty, unhygienic working, and living conditions and terrible health problems due to remaining continuously in a tiny room filled with tobacco dust. Frustrated with this, Chandabibi became the first bidi worker to approach SEWA. SEWA's intervention started in bidi industry with this incident and moved on to become a long drawn battle. The movement gained its momentum when the Padmashali women, originally belonging to Andhra Pradesh joined it at Ahmedabad. The mothers and grand mothers of these women had a history of association with union movements. The Muslim and the Koshti women also joined hands with them to make it the most successful movement legally.