

Organising Bidi Workers: History of SEWA's Role In Bidi Industry In Ahmedabad

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. Following are the landmark events in the history of struggle of Bidi workers from Ahmedabad-

Year	Events
1978	General meeting of the women bidi workers of Patan and formation of their trade organization
1981	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formation of bidi workers organization in Ahmedabad. -Change in the time of delivery of the bidis. Previously, the workers had to deliver in the night between 8p.m. To 11 p.m. As the time was inconvenient to the women, they persuaded and got it changed to daytime. -Dispensary started for the Bidi workers.
1982	<p>General Meeting of 5,000 Bidi workers with the State Finance Minister, Shri Sanat Mehta, on matters of price increase and purchase – sale operations of bidis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A survey was undertaken to study the socio- economic conditions of bidi workers. -Registration of the Cooperative of Bidi Workers.
1983	<p>Report presented on the socio economic background of bidi workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -First rally of Bidi workers taken out by SEWA in Ahmedabad. A memorandum containing 12 point's agenda was presented to the Labour Commissioner. -An inspection was done by the Labour Department to identify and count the number of employers and bidi workers in the city of Ahmedabad. -Identity cards were issued to the bidi workers. -Formation of the trade committee. -A case registered in the High Court against Jivraj Bidi for getting legal protection. -Case registered against Jivraj Bidi in Industrial Disputes Court. -Laxmandas Bidi owner retrenched 200 Bidi workers. After a lot of negotiations, SEWA got RS. 3,00,000 as compensation for the workers. -For the first time in the history of Bidi workers, around 200 workers got provident fund from Laxmandas Bidi. -An inquiry was undertaken by the Labour department to check an inadequate raw material supplied to the bidi workers. Steps undertaken to see that they get an adequate supply of raw materials. -The membership of bidi workers within SEWA grew to be the largest among all the informal sector workers' membership. -25 bidi workers successfully went on strike against Shri Narayan Jivandas of Patan city in Gujarat. -Formation of Bidi Workers Organization in North Gujarat. -The issues and problems of bidi workers were discussed on the television in the "Nyay-Anyay" programme. -For the first time, the price per unit (1,000 bidis) increased by Rs. 2.
1984	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A survey covering 500 women bidi workers of Ahmedabad on their housing related needs was conducted. -50 <i>Agyevans</i> (community leaders) made a visit to the Dinesh Cooperative for a study. -For the first time, a bonus in cash was paid to the bidi workers. -A bidi worker was elected as a Director of SEWA Bank for the first time

1985:	<p>-SEWA was invited to be a member of the State Advisory Committee on bidi workers.</p> <p>-A case was filed in High Court against Jivraj Bidi for provident fund.</p> <p>-For the first time in Gujarat, the Administrative Welfare Commissioners of 12 different states made a visit to meet the bidi workers of Ahmedabad.</p>
1986	Meeting of bidi workers at national level workshop.
1987	On the occasion of World Habitat Day, the government cleared project for providing houses to economically weaker sections, wherein 110 SEWA bidi workers were included
1988	<p>-Discussion on the issues pertaining to bidi workers in the State Legislative Assembly.</p> <p>-Compilation of information and data pertaining to bidi workers on a national level.</p>
1989	<p>- In a case filed against Jivraj Bidi, 300 bidi workers were given a compensation of Rs.450, 000.</p> <p>-In a case filed against another Bidi contractor, 40 bidi workers rewarded with a compensation of Rs. 100,000</p> <p>-Bidi Workers' Organization started in Palanpur and Vijapur in Gujarat. Identity cards were provided to these bidi workers.</p> <p>A Housing Cooperative consisting of 302 bidi workers was registered.</p> <p>-110 bidi worker's dream of having their own pucca houses was shattered due to the extension of the airport zone, where they got land from the government.</p> <p>-A successful strike and Dharna by 300 women bidi workers for getting back the land for the 110 houses</p>
1991	-Mobilizing around the issue of payment of equal price for bidis in all areas of Gujarat.
1993	SEWA initiated Group Insurance Scheme for bidi workers.
1994	Visit of the Petitions Committee of Rajya Sabha to study different issues affecting the bidi workers in Gujarat.
1995	For the first time, there was a direct increase of Rs. 4 per 1,000 bidis.
1996	<p>A National Meeting of Bidi Workers was convened by I.U.F.</p> <p>A memorandum was submitted to the Labour Minister, Welfare Minister and Finance Minister on the issue of fixing of minimum wages for bidis and different welfare schemes for the workers.</p> <p>- Increase in the tax rate on bidis declared during the budget for that year.</p>

1998-99	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Victory in the court case regarding provident fund. Gujarat High Court gave an order to the Provident Fund Commissioner to make an assessment of the amount of provident fund to be paid to the bidi workers. - A joint meeting with 37 bidi manufacturers/contractors to discuss the process of implementation of the order of the court with respect to payment of provident fund to the bidi workers. - Order passed by the Provident Fund Commissioner for payment of Rs. 4,97,790 to 191 bidi workers. - Participation in a workshop to discuss various welfare schemes implemented for the bidi workers. A meeting with the Labour minister of Karnataka on the issues pertaining to bidi workers. A visit to the cities of Solapur, Pune and Dharampur to initiate and study the process of provident fund to be given to the bidi workers. - Struggle to abolish the prevailing purchase- sale system of bidis.
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