



Rolling in misery

The women who make beedis for India's tobacco industry are demanding their rights

Caste and gender hierarchies exclude many women from legal protections, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and inequality, finds Madhuri Kamtam.

Madhuri Kamtam

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In the sun-scorched villages of Telangana, a state in southern India, many Dalit women – members of the Scheduled Castes, who have faced historical oppression at the bottom of India's centuries-old caste hierarchy – spend their days rolling beedis. Beedis are hand-crafted, unfiltered cigarettes made from about 0.2 grams of tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf. People in India smoke nearly ten times more beedis than factory-made cigarettes. The social landscape in India is shaped by the caste system, which divides people into groups: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Open Category (often the most dominant castes) and these affect people's access to labour, education and dignity. Despite legal protections, the beedi-producing women face systemic exclusion. Their labour fuels a multi-million-dollar industry while their lives remain precarious.

During my ten months of fieldwork in Sirikonda and Thandriyal, two beedi-producing villages in Telangana, I asked who benefits from a collective voice when issues of caste and gender fracture worker solidarity? As a Dalit first-generation scholar, I write from the margins, grounded in shared histories and solidarity with the beedi workers.

An unseen economy

The beedi industry produces between 750 billion and 1 trillion beedis annually. Revenues have risen from \$37.8 million (£23.4 million) in 2005–2006 to \$285 million (£176.7 million) in 2010–2011. The system enriches contractors and industry owners, leaving workers impoverished. Manufacturers process tobacco and tendu leaves, sourced from farmers and tribal communities. They then use contractors to distribute raw materials to female workers – primarily from the Dalit and Other Backward Classes castes – who hand-roll beedis in their homes. Contractors collect the finished beedis at village workshops, and the beedis are sorted, packaged and distributed to wholesalers for sale across India.

Women comprise around 85 per cent of the beedi-making workforce, yet they earn only 17 per cent of the wages of men and women in formal manufacturing sectors. The beedi workers are considered structurally disposable – systemically excluded from labour protections and social benefits due to their caste and gender, despite the economy's reliance on their labour.

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My research draws on surveys of 320 female beedi workers, 60 semi-structured interviews, focus groups with union members, and interviews with contractors, welfare officers and medical staff. I supplemented this primary research with archival analysis of labour laws and implementation reports. But I also have a personal perspective. I grew up in a Telangana village where every household, including my own, contained a beedi worker – my mother among them. As a child, I tied threads around beedis, my small hands learning the rhythm of their labour. My research is not just a study of the informal economy; it is a narrative woven from shared histories, lived experiences and a commitment to amplifying the voices of women like my mother, whose labour is visible but whose lives often go unnoticed.

Forgotten families, broken promises

The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act (1966) and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act (1976) promise housing, healthcare, scholarships and pensions to beedi workers. Yet these benefits remain out of reach for many. Entitlements hinge on “job cards” – proof-of-employment documents issued by contractors. Even with cards, Dalit women face barriers navigating a welfare system that is riddled with arbitrary conditions.

In Sirikonda, I sat on a woven mat outside a mud-walled home with Lakshmi, a 42-year-old Dalit worker, her hands stained with tobacco dust. The air was thick with the scent of dried leaves as we spoke about accessing healthcare. In a voice heavy with frustration, Lakshmi recounted her communications with the welfare officer: “He said, ‘Show proof’. I said, ‘Come to my house, see the beedis’. He said, ‘That’s not enough.’”

Other women nodded in agreement. Lakshmi explained that the welfare office – a two-hour walk away – rarely processed claims without a contractor’s signature, which often required bribes.

Housing entitlements are no better. Although 28 per cent of the women I surveyed were renting and eligible for housing assistance, not a single woman had received this benefit. The complete absence of delivery renders it impossible to assess the scheme’s effectiveness as, in practice, it does not exist for them.

Kamala, a 38-year-old Dalit woman in Thandriyal, explained that she had been living in a rented one-room house with her three children for over a decade. “They promised housing six years ago,” she said. “We filled out the forms, gave the documents. Since then, nothing. Not a single visit, no word. It’s like they forgot us.” Her voice cracked as she pointed to the cracked asbestos sheet that served as their roof. “We don’t want charity. We just want what they promised.”

In Thandriyal’s community hall, a cramped room with peeling paint, I spoke with Sarita over the hum of a single fan. She shared her struggle to secure a scholarship for her daughter. “I applied for my daughter’s scholarship,” she explained. “The officer asked for my job card, then my husband’s ID, then proof of income. I roll 1,000 beedis a day – my hands are my proof! But they don’t care.”

Sarita’s eyes were tired but defiant. Her story reflects a broader pattern: welfare officers, who are tasked with implementing the acts, wield discretionary power that excludes women through bureaucratic gatekeeping.



Beedi bundles submitted to the contractor in the packaging office.
Madhuri Kamtam

Last in line

In Sirikonda and Thandriyal, caste dictates the layout of villages (with Dalit hamlets on the fringes), access to work, and even the routes of welfare vans. In Sirikonda's Dalit galli, a narrow lane lined with small homes, I spoke with Radha on her doorstep as goats wandered nearby.

"They don't come to our galli. We roll the most, but we are last," she said, her voice steady but resigned as she gestured towards the main village where dominant-caste homes stood. Union structures often replicate these inequalities. In Sirikonda, a dominant-caste male union leader prioritises pensions and wages, while sidelining gender-specific issues such as childcare or harassment. In Thandriyal, a dominant-caste woman leads the union but concentrates on her own caste group.

During a focus group in Thandriyal's temple courtyard, shaded by banyan trees, Kamala, a Dalit worker, leaned forward, her hands clasped tightly. "She fights, but not for us," she said of the union leader. "They help their own. We are used to being last in line. Once, I went. They looked at me like I shouldn't be there. I never went back."

Her tone was bitter, and other women murmured in agreement, their faces etched with the fatigue of exclusion. Yet Dalit women forge informal solidarities – assisting each other with paperwork, navigating contractors or marching to welfare offices. Their collectivity emerges in resistance to

exclusion and reveals a hard truth: not all women's leadership liberates all women. Caste must be central to gender justice.

Who rolls the dice?

These women are not voiceless. They speak with clarity and urgency, demanding their existing legal rights unhindered by contractors or caste gatekeeping. In a Sirikonda tea stall, over chipped cups of chai, I spoke with Anjali, a 35-year-old Dalit worker. We sat on wooden benches as the evening heat lingered and men nearby discussed market prices. "We just want what is ours. We don't want to beg," Anjali said firmly, her insistence on dignity echoing the group's resolve.

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Intersectional feminism, particularly civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework, illuminates how overlapping identities – caste, gender and class – can compound oppression. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, developed to analyse how race and gender intersect to shape Black women's experiences, applies here to Dalit women, whose caste and gender multiply their exclusion from labour protections and social power. The capabilities approach developed by Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen reframes welfare as substantive freedom. Yet the freedoms of Dalit women are curtailed by documents, distance and discrimination. They roll the beedis, but contractors, union leaders, and bureaucrats roll the dice. Until things change that enable these women to address issues of caste and gender, the system remains rigged.

Author's note

All names from my research have been changed.

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References and further reading

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About the author

Madhuri Kamtam

Madhuri Kamtam is a final-year PhD researcher in the School of Global Development at the University of East Anglia and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA). Her research explores labour, gender, caste and welfare through an intersectional feminist lens. Her doctoral work, which examines the impact of beedi labour legislation on workers' welfare, uses the capabilities approach, theory-based evaluation and mixed methods, grounded in extensive fieldwork in India. She is a Yale University Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP) fellow, committed to advancing justice through research and advocacy.

Read more by Madhuri Kamtam.

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Feature image

Visual description: A woman rolling beedis

Image source: Madhuri Kamtam