

Labour Laws, Welfare, and Gendered Collective Action in Home-Based Occupations

A Focus on the Beedi Industry in Telangana, India

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Source: Fieldwork

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Global Development, University of East Anglia
February 2026

Student registration number: 100343739

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Abstract

Global trends of informalisation and feminisation of labour have raised questions around the ‘race to the bottom’, particularly regarding non-compliance with regulations around ‘decent work’. Beedi production, involving hand-rolled country cigars that provide major source of employment for women in rural India, reflects these trends. Despite key legislation—the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976—implementation on the ground remains inconsistent due to decentralised production systems, administrative inefficiencies, and socio-economic inequalities tied to gender, caste and class. While micro-level studies have examined beedi labour conditions, less attention has been paid to how these laws function in practice, how regional disparities shape welfare outcomes, and how collective action influences implementation.

This study evaluates the impact of beedi legislation on workers’ welfare, the factors shaping its uneven implementation, and the role of women-led collective action in securing entitlements. Theoretically, this extends Amartya Sen’s (1999) Capability Approach (CA)—traditionally applied to labour law in developed contexts—to labour laws governing informal employment in India. It conceptualises beedi legislation as a mechanism for expanding substantive freedoms, by integrating the concept of “collective capabilities” (Stewart, 2005; Ibrahim, 2006), highlighting how collective action functions as a critical demand-side factor in securing legal protections. Specifically, it explores three dimensions of the law: working conditions, scholarships for education, and the scope for collective action.

The impact evaluation at the centre of this study, was carried out using a generative approach to causality, integrating a theory-based evaluation within a mixed-methods design and guided by an intersectional feminist lens. Fieldwork was conducted in Sirikonda and Thandriyal—two villages in northern Telangana, India’s third-largest beedi-producing state. Adopting a feminist epistemological stance, the study centres women workers’ voices to reveal power asymmetries and intersecting inequalities. Findings show that enforcement gaps deprive home-based workers of protections, while structural barriers, particularly those rooted in caste, prevent Scheduled Caste (SC) workers’ daughters from accessing scholarships and limit SC women’s opportunities for leadership and representation. Women-led unions do secure welfare benefits but face a “pyramid of exclusion,” which restricts their representation at higher levels. These challenges highlight the need to reimagine labour laws and strengthen inclusive collective capabilities, to advance equitable rights for all informal workers, leaving no one behind.

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Acknowledgements

A PhD is never a solitary journey—it is a collective endeavour shaped by the people who support, guide, and walk alongside us. These past 4 years have been a time of deep reflection, intense reading, meaningful connections, and an expanded understanding of the world. I have grown intellectually, but more profoundly, I have grown as a person in ways I never imagined. This journey has been one of the most valuable experiences of my life, and I carry immense gratitude for every person who made it possible.

Professor Nitya Rao and Professor Maren Duvendack, thank you. Your joint supervision has not only shaped this thesis but has profoundly shaped me as a scholar. Your mentorship, patience, and unwavering belief in my work gave me the confidence to push boundaries and challenge myself intellectually. Our conversations, your sharp insights, and your ability to guide me while allowing me the freedom to carve my own path have been invaluable. I could not have asked for better supervisors. Your constant support, encouragement, and belief in my potential—especially in moments of doubt—kept me going. I am deeply grateful for your guidance and for never giving up on me.

This research would not have been possible without the generosity and time of the workers and unions who shared their stories with me. I am deeply grateful to Bharath Netha and Ravali Suddala for accompanying me on field visits and helping me navigate these spaces. To the beedi workers, union leaders, and everyone who welcomed me into their world—thank you. Your voices, struggles, and resilience are the heart of this thesis.

My father, Rajam Kamtam, and my mother, Rama Kamtam—this thesis is for you. You provided me with more than just support; you gave me the courage to dream beyond what society allowed for us. In a village where having three daughters and no sons brought relentless pressure for early marriage, you never gave in. You stood by us, shielding us from the expectations that tried to limit us. Where I come from, the idea of a young Dalit woman pursuing a PhD abroad is unthinkable—but you made it possible. Without your constant support, I would not be educated, let alone completing a PhD.

Amma, your raw insights, deep conversations about my chapters, and endless discussions about how to think critically have been invaluable. You never had the opportunity to go to school, but

you ensured that your daughters did. Thank you, Nanna, for accompanying me on my field visits and for driving me to sites, offices, and everywhere I needed to go. I am forever grateful to be your daughter.

Mounika Kamtam and Manisha Kamtam, my dearest sisters—you are my backbone. Being the youngest of three daughters was a privilege because it meant I had you both paving the way for me. You bore the weight of being young women in our village, facing struggles and making sacrifices so I would not have to endure the same. You protected me, guided me, and taught me how to navigate life with strength and resilience. Every opportunity I have today exists because of you. I acknowledge the privilege of being the youngest, and I know that without you, I would not be here, completing a PhD at this age, 26, in a place far from home.

This PhD journey was not easy—juggling research, finances, personal life, and mental health as a young woman in my early twenties came with its challenges. But I never walked alone. To my friends who stood by me from the very beginning to the end—I see you, and I thank you. To the DEV PGRs, thank you for keeping me sane and for creating an environment that made our office feel like home. A big thank you to Stefi Barna and Shashank Kumar for inspiring me every day and for being such great mentors in life.

As a young Dalit woman and a first-generation learner, this PhD is more than a personal achievement—it is a milestone for my entire community. Without the support, mentorship, and resilience of those who came before me, I would not be here. I walk on the path paved by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and I am proud to be shaped by the institutions that nurtured me—Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS), Azim Premji University (APU), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and UEA. These spaces have moulded me into who I am today.

A heartfelt thank you to Dr. R.S. Praveen Kumar, whose visionary leadership transformed TSWREIS schools into empowering spaces where students from Dalit and Adivasi communities can dream beyond limits and reach their full potential. His work has reshaped not just institutions but also the aspirations of countless marginalised students, including myself. A significant part of my motivation and ambition comes from our ten commandments, especially the principles I have carried with me every step of the way: *“I shall always dream big and aim*

high” and *“I shall never give up.”* These words have been my guiding force, and I am incredibly proud to be a SWAERO.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the National Overseas Scholarship, from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India— a scholarship for students from Dalit and Adivasi communities, without this financial support, this PhD would not have been possible.

I end with the words of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, which have guided me throughout my journey: *“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.”*

This thesis is for every young girl from my village who was told to lower her gaze, who was told that education was not for her. I hope my journey serves as proof that we belong here, that we can dream beyond the limits set for us, and that we are capable of shaping our own futures.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AIBCTWF	All India Beedi Cigar and Tobacco Workers Federation
AICCWW	All India Coordination Committee of Working Women
AIDWA	All India Democratic Women's Association
AIBWF	All-India Beedi Workers Federation
AISHE	All-India Survey of Higher Education
AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress
AMM	Annapurna Mahila Mandal
APBWU	Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
ABP	Aadhaar-Based Payment
APBWU	Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union
ASI	Annual Survey of Industries
BCA	Beedi and Cigar Act
BC	Backward Classes
BE	Bachelor of Engineering
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh
BPL	Below Poverty Line
BWWC	Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act
BWWF	Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act
BB	Before Bifurcation
CA	Capability Approach
CFGs	Collective Forest Groups
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions
COPTA	Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPIML ND	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) New Democracy
CSO	Central Statistical Organisation
CTUOs	Central Trade Union Organisations
CWM	Centre for Workers' Management

DBT	Direct Benefit Transfer
DGLW	Director General of Labour Welfare
DILA	Digital Indian Labour Archives
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
DRDO	District Revenue Development Officer
EPFO	Employees' Provident Fund Organisation
FLFP	Female Labour Force Participation
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FSSP	Female Secondary School Stipend Program
FTOs	Full-Time Trade Union Officers
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GATS	Global Adult Tobacco Survey
GOI	Government of India
GST	Goods and Services Tax
GVCs	Global Value Chains
G2C	Government to Citizen
G2B	Government to Business
HDI	Human Development Index
HMS	Hind Mazdoor Sabha
IARC	International Agency for Research on Cancer
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
IFTU	Indian Federation of Trade Unions
IHS	Integrated Household Survey
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IOMC	Iron Ore Mines, Manganese Ore & Chrome Ore Mines
ITI	Industrial Training Institute
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LWO	Labour Welfare Organisation
LSDM	Limestone and Dolomite Mines

MDM	Mid-Day Meal Scheme
MEC	María Elena Cuadra
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MoSPI	Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation
MVF	Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation
MPDO	Mandal Parishad Development Officer
MRO	Mandal Revenue Officer
MBBS	Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery
MBA	Master of Business Administration
NAS	National Accounts Statistics
NCEUS	National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector
NBKS	Navayuga Beedi Karmika Sangham
NCL	National Commission on Labour
NCLP	National Child Labour Project
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSP	National Scholarship Portal
NSS	National Sample Surveys
NSSO	National Sample Survey Organisation
NRHM	National Rural Health Mission
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
OC	Other Castes
OSHCW	Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions
PDS	Public Distribution System
PF	Provident Fund
PFMS	Public Financial Management System
PLFS	Periodic Labour Force Survey
PMS	Pragatisheel Mahila Sangathan
PRO	Public Relations Officer
RIHS	Revised Integrated Housing Scheme
RTI	Right to Information

RCTs	Randomised Control Trials
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
SNA	System of National Accounts
SMART	Simplified, Mission-Oriented, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
SSI	Semi-Structured Interviews
ST	Scheduled Tribes
SEEEPC	Socio-Economic, Educational, Employment, Political and Caste
RWCs	Regional Welfare Commissioners
TB	Tuberculosis
TLA	Textile Labour Association
ToC	Theory of Change
TPBWU	Telangana Pragatisheela Beedi Worker Union
TSDPS	Telangana State Development Planning Society
TII	Tobacco Institute of India
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America
VCK	Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi
VVGNI	V.V. Giri National Labour Institute
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising
WWF	Working Women's Forum
WWII	World War II

Legislation

Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859
Indian Contract Act, 1872
Factories Act, 1881
Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923
The Trade Unions Act, 1926
Indian Dock Labourers Act, 1934
Factories Act, 1934
Madras Beedi Industrial Premises Act, 1958
Factories Act (Madras Province Amendment), 1937
Government of India Act, 1935
Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1946
Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1947
Minimum Wages Act, 1948
Factories Act, 1948
Constitution of India, 1950
Plantations Labour Act, 1951
Weekly Holidays Act, 1942
Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955
Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966
Tobacco Board Act, 1975
Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976
Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976
Cine Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1981
The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986
Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
Telangana Shops and Establishments Act, 1988
The Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948
The Payment of Bonus Act, 1965
The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
Forest Rights Act, 2006
Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003

Unorganised Sector Social Security Act, 2008

Right to Education Act, 2009

Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017

Codes

Code on Wages, 2019

Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020

Code on Social Security, 2020

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020

Glossary

Anganwadi services.	Rural childcare centres in India providing basic health and nutrition services.
Bathuku Poru	A phrase in Telugu, meaning “struggle for livelihood.”
Beeda	“Beedi” derives from “beeda,” a Marwari word for betel leaf offerings.
Beedi	A hand-rolled cigarette made by rolling 0.2–0.3 g of sun-dried, flaked tobacco in a dried tendu leaf (<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>), secured with a thread. In contrast, a standard-sized cigarette contains around 1 g of tobacco
Cheroot	A cigar-like tobacco product with both ends closed.
Chillum	A straight, conical clay pipe (10–14 cm long) used for smoking tobacco or other substances.
Chutta	A hand-rolled cigar smoked in reverse, with the lit end inside the mouth. The name <i>chutta</i> in Telugu (spoken in Andhra Pradesh) may have originated from the Tamil word <i>shruttu</i> , meaning “to roll.”
Coir	A natural fiber obtained from the husk of coconuts. The coir industry is a significant sector in countries like India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, where it supports rural livelihoods and produces a variety of product such as ropes, mats, and mattresses
Dalit	A term referring to historically marginalised castes (Scheduled Castes Category) in India, formerly called “untouchables.”
Diospyros melanoxylon	A species of tree native to India and Southeast Asia. Its leaves, known as temburni leaves, are commonly used for rolling beedis.
Gutka	A flavoured chewing tobacco mix made from crushed areca nut, tobacco, and additives.
Hookah	Also known as hubble-bubble or narghile. A traditional Indian water pipe for smoking flavoured or unflavoured tobacco. The term <i>hookah</i> is consistently used unless historical records specify <i>hukka</i> .
Kalladhars	Agents or processors in the beedi industry.
Kharkanas	Beedi shops.

Karya Darshi Nivedika	Secretary's report
Mala and Madiga	Both are Dalit sub-castes under Scheduled Castes Category, primarily found in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana
Pathra	A tendu leaf size-measuring tool.
Poru Batalo	A Telugu phrase meaning "in the path of struggle."
Prothsahaka Upakara Vethanam	The phrase means "financial incentive for encouragement" and is typically used in the context of scholarships or education-based incentive programs.
Pulla	A tool used in the beedi rolling process to tighten and secure the tobacco-filled tendu leaf, ensuring a firm and uniform roll. It helps maintain consistency in shape and size across beedis.
Shed	In the context of beedi production, a factory <i>shed</i> refers to a space where women gather to roll beedis, unlike home-based setups where workers roll them in their own homes.
Telangana Yaasa	The unique dialect and accent spoken in rural Telangana, characterised by distinct phonetic and linguistic variations from standard Telugu.

1. Introduction

Growing up as a Dalit¹ (formerly ‘Untouchables’), marked by the dual burdens of caste and class marginalisation, my childhood was shaped by the rhythmic clatter of beedi² rolling in our modest home. Raised in a small village in the northern region of Telangana, South India, I lived in a Dalit colony where beedi rolling was and remains the dominant source of employment for women. Nearly every household had at least one beedi worker; the lives of women, including mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters-in-law, were stitched together through the act of rolling beedis.

As a child, each evening after school, I would return home and sit beside my mother, a beedi worker, helping her to fold the coarse tendu leaves, pack the pungent tobacco into hand-rolled cigars, and tie the threads. I witnessed firsthand the physical toil, economic precarity, and social invisibility of her labour. The sharp, earthy smell of tobacco clung to our clothes, our skin, and our home, an invisible yet constant presence. Women gathered in small circles, seated in front yards or narrow lanes, their hands moving swiftly, tirelessly, in practiced repetition as they chatted, laughed, shared stories, and sometimes wept in grief. These gatherings were both social and economic lifelines. The collective rhythm of their labour was accompanied by a chorus of shared joys and silent burdens. Behind the camaraderie of these gatherings lingered fatigue, aches, and the slow, silent toll on their health. Their labour, often dismissed as invisible or insignificant, formed the backbone of both their households and our community.

My mother’s hands, weathered from years of repetitive motion, bore silent testimony to both her resilience and the systemic neglect that defined her work. Laws existed to protect her, yet their benefits rarely reached our doorstep.

¹ Dalits, formerly classified as untouchables, have historically faced systemic oppression and exclusion for over two millennia. The term “Dalit,” meaning ‘the oppressed,’ is widely accepted within these communities. Deeply ingrained cultural norms and religious ideologies have long positioned Dalits as impure, reinforcing their marginalisation. As per the 2011 Census of India, Dalit communities make up around 16.6% of the population, exceeding 200 million people.

² A hand-rolled cigarette made by rolling 0.2–0.3 g of sun-dried, flaked tobacco in a dried tendu leaf (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), secured with a thread. In contrast, a standard-sized cigarette contains around 1 g of tobacco. In the literature, the term appears as either “beedi” or “bidi.” For consistency, this study will use “beedi” throughout.

As a child, I lacked the language to question what I witnessed. Beedi work was simply woven into the fabric of daily life, ordinary and unexamined. It was only much later, as I navigated academic spaces and engaged with development issues, that I began to see it through a more critical lens as a first-generation learner. I started to recognise how structures of caste, gender, and class quietly yet powerfully shaped the contours of our existence. That realisation sparked a deeper curiosity: why do labour laws, intended to safeguard workers, so often fail women like my mother? What prevents these rights from materialising in the lives of those who need them most? And how do women, particularly from marginalised communities, mobilise within this gap? These questions, rooted in memory, informed by reflection, form the backbone of this study.

I locate this research within broader debates on the informal economy, with particular focus on home-based work, a sector that is deeply gendered, often invisible, yet central to both global and national production networks. Within this, I position the beedi industry as a critical site of inquiry, not only because of its scale but also for how it encapsulates the tensions between regulation, informality, and women's labour. This introductory chapter begins by mapping these discussions: Section 1.1 frames informality and home-based work, followed by Section 1.2, which introduces the beedi industry within this context. Section 1.3 sets out the problem statement and outlines the research gap, while Section 1.4 presents the research questions. Section 1.5 introduces the theoretical framework, followed by Section 1.6 on the methodological approach. Section 1.7 highlights the study's contributions, and Section 1.8 outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Framing Informality

This study is situated within broader debates on informal work in the global economy. Keith Hart first coined the term “informal sector” in the 1970s to describe economic activities such as self-employment, small-scale trade, and casual labour that operated outside formal state regulation (Hart, 1971; 1973). Initially, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) viewed informal work as a temporary and flexible solution to poverty and unemployment, expected to decline with industrialisation and the expansion of formal employment — a trajectory also anticipated by the dual-sector model of Lewis (1954) and the migration model of Harris and

Todaro (1970)³. Instead, informality has expanded, especially across the Global South (Heintz and Pollin, 2002).

The scale of informality in India is staggering. Over 90% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, contributing nearly 45% of the Gross Domestic product (GDP) (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), 2023; Ministry of Finance, 2024). Liberalisation and globalisation have only deepened this trend, embedding informal labour into global production networks through subcontracting, piece-rate work, and decentralised supply chains (Standing, 1989; Bhattacharjee, 1999; Hensman, 2001a; Carr and Chen, 2002; Mezzadri, 2008).

By the 1990s, the ILO acknowledged that these jobs were not merely flexible but deeply precarious: characterised by low pay, insecurity, and lack of protections. Standing (2011) termed this growing workforce the “precarariat,” highlighting that informality is not just an economic phenomenon but a structural system of exploitation and inequality (Portes and Castells, 1989; Unni and Rani, 2002; Agarwala, 2009). Despite economic growth, the persistence of low-quality jobs raised urgent questions about the nature of employment itself (Chen, 2005).

In response, the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda (1999) shifted the global focus from mere job creation to job quality, anchored in four pillars: employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. The ILO defines “decent work” as

“opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men” (ILO, 2024).

Decent work is also enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); specifically, SDG 8 refers to achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all by 2030 (UN, 2015).

³ Both models suggested that surplus labour in agriculture and traditional sectors would eventually be absorbed into the formal industrial economy.

Informal employment, however, is far from homogenous. It spans a range of activities and employment relationships, cutting across both organised and unorganised sectors. It includes unregistered enterprises, informal workers within formal firms, and household-based or community-driven labour. Informal workers may be self-employed—either as own-account workers or contributing family workers—or they may be employees without formal contracts, benefits, or protections, including casual, part-time, temporary, and subcontracted labour. Even within formal enterprises, informal practices persist through unpaid family labour or forms of work linked to household production (Harriss-White, 2003).

In India, informal work is deeply structured by inequalities of gender and caste. A striking trend is the overrepresentation of women: 61% of non-agricultural women workers are engaged in informal enterprises (MoSPI, 2024). Women are more likely to be self-employed, particularly in home-based or agricultural activities, often as unpaid family workers or low-wage earners. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2007) report found stark caste-based disparities, with 88% of Scheduled Castes (SC), 80% of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and 79% of Scheduled Tribes (ST) engaged in informal employment. It also reported that 79% of informal workers earned less than \$2 per day, with many lacking access to basic education and minimum wage protections.

For women, informal employment is marked by even deeper precarity. They are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid or unpaid home-based labour—an invisible yet integral part of national and global economies (Mies, 1981; Jhabvala, 1998; Ghosh, 2009). This convergence of informality, gender, and caste marginalisation is evident in the case of homebased work, which is largely invisible in labour statistics. Despite its significant contribution to Global Value Chains (GVCs) through subcontracting and piece-rate production (HarrisWhite and Gooptu, 2001; Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007), this work lacks formal protections.

Efforts to organise home-based workers gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by women's organisations advocating for informal labour rights. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 in Gujarat, and the Working Women's Forum (WWF) in Tamil Nadu, alongside Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM) in Bombay (1975), played crucial roles in mobilising women workers and improving access to credit (Dixit & Pandey, 2020). The *Shramshakti Report* (1988) surveyed over 100 million self-employed women, pushing for

formal recognition of home-based work and challenging narrow definitions of labour by classifying workers as either homeworkers (piece-rate workers) or own-account workers (independent artisans) (Spodek, 1990).

Despite these efforts, home-based work was not officially recognised until the adoption of ILO Convention No. 177 on Home Work in 1996. However, India has not yet ratified this convention. By 2011-12, home-based workers constituted 11% of the informal workforce, totalling 37.4 million, with women making up 42.8% (Bonnet et al., 2021). Women are three times more likely than men to engage in home-based non-agricultural work, particularly in manufacturing. Between 1999-2000 and 2011-12, the number of women home-based workers grew by 6.47 million, with over half a million joining annually (Raveendran et al., 2013). Manufacturing, particularly tobacco production, remains the dominant sector, with beedi rolling being the single largest employer. The number of women beedi workers increased from 2 million in 1999-2000 to 3.37 million in 2011-12, surpassing other industries such as apparel (Mazumdar, 2018).

1.2 The Beedi Industry

The beedi industry, the focus of this study, stands out in the informal sector due to its decentralisation and feminisation. Initially dominated by male factory workers, the shift of beedi production to home-based labour, particularly among women, began during the colonial era and accelerated in the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1960s, women made up 83% of the beedi workforce (Chauhan, 2001). This shift in production predates broader informalisation trends seen after India's 1991 liberalisation reforms, making the beedi industry an important case for studying informal labour dynamics.

Labour laws like the Factory Act of 1948 unintentionally accelerated this shift. As factory regulations increased, employers sought ways to bypass these rules, decentralising production and expanding home-based labour (Ahuja, 2020; Kalathil and Abraham, 2020; Wielenga, 2020; Kalathil, 2023). This decentralisation turned the beedi industry into a prime example of how labour regulations can, paradoxically, contribute to informal work growth. The dynamics of state-capital-labour interactions, explored further in Chapter 2, shaped the industry's workforce structure.

The beedi industry mainly operates through home-based subcontracting, where women receive raw materials from contractors and are paid per thousand beedis rolled. A smaller sale-purchase system exists, where intermediaries buy beedis from women at low rates and resell them for profit. While some workers are employed in registered units, most work informally from home. This decentralised structure has shaped the workforce, with women often balancing beedi rolling with household duties. The reliance on subcontracting has further fragmented the industry, with multiple middlemen between manufacturers and workers. Despite being a significant sector in India's informal economy, beedi production remains largely invisible due to its dispersed workforce.

The beedi industry highlights the structural vulnerabilities of home-based labour, where decentralised production and subcontracting obscure employer-employee relationships. Similar to workers in sectors like weaving, pottery, food processing [snacks, pickles, *papads* (flatbread)], garment production, crafts, *agarbatti* (incense stick)-making, and basket weaving, beedi rollers operate within an informal system that eliminates direct shop-floor interactions (Agarwala, 2006). Often referred to as the “poor man’s cigarette” (Gupta et al., 1990; Lal, 2009), beedi is widely consumed, with ten beedis smoked for every cigarette (International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), 2004; Tobacco Institute of India (TII), 2023). The Ministry of Labour and Employment (2024) reports 4.98 million registered workers, with women making up 73%. Top five production hubs include West Bengal (36.7%), Tamil Nadu (12.1%), Andhra Pradesh & Telangana (9.19%), Madhya Pradesh (8.84%), and Uttar Pradesh (8.28%), though unregistered labour suggests underreporting. The workforce is predominantly from marginalised communities, including Dalits, Muslims, and OBCs, who face intersecting caste, gender, and class vulnerabilities (Gopal, 1999; Pande, 2022).

Given these structural vulnerabilities, labour laws are crucial for protecting workers’ rights and promoting welfare. The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act (BCA), 1966 and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWFF) Act, 1976 stand as landmark achievements, secured through nearly half a century of collective action beginning in the 1920s (Datar, 1990; Chauhan, 2001; Wielenga, 2020). The BCA 1966 mandates provisions for cleanliness, ventilation, drinking water, creches, minimum wages, and overtime pay, while the BWFF Act 1976 extends welfare services such as healthcare, sanitation, housing, provident funds, maternity benefits, and scholarships for children. Together, they aim to strengthen workers’ social security and well-being.

1.3 Problem Statement: Implementation of Labour Laws in the Beedi Industry

The beedi industry is among the few⁴ with dedicated, industry-specific legislation. Notably, the BCA 1966 was one of the first to include ‘home worker’ under the definition of ‘employee’ [Section 2(i)], formally recognising home-based labour. Along with the BWWF Act 1976, these laws aimed to extend employment rights and welfare protections. However, widespread subcontracting, lack of employer accountability, and persistent informality continue to undermine enforcement, leaving large sections of workers outside formal protections (Datar, 1990; Ansari & Raj, 2015; Gopal, 2018; Sharma, 2018; Pande, 2022; Rahmatullah et al., 2022). Moreover, weak worker registration, logistical hurdles, socio-economic inequities, illiteracy, and limited access to information further restrict the reach of these legal safeguards. As a result, many workers remain excluded from formal regulatory frameworks, facing ongoing exploitation and limited access to welfare.

Furthermore, labour law enforcement remains uneven, with stark disparities across states, districts, and villages. In India’s federal structure, labour falls under the Concurrent List, allowing both Union and State governments to legislate and share responsibility for enforcement (Constitution of India, 1950). While the BCA and BWWF were enacted centrally, the BCA is enforced primarily by state authorities through appointed ‘Competent Authorities’ and inspectors, whereas the BWWF is centrally administered with states playing advisory roles. Variations in administrative capacity, resource allocation, and political will, as explored in Chapter 3, drive differential outcomes.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the extent to which the BCA and BWWF have improved “labour welfare” in the beedi industry. It argues that the existence of statutory entitlements creates an enabling environment for claiming basic rights and services. However, securing these entitlements increasingly depends on collective action, particularly by women led unions. In line with the fourth pillar of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda—which emphasises social dialogue as a cornerstone of decent work—this study explores how collective action

⁴ Others include The Indian Dock Labourer’s Act (1934); Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund act (1946); Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund act (1947); The Building and Other Constructions Workers’ (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, (1996)

operates as a fundamental demand-side driver of labour protections. It functions both as a means of improving enforcement and as an end in itself, by building agency and solidarity among marginalised workers (ILO, 1999). Together, legal entitlements and collective mobilisation help explain the regional variation in welfare outcomes across the sector.

While existing literature, primarily based on micro-studies, has examined challenges such as low wages (Dharmalingam, 1993; Srinivasulu, 1997; Prasad & Prasad, 1985; Aghi & Gopal, 2001), child labour (Kannan, 2002; Swami et al., 2006; Mohanty, 2008; Mittal et al., 2008), and health risks (Kumar Nakkeeran & Bharathi, 2010; Joshi et al., 2013; Mathew, 2015; Deshpande, 2017; Gopal, 2018; Franke et al., 2018; Panneer, 2019; Rao et al., 2020; Sahoo, 2021; Harish & Venkatasami, n.d.), few studies explore regional variations in enforcement or the specific role of women-led organising (Desai, 2020). This study addresses this gap by focusing on Telangana, the third-largest beedi worker state, and examines two villages to analyse how women-led collective action shapes the realisation of labour rights in this highly feminised informal sector.

1.4 Research Questions

This study investigates the following main research question and sub-questions:

Main Research Question:

- What is the impact of the legislation designed to protect the rights of beedi workers in India (Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966; Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976) on their welfare?

Sub-questions:

- What are the factors that contribute to the implementation and enforcement of these labour laws, and how do these factors explain the differential implementation and variations in impact?
- What role does women-led collective action and leadership play in shaping the implementation of labour laws to ensure the welfare of beedi workers in the selected villages?

1.5 Capability Approach: A Theoretical Framework

The Capability Approach (CA), developed by Amartya Sen in the 1980s and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000a), offers a powerful framework for rethinking “labour welfare” in

informal sectors. Unlike traditional theories focused on utility, resources, or legal rights (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1963; Rawls, 1971; Dworkin, 1977), CA shifts attention from material entitlements to the substantive freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value. *Capabilities* refer to the opportunities available to individuals, while *functionings* are the realised outcomes. Labour laws, in this framework, act as critical *conversion factors* that help transform formal entitlements into real opportunities for well-being.

From this perspective, effective labour laws for informal workers in the beedi industry must go beyond formal rights on paper to create enabling conditions that foster *agency, dignity, and real freedoms*. The beedi workforce is predominantly women, but gender intersects with caste—a deeply entrenched system shaping access to resources, occupations, and mobility in India. Despite legal efforts, caste still influences economic opportunities, social networks, and political representation (Dutt, 2024).

Women-led worker organisations are central to expanding *collective capabilities* and building *collective agency* (Stewart, 2005; Ibrahim, 2006). Their leadership helps ensure that labour laws respond to the challenges shaped by the intersections of gender, caste, and class. This approach aligns with the idea of “*Capabilities for All*,” affirming substantive freedoms for historically marginalised workers.

Most CA applications to labour law focus on developed countries (Deakin and Wilkinson, 2000; Hepple, 2006; Langille, 2011), with limited attention to informal work in the Global South. Some studies apply CA to informality (Alkire, 2002b; Hill, 2010), but few examine law’s role in these contexts. Routh (2014) proposed CA-based frameworks for self-employed workers yet analyses of existing labour laws’ impact on capabilities in informal economies remain rare. This study applies CA to the BCA 1966 and BWLF 1976, exploring how labour laws enhance freedoms and women-led collective action advances labour welfare in the feminised beedi industry, contributing to scholarship on labour law, informality, and capabilities in the Global South.

1.6 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to evaluate the impact of the BCA 1966 and BWLF 1976. An impact

evaluation is conducted to assess the effectiveness of welfare legislation for women beedi workers. The primary goal is to understand the causal relationships between policy interventions and their outcomes, addressing *what works, for whom, and under what conditions* (White, 2009; Bamberger, 2012). However, the challenge of evaluating policies implemented over fifty years ago arises from the lack of reliable baseline data and counterfactual scenarios, making traditional before-and-after comparisons or Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) unsuitable for this context.

Instead, this study adopts a generative approach to causality (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Mayne, 2011), aligned with theory-based evaluation (Weiss, 1997), focusing on underlying causal mechanisms and contextual factors that shape policy outcomes in specific, real-world settings.

This research is grounded in a feminist epistemological stance, which challenges dominant androcentric paradigms of knowledge production (Harding, 2004; Crenshaw, 2015). Feminist epistemology critiques the presumed neutrality and objectivity of mainstream research, recognising that all knowledge is shaped by social context and power relations (Harding, 1987; Podems, 2010). Understanding labour welfare in the beedi industry requires recognising the invisibility of home-based informal work. The *home as workplace* must be examined not only economically but also through the lens of patriarchal structures that devalue women's domestic and economic contributions, limiting their autonomy and masking their central role in sustaining the industry.

Accordingly, the study centres the lived experiences of women workers—historically marginalised in both policy and academic discourse—and adopts a bottom-up approach to knowledge production. It recognises knowledge production as inherently political, shaped by which voices are heard, and which are excluded. The analysis is informed by an *intersectional feminist lens* (Crenshaw, 2015; McLaren, 2019), which views that gender, caste, and class are not separate categories but interlocking systems of power that shape access to rights, resources, and voice. This lens does not function as an add-on to the theoretical framework, but as a core analytic tool embedded throughout the research design, data collection, and interpretation.

1.6.1 Fieldwork, Scope and Research Sites

This study is set in Telangana, a state with a strong labour activism history rooted in the Telangana Rebellion (1946–1951), which shaped leftist politics and labour resistance (Andhra

Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union, 1997). Persistent rural economic disparities continue to impact women in the beedi industry (Galab et al., 2017).

Kathlapur mandal in Jagtial district was chosen for its historical ties to the beedi industry, especially through Desai Beedi, established in 1901. The industry remains the main livelihood for many women, making it ideal to study gender roles and labour conditions.

Traditional trade unions like All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) dominate Telangana, with no alternatives like SEWA. The Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), linked to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) New Democracy [CPI(ML) ND], is the most influential union in Kathlapur mandal and the study's focus. Its women's wing, Pragatisheel Mahila Sangathan (PMS), and the women-led Telangana Pragatisheela Beedi Worker Union (TPBWU) address beedi workers' specific concerns.

Fieldwork covered two villages: Sirikonda (male-led union) and Thandriyal (women-led union), both with similar socio-economic profiles, enabling comparison of gendered union leadership effects on labour outcomes.

Fieldwork was carried out in two phases: scoping (Oct 2022–Jan 2023) and primary data collection (Feb–May 2023). By integrating multiple methods—surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and archival research—the study seeks to triangulate quantitative data with qualitative insights, providing a nuanced understanding of gendered power dynamics in policy implementation and outcomes (Greene et al., 1989).

1.6.2 Research Ethics

My positionality as a Dalit woman from a beedi-working family in rural Telangana shaped complex insider–outsider dynamics during fieldwork. While shared caste and class fostered trust with some participants, engaging with dominant caste groups required careful navigation of social hierarchies. Caste as a lived experience influenced everyday interactions (discussed further in Chapter 4).

Research required sensitivity to the intersecting marginalisation of lower caste⁴ communities, beedi workers, and women. Ethical approval was obtained from the UEA School of Global Development. Beyond formal approval, ethical practice involved thoughtful questioning, prioritising participant comfort and agency, and managing power asymmetries. Permissions were obtained from local Gram Panchayats/Village Council. A field notebook and audio records were securely stored and access limited to the researcher.

1.7 Research Contribution and Significance

This study makes both theoretical and empirical contributions that advance understandings of labour law, informal work, and intersectionality.

Theoretically, it extends the CA to labour law in informal economies, where CA has largely been applied to formal labour markets in the Global North. By reframing labour law as a means to expand workers' substantive freedoms and agency, the study illustrates how legal frameworks can be reimagined to support more equitable labour conditions. It also engages with Soundararajan, Wilhelm, and Crane's (2021) call to humanise research on working conditions by moving beyond buyer- and product-centric analyses to focus instead on the lived realities of workers embedded within complex, fragmented supply chains. This emphasis foregrounds the socio-cultural and power dynamics that fundamentally shape labour experiences.

Empirically, the study addresses the inherent challenges of evaluating the impact of law in informal settings through a theory-based evaluation approach, offering insights into how labour law functions in practice. Using an intersectional feminist lens, it reveals how caste and gender hierarchies intersect to shape access to legal protections, revealing the structural barriers that limit workers' ability to claim rights. By comparing and contrasting union leadership structures, it further shows how gendered power relations within unions influence policy outcomes for women in informal sectors. In doing so, it underscores the importance of *collective capabilities*

⁴ Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'upper caste' and 'lower caste' for ease of reference, as they are commonly recognised in both academic and policy literature. However, I do so with critical awareness. These terms are socially constructed, arbitrary, and carry historically entrenched implications of superiority and inferiority, which this work unequivocally rejects. While such descriptors are widely understood, their continued use reinforces caste hierarchies that this thesis seeks to interrogate.

and the critical role of collective action in advancing the agency and rights of marginalised women workers.

Together, these contributions provide a deeper understanding of how legal protections are negotiated within informal economies in the Global South, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and labour advocates seeking to strengthen workers' agency, dignity, and access to rights amid entrenched inequalities.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, this study traces the state-labour-capital dynamics in the beedi industry, providing a literature based historical overview across three key time periods.

The first period, **17th century-1947**, explores the industry's growth, starting with the colonial era's raw materials (tobacco and tendu leaves). It examines the roots of early labour legislation and the phenomenon of 'defactorisation', where production gradually shifted from centralised factories to decentralised, home-based work. The rise of communist-led unions and worker organising started in the 1920s and their role in fighting for workers' rights, central to this research, is also addressed.

The second period, **1947-1990**, examines the birth of beedi legislation and the further decentralisation of production through the growth of subcontracting and the rise of feminisation in labour. There was a major shift from male-dominated factory work to home-based work primarily carried out by women. Key legislative efforts, such as the BCA 1966, were introduced to protect the working conditions of beedi workers. This period also saw the rise of the postcolonial welfare state, which led to the creation of the BWWF, 1976. These legislative efforts, achieved through collective worker action, aimed to improve workers' welfare.

The third period, **1990–Present**, examines the impact of liberalisation and globalisation, which has further contributed to the informalisation of the beedi sector. It examines the ILO's 1996 recognition of home-based work and the challenges of implementing the BCA 1966 and BWWF, 1976 in an increasingly informalised, feminised industry, compounded by caste dynamics. This section also touches upon contemporary issues such as the challenges posed by Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COPTA 2003), Goods and Services Tax (GST

2017)⁵, the lack of alternative employment opportunities for beedi workers, and the yet-to-be implemented labour codes. It underscores the deteriorating conditions for workers while offering a 360-degree overview of the industry's evolution and its current state.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed theoretical framework for this study, grounded in the CA as discussed earlier. It applies the CA to labour law, using various CA concepts to structure the research and key concepts such as labour laws as *conversion factors*, implementation as a critical *process freedom* and collective action as a demand-side factor that influence implementation. The chapter also emphasises the importance of *collective capabilities* in achieving other capabilities, particularly through the *capacity of voice*. It highlights that collectives are central to achieving both individual freedoms and broader capabilities. Additionally, the use of an intersectional feminist lens is discussed to ensure that caste- and gender-inclusive collective action is prioritised, ensuring that everyone's capabilities are realised, and no one is left behind.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework of this study. It is a theory-based impact evaluation, grounded in a feminist epistemological stance taking a bottom-up, mixed methods approach to research and assessment. The chapter also emphasises fieldwork dynamics, positionality, reflexivity, and ethics, and provides a detailed discussion of methods, data collection, and data analysis, setting the stage for the empirical chapters.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the empirical findings of this research. After reviewing the provisions of the BCA 1966 and the BWWF 1976, this study identified key benefits these laws provide. As discussed in Chapter 3, I conceptualise labour welfare across five dimensions: "Being securely employed" (working conditions), "Being Housed" (housing benefits), "Being educated" (scholarships for children), "Being healthy" (health benefits), and "Being affiliated" (collective action, a key focus of this research). Following fieldwork, I observed that housing and health benefits were largely dysfunctional and therefore chose to focus on the dimensions of secure employment, education, and affiliation. I explore the role and interlinkages between

⁵ The Goods and Services Tax (GST) is a comprehensive, indirect tax system implemented in India in 2017, aimed at simplifying the country's complex tax structure. It subsumed various state and central taxes, such as sales tax, service tax, and excise duty, into one unified tax system. GST is levied on the supply of goods and services and is designed to create a single national market by eliminating tax barriers between states. It operates on a multi-tier tax structure with different tax rates for different goods and services, and the revenue generated is shared between the central and state governments.

key stakeholders—employers, the state, and the workers themselves—in ensuring worker welfare.

Chapter 5 evaluates the impact of legislation on working conditions from the perspective of the employer's responsibility to ensure worker benefits. Chapter 6 examines the impact of legislation on scholarships for beedi workers' children, and the state's role in ensuring these benefits. Chapter 7 examines the role of collective action, with a focus on women-led unions. It explores gendered union leadership to highlight the significance of women's leadership in driving collective action to influence implementation.

It is important to note that all dimensions of labour welfare conceptualised in this study are interconnected. While empirical chapters 5, 6, and 7 each present individual theories of change for specific benefits, a broader Theory of Change (ToC) that captures the interconnectedness of all benefits is outlined in Chapter 4. This approach allows for a clear analysis of each dimension individually while acknowledging their interdependence.

Chapter 8 concludes by summarising the findings from the empirical chapters and offering theoretical reflections. It situates these findings within the broader context of the existing literature, providing methodological insights and contributions. The chapter reflects on the research questions, discussing how the findings enhance the understanding of labour law and labour welfare in the informal sector through the lens of the CA. Concluding remarks present policy recommendations, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Tracing the Dynamics of State, Labour, and Capital: A Historical and Literature Review of the Beedi Industry in India

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the historical, socio-political, and economic evolution of the beedi industry in India, focusing on the interplay of state policies, labour relations, and capital forces. It begins with an overview of the beedi industry's supply chain, detailing production, consumption, and distribution processes, while situating the industry within India's informal economy (Section 2.1.1).

Organised chronologically, the chapter is divided into three sections. Section 2.2 traces the origins of beedi production during the pre-colonial and colonial period, highlighting early labour systems, the growth of the industry under colonial rule, and the shift from factory-based to home-based production. Section 2.3 examines the post-independence period, focusing on the introduction of beedi legislation, the decentralisation of production, and the feminisation of labour, with a particular emphasis on key legislative efforts like the BCA, Act of 1966 and the BWWF, Act of 1976.

Section 2.4 examines the post-liberalisation era, emphasising the effects of economic liberalisation and globalisation on the informalisation of the beedi industry, alongside increasing feminisation and caste dynamics. It also explores the difficulties in enforcing labour laws, the effects of policies like COPTA (2003) and GST (2017), and the scarcity of alternative employment opportunities for beedi workers. Centring beedi workers, it highlights the interconnected roles of unions and stakeholders, showing how each impacts the others. This section also identifies research gaps and focuses on the ongoing challenges faced by workers, particularly in Telangana, providing a comprehensive view of the industry's evolution and current state.

Figure 2.1 below provides a visual overview of the key developments in the beedi industry across these three time periods, highlighting shifts in state-capital relations, informalisation, and labour organisation.

Figure 2.1: Evolution of the Beedi Industry: Pre-Colonial (17th Century) to Present

<p>Tobacco (1600s) and tendu leaf (1700s) integrated with labour systems; beedi smoking recorded in 1711.</p> <p>First beedi manufacturing company (1887), first trademark (1901). Shed-like, non-power, non-mechanised factory model; predominantly male workforce, footloose labour.</p> <p>Manual, labour-intensive production despite industrialisation; British-era transport expanded supply chains.</p> <p>Shift from factory to home-based work to bypass labour laws. Communist-led uprisings (1920s), AITUC formed (1920).</p> <p>Factory Act 1934 excluded beedi workers; first strike in Kerala, later in Gondia, Nagpur. 1937 Madras Amendment included beedi workers, led to production shifts to weaker-regulated states.</p> <p>Shift to home-based work; poor wages, job insecurity, no legal protections.</p>	<p>Factory Act 1948 included beedi but led to decentralisation.</p> <p>Minimum Wages Act 1948: inconsistent implementation, more capital flight.</p> <p>Increased unionisation, strikes, and bloodshed for industry-specific laws. BCA 1966 recognised homeworkers (Section 2).</p> <p>BCA 1966 caused decentralisation, capital flight, and feminisation (83% women by 1960s).</p> <p>Rise of CTUOs (AITUC, CITU, IFTU, BMS, HMS, INTUC) with male leadership.</p> <p>BCA 1966 failed; unions fought for welfare, leading to BWWF Act 1976 (cess model, tax per 1000 beedis).</p> <p>Struggles for implementation through women's movements (SEWA, AMM, WWF); delays until mid-1980s, renewed pressure in 1990s.</p>	<p>1991 Liberalisation: Rise of informal work.</p> <p>Globalisation & mini-cigarettes: Affected beedi sales, but beedi remained strong.</p> <p>ILO Convention 177: India didn't ratify.</p> <p>NCEUS 2008: For unorganised workers.</p> <p>Feminisation: 93% workforce women by 2001.</p> <p>Subcontracting Growth: Complex production relations.</p> <p>Decline of Welfare State: Poor beedi law implementation.</p> <p>COPTA 2003: Pictorial warnings, strikes.</p> <p>GST 2017: 28% tax, no cess model, BWWF under labour welfare fund.</p> <p>2020 Labour Codes: Drafted, not implemented, diluted rights concerns.</p>
<p>Pre-Colonial and Colonial Period (17th Century–1947)</p>	<p>Post-Independence Period (1947–1990)</p>	<p>Post-Liberalisation Reforms Period (1990–Present)</p>

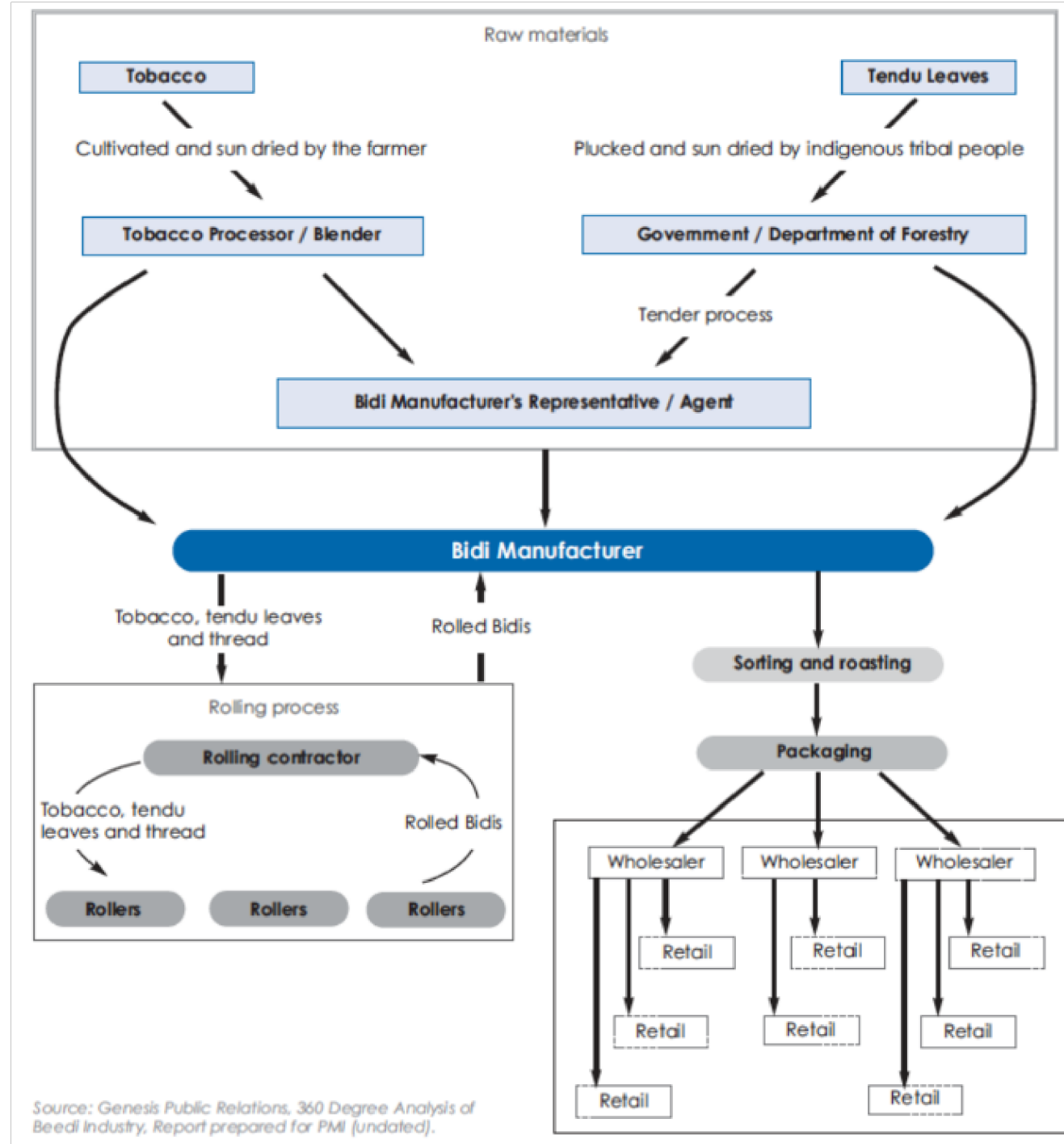
Source: Author's creation

2.1.1 Tobacco Economics: A 360-Degree Overview of the Beedi Industry

The beedi industry is one of India's most prominent traditional cottage industries, centred on the production of hand-rolled cigars known as beedis. Beedi is a hand-rolled cigarette made by rolling 0.2–0.3 g of sun-dried, flaked tobacco in a dried, rectangular piece of *tendu* leaf (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), secured with a thread. In contrast, a standard-sized cigarette contains around 1 g of tobacco. This labour-intensive sector, a key component of tobacco economics in India, operates through a decentralised, multi-tiered supply chain that includes raw material procurement, processing, rolling, and distribution (ILO, 2007). The industry employs a substantial workforce, including tribal communities who collect *tendu* leaves, tobacco farmers, and home-based or factory-based beedi rollers. Women and children form a significant portion of this workforce, highlighting both the socio-economic importance of the industry and the vulnerabilities it perpetuates.

The supply chain begins with the cultivation and drying of tobacco by farmers and the harvesting of *tendu* leaves by tribal communities under state forestry oversight. These materials are procured through tenders and transported via intermediaries (processors/agents, known as *kalladhars* in Telugu, a language spoken in Telangana) to manufacturers. Using a subcontracting model, manufacturers supply raw materials to contractors, who then distribute them to workers—primarily women—who hand-roll beedis at home or in informal settings. The distribution and collection centres, known as *karkhanas*, serve as hubs where contractors supply leaves to workers and collect finished beedis. These *karkhanas* are strategically set up within villages to facilitate easy collection from workers. Post-processing, the beedis are sorted (quality check), roasted, packaged, and distributed to wholesalers (intermediaries between manufacturers and retailers), ensuring their wide availability, even in remote regions (ILO, 2007) (see Figure 2.2 below). There are approximately 10 *lakh* retail shops linked with beedi companies across India (Vasuki and Rambhatla, 2021).

Figure 2.2: 360-Degree Analysis of the Beedi Industry



Source: Genesis Public Relations(n.d.), as cited in Sunley (2008)

The National Sample Survey (NSS) 1999-2000 shows that beedis dominate India's tobacco consumption, accounting for 34% of tobacco production, driven by their affordability and cultural entrenchment among low-income populations (MoSPI, 2001)⁶. A single beedi costs as little as ₹1 (\$0.01) (pack price approximately ₹12 (\$0.14)), compared to ₹9.50 for a cigarette stick [pack priced at ₹95 (\$1.09)] (Welding et al., 2021), largely due to lenient taxation policies. For example, excise taxes on 1,000 handmade beedis in 2015–16 was just ₹16 (\$0.18), compared to ₹3,790 (\$43.49) for cigarettes (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2017). While cigarettes are taxed at 53% of their retail price, beedis are taxed at only 22%. Consequently, beedis outsell cigarettes by a ratio of 4.3:1, with 7.7% of adults smoking beedis versus 4% smoking cigarettes (Kostova et al., 2014). The fragmented beedi industry structure also enables manufacturers to exploit tax exemptions and evade taxes by rebranding larger units.

According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) Round 2 (2016-2017), Bihar and northeastern states have the highest tobacco consumption rates. Affordability is a key factor driving consumption, but it comes at a significant public health cost. Beedis, made from unprocessed tobacco, contain significantly higher levels of harmful substances—three times more nicotine and carbon monoxide and five times more tar than filtered cigarettes. As a result, they pose serious health risks, including cancer, bronchitis, and tuberculosis (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017). Beedi smoking's economic burden, including healthcare and productivity losses, was estimated at ₹80,000 crore (\$12 billion) in 2017, dwarfing excise tax revenues from beedis (John, 2019).

The industry employs nearly 85% of the workforce in India's tobacco sector and produces between 750 billion and 1 trillion beedi sticks annually (Mercy and Smiley, 2020), generating revenues of \$1.87 billion (Tobacco Board, 2002), positioning it among the largest employment generating sectors in India, alongside agriculture, handloom, and construction. Leading industry players report turnovers of up to \$103.26 million each, highlighting the significant financial contributions of this sector to the national economy (Bhattacharya, 2017). Despite this, beedi workers earn only 17% of wages compared to those in other manufacturing sectors. Profits have surged—rising from \$37.8 million in 2005–2006 to \$285 million in 2010–2011—

⁶ According to the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO), a review of Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) data on the gross output value of the manufactured tobacco sector from 1973 to 1998 (as cited in Reddy and Gupta, 2004) reveals that among India's 200 million tobacco users, the majority (54%) consume beedis, while only 13% smoke cigarettes, with the rest using raw tobacco or gutka (Mohan et al., 2018). Gutka is a flavoured chewing tobacco mix made from crushed areca nut, tobacco, and additives.

yet workers' wages have stagnated or declined (Arora et al., 2020). In addition, while the beedi industry provides employment to millions in poverty, it also exposes both workers and consumers to severe health risks—the poverty paradox of tobacco economics. Despite being well-documented, these contradictions persist, reflecting the ongoing struggle between economic necessity and its harmful consequences (Mehta et al., 1969; World Bank, 1999; Choudhary et al., 2001; ILO, 2007; John, 2019).

This next section explores the industry's early history, tracing its origins, the phenomenon of 'defactorisation,' the evolution of labour laws, and the role of communist mobilisation from the 17th century to 1947.

2.2 The Origins of Beedi Production, 'Defactorisation', Labour Law Evolution and Communist Mobilisation (17th Century–1947)

2.2.1 Raw materials: Tobacco and Tendu leaf

The origins of beedis, a traditional Indian cigar, have been a subject of historical debate. Some historians argue that European doctors introduced tobacco during Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign, while others trace it to Portuguese traders who brought it to India around 1600 through their trade networks (Sanghvi, 1990). Regardless of its precise origin, tobacco quickly gained popularity, especially during Shah Jahan's reign (John, 2015) and became integrated into the country's social and cultural fabric. The term *beedi* is believed to derive from *beeda*, a Marwari⁷ word for betel leaf offerings symbolising respect. Beedis also gained cultural legitimacy through Ayurvedic practices of inhaling medicinal herbs. Over time, various methods of tobacco consumption emerged, including *hookah*⁸, *cheroots*⁹, and chewing tobacco. Among

⁷ Marwari refers to an ethnic and linguistic community from the Marwar region of Rajasthan, India. Traditionally known for their business acumen, Marwaris have played a significant role in trade, finance, and industry across India.

⁸ Also known as *hubble-bubble* or *narghile*. A traditional Indian water pipe for smoking flavored or unflavored tobacco. The term *hookah* is consistently used unless historical records specify *hukka*.

⁹ A cigar-like tobacco product with both ends closed.

these, smaller rolled tobacco preparations such as *chutta*¹⁰, documented along India’s East Coast by 1670, are considered precursors to modern-day beedis (Sanghvi, 1990).

By 1711, beedi smoking was explicitly recorded in historical accounts (Bhonsle et al., 1990). Early beedis were compact, finger-sized products made by rolling coarse tobacco flakes in dried tree leaves, sold in bundles of 20–30 pieces—a form that remains largely unchanged today. Unlike cigarettes, which were primarily consumed by wealthier classes, beedis gained widespread popularity among all social groups due to their affordability and accessibility. By the late 19th century, beedis had become a key part of India’s tobacco economy, predominantly consumed by the poorer, working-class population.

Beedi-making emerged as a small-scale industry in the late 19th century, partly in response to economic hardship. A severe drought in Gujarat in 1899 led migrant families to roll leftover tobacco into portable smoking products, laying early groundwork for the beedi sector (Gulati and Isaac, 2001). The first beedi manufacturing company was established in 1887, and by the early 20th century, production clusters had emerged in Bombay, Jabalpur, Madras, and Telangana (Rahmatullah et al., 2022). The first beedi trademark, registered by Haribhai Desai, was filed in Bombay in 1901. This expansion was supported by favourable colonial-era tax policies that privileged beedis over cigarettes (Ray and Gupta, 2009).

Over time, beedi production became concentrated in tobacco-growing states such as Andhra Pradesh¹¹, Telangana, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. These regions benefited from access to tendu leaves and a steady supply of low-waged labour. By the mid-20th century, annual production ranged from 800 billion to 1.2 trillion beedis, and by 2002, the industry used 200 million kilograms of beedi tobacco (see Figure 2.3) (Reddy and Gupta, 2004). Today, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana together contribute 34% of national tobacco output, followed by Gujarat (22%) and Karnataka (11%), collectively accounting for around 65% of total production (Madhav et al., 2023). The Tobacco Board Act, 1975 further formalised regulation of the sector, overseeing both marketing and export.

¹⁰ A hand-rolled cigar smoked in reverse, with the lit end inside the mouth. The name *chutta* in Telugu (spoken in Andhra Pradesh) may have originated from the Tamil word *shruttu*, meaning “to roll.”

¹¹ Andhra Pradesh originally included the Telangana region until the state’s bifurcation in 2014, when Telangana became a separate state. To distinguish between the two, AP (BB) refers to Andhra Pradesh before bifurcation, including Telangana. When simply referring to AP, it denotes post-bifurcation Andhra Pradesh, excluding Telangana.

Figure 2.3: Types of tobacco produced in India, 2002.

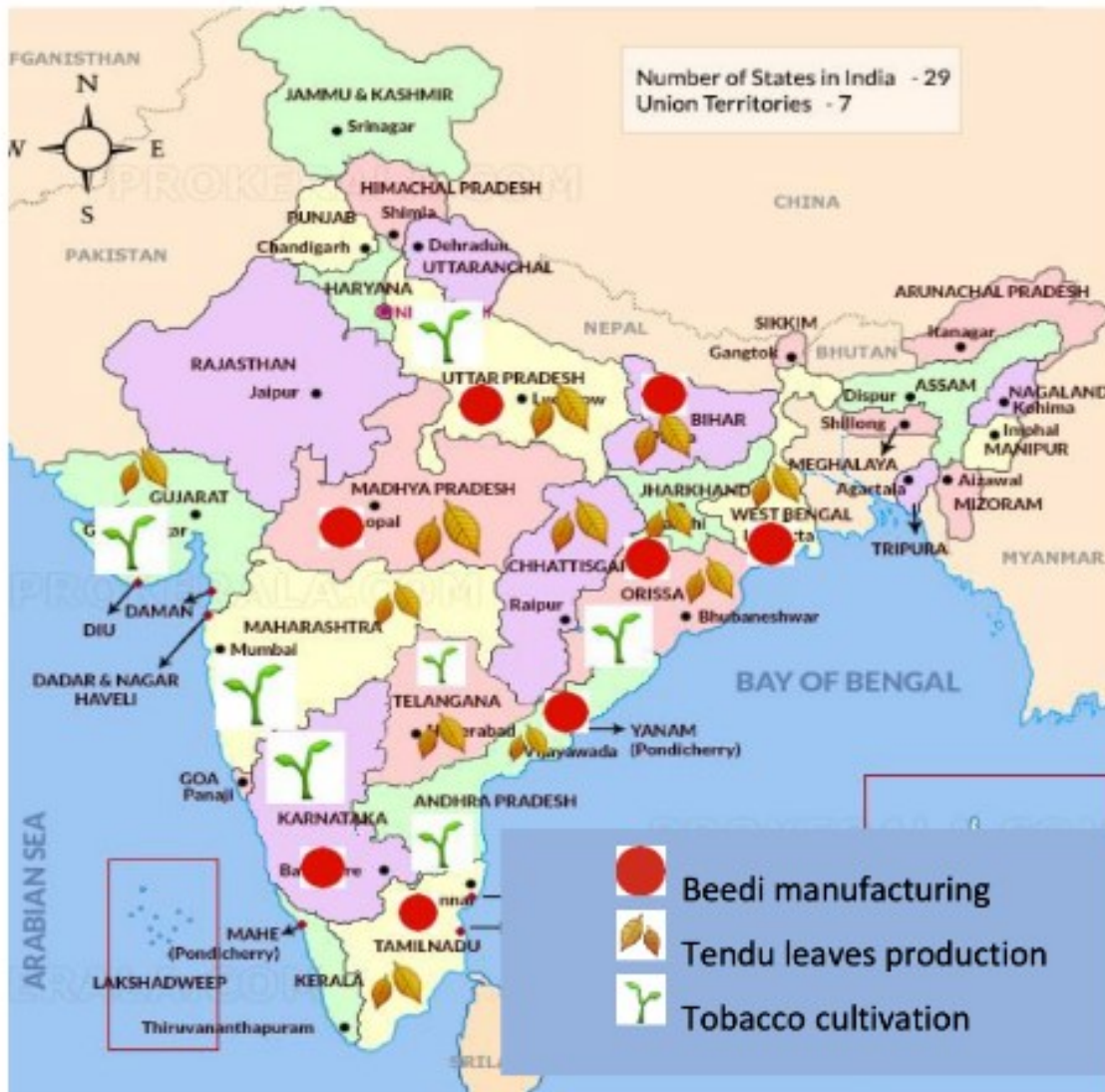
Type of tobacco	Quantity (million kg)
<i>Cigarette tobacco</i>	
FCV	175
Dark air/sun-cured	40
Burley	8
HDBRG	20
Oriental	0.1
DWFC	1
Subtotal	244.1
<i>Non-cigarette tobacco</i>	
Beedi	200
Chewing tobacco	65
Cigar	22
Hookah	60
Snuff	10
Subtotal	357
Total	601.1
<small>FCV: flue-cured Virginia; HDBRG:; Harvel De Bouxo Rio Grande; DWFC: Dark western fire-cured Source: www.indiantobacco.com</small>	

Source: Indian Tobacco Company: www.indiantobacco.com

Despite competition from modern tobacco products, the beedi industry remains influential and resistant to mechanisation. Manufacturing continues to be concentrated in states such as Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh, which span the entire value chain—from tobacco cultivation to tendu leaf collection and beedi manufacturing (Best Practices Foundation, 2001; John, 2008)¹² (see Figure 2.4).

¹² By the early 20th century, tobacco had become a major cash crop in India (Sanghvi and Notani, 1989). British colonial interventions—including improved seeds, agricultural research, and subsidies—led to a threefold increase in the area under tobacco cultivation between 1891 and 1921, expanding from 132,300 hectares to 425,100 hectares. Beedi tobacco alone accounted for nearly 30% of national cultivation by the late 19th century. By 1936–37, India had become the world’s largest tobacco producer, peaking at 3.4 billion kilograms of production in 1939–40 and again in 1945–46 (Reddy and Gupta, 2004). Today, India remains the world’s second-largest tobacco producer and the fourth-largest exporter (Tobacco Board, 2025).

Figure 2.4: Tobacco cultivation, tendu leaves production & beedi manufacturing in different states



Source: (John, 2015)

Tendu leaves, harvested from the *Diospyros melanoxylon* tree (East Indian ebony), are indispensable to the beedi industry for their durability, pliability, and flavour-enhancing qualities¹³. Predominantly sourced from degraded deciduous forests across peninsular India, they provide crucial seasonal income to tribal and forest-dependent communities. India annually produces ~350,000 tons of tendu leaves, generating an estimated USD \$2 billion in trade value (Sekar et al., 1996). Madhya Pradesh leads national production with 25% of the

¹³ Early tobacco users in Gujarat employed hookahs or *chillums*, but labourers eventually turned to rolling tobacco in locally available leaves, including mango, jackfruit, and banana leaves.

output, followed by Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Maharashtra. The nationalisation of the tendu trade began in 1964, starting with Madhya Pradesh (Mahapatra et al., 2005).

The tendu leaf industry supports ~7.5 million workers, creating 106 million person-days of seasonal work and 675 million person-days for beedi rolling, generating Rs. 4515 million annually. Despite this, the work is part-time, poorly compensated, and accounts for just 2.2–2.7% of annual tribal income. States differ in benefit distribution—Madhya Pradesh provides 100% of profits as payments/bonuses, Odisha allocates 50% for welfare and infrastructure, and Andhra Pradesh [Before Bifurcation (BB)] limits compensation to wages (Mohanty, 2014).

Despite the economic significance of tendu, revenue flows disproportionately benefit forest departments, traders, and manufacturers. For instance, tendu contributes 70–80% of Odisha's Forest department income, but tribal collectors face systemic exploitation, inefficiencies, and corruption.

Before nationalisation in the 1980s, regions like Telangana saw local contractors exploit tribal workers with low wages. State intervention improved conditions but was undermined by governance weaknesses and the rise of the Naxalite insurgency¹⁴. By the late 1990s, a 'joint extraction regime' emerged, with both the state and Naxalites sharing control over wages, appointments, and revenues. Similar dynamics in Jharkhand highlight how insurgent groups exploit resource economies in areas with limited state authority (Suykens, 2010). Despite the Forest Rights Act (2006), which grants community ownership of forest resources, restrictive policies and protected areas often alienate these groups, undermining their livelihoods. Efforts to regulate the tendu leaf trade remain inadequate. Key issues include illicit trade, income disparities, and the exploitation of pluckers (Lele et al., 2015).

The beedi industry's growth in the 1940s as a labour-intensive cottage industry, facilitated by the expansion of railways (late 19th and early 20th century) connecting tobacco-growing regions with manufacturing hubs. Railways connected key tobacco-growing regions like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra with emerging manufacturing hubs in places such as Jabalpur, Gondia, Telangana, and Madras. Women and marginalised groups became the

¹⁴ A Maoist insurgency originating in the late 1960s, active in central and eastern India, mobilising tribal communities around issues of land rights, state neglect, and resource exploitation.

backbone of this socio-economic enterprise. The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908) and later the Quit India Movement (1942) boosted the industry, positioning beedis as symbols of nationalism and resistance to British goods. During World War II (WWII), beedis became part of soldier rations, spreading their consumption and cementing their place in Indian society (Avachat, 1978). By the mid-20th century, beedi manufacturers used patriotic imagery—Mother India, Gandhi, and the tricolour flag—to promote their products (e.g., Jeevan Chhap)¹⁵ (see Figure 2.5 below). They emphasised cost-effectiveness and even claimed medicinal properties to compete with cigarettes.

Figure 2.5: Patriotic Imagery in Beedi Branding – ‘Hindmata Chaap’¹⁶ by General Beedi Company



Source: (Dokka 2018)

¹⁵ A popular brand of beedis that used patriotic imagery such as Mother India, Gandhi, and the tricolour flag in its marketing to appeal to national sentiments and promote its products.

¹⁶ A beedi brand by the General Beedi Company that used patriotic symbols like “Hindmata” (Mother India) as part of its branding.

By the time of independence, the beedi industry was already well-established and increasingly dependent on marginalised labour. Having situated the industry within broader discussions of natural resources, labour rights, and the precarious livelihoods of tribal communities, the next subsection turns to the evolution of colonial labour laws and the phenomenon of ‘defactorisation,’ examining how these developments shaped the growth and transformation of the beedi sector.

2.2.2 Evolution of Law and Labour in Colonial India: The Phenomenon of ‘Defactorisation’

During British colonial rule in India, the legal system was shaped by a combination of British common law and traditional Indian legal practices (Cohn, 1996; Roy and Swamy, 2016). Early British administrators, such as Warren Hastings, attempted to integrate Indian legal traditions, but over time, colonial courts replaced traditional village councils (panchayats), marking the “expropriation of law” (Galenter, 1997). This shift allowed the British to take control of legal matters, diminishing the role of local legal systems. Simultaneously, British economic policies focused on revenue generation and monopolies, contributing to deindustrialisation and the exploitation of labour, particularly women and children (Chandavarkar, 1998).

British economic policies aligned India with European capitalism, leading to developmental inequalities and economic stagnation (Frank, 1966; Naoroji, 1969). Agricultural policies that prioritised cash crops, exacerbated soil degradation and worsened the conditions for small farmers (Habib, 2016). Although Britain claimed to follow a *laissez-faire* approach, which suggests minimal government interference in the economy, their policies actually favoured British capital and suppressed local economic growth. This contributed to the rise of movements like *Swadeshi* and the “drain theory,” which argued that Britain was draining India’s wealth and resources to benefit itself (Sen, 1998).

By the mid-19th century, colonial labour laws transitioned from a *laissez-faire* approach to more paternalistic policies (Ahuja, 1999; Kerr, 2004). Early legislations, such as the Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act (1859) restricted labour mobility and institutionalised wage advances, which primarily benefited European employers. The Indian Contract Act (1872) further entrenched racial, caste, and gender inequalities in the workforce (Anderson, 1993).

As industrial conditions deteriorated, labour unrest began to rise. While the Factories Act (1881) provided limited protections, subsequent reforms like the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923) and the Trade Union Act (1926) often favoured employers over workers (Arnold, 1980). External pressures, such as the influence of the ILO and the impacts of the Great Depression, prompted further reforms during the 1930s and 1940s. These led to the Factories Act (1934), which, despite offering some welfare provisions, continued to prioritise the interests of the state and employers.

The trajectory of industrialisation in colonial India diverged from Europe's. While Europe transitioned to centralised factory systems, India retained a mix of factory-based and decentralised production models, particularly evident in the textile and coir¹⁷ industries. This dual structure was driven by fluctuating markets and resistance to large-scale infrastructure investment (Isaac, 1982; Chandavarkar, 1985). Capitalists adopted 'defactorisation' (Kalathil and Abraham, 2020) to minimise costs and evade labour laws by fragmenting production into smaller, unregulated units.

The beedi industry exemplifies this shift. Initially small-scale, non-mechanised, and nonpowered, beedi production primarily took place in factory *sheds*¹⁸, but eventually evolved into a hybrid model, combining factory and home-based setups. According to the Government of Madras (1939), as mentioned in the Madras Factories Manual, early labour laws like the Factories Act of 1934 did not cover small-scale industries such as beedi production, matchstick manufacturing, or groundnut processing. Efforts to regulate these industries, including the 1932 bill proposed by Ganala Ramamurthy, were unsuccessful due to opposition from elites.

2.2.3. Communist Rebellion and the Rise of the Beedi Working-Class Movement

The colonial labour system in India was marked by coercion and exploitation, with workers subjected to harsh conditions, including debt bondage. These conditions contributed to the rise of the beedi workers' movement, driven by communist-led rebellions and efforts to address systemic challenges through collective action and organisation. As industrialisation expanded between 1894 and 1914, the number of factories increased from 815 to 2,936, and the

¹⁷ Coir is a natural fibre obtained from the husk of coconuts. The coir industry is a significant sector in countries like India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, where it supports rural livelihoods and produces a variety of products such as ropes, mats, and mattresses.

¹⁸ A factory shed, in the context of beedi production, refers to a space where women gather to roll beedis, unlike home-based setups where workers roll them in their own homes.

workforce grew from 349,810 to nearly a million (Roy and Roy, 1986). Early worker resistance was fragmented and largely unorganised, consisting of contract breaches or isolated acts of defiance (Breman, 1989). However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the spread of Marxist ideologies catalysed the development of more structured labour movements in India. This culminated in the formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920, which became a leading force advocating for improved wages, working conditions, and the protection of labour rights (Gupta, 1996).

Amid broader labour unrest, the beedi workers' movement became a significant site of resistance. Inspired by Marxist principles, unions in the early 20th century aimed to combat exploitation in informal sectors like the beedi industry. The first major strike by beedi workers took place in Kerala in 1934, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. The Great Depression exacerbated worker conditions, deepening wage disparities and fuelling unrest. Strikes and protests intensified, including the hunger strike in Gondia and the Nagpur strike in 1934, which grew from 300 to 3,000 participants (Chauhan, 2001).

Trade unions' persistent advocacy led to legislative interventions. In 1937, the government extended the Factories Act to the beedi industry through a directive issued by the Development Department of the Madras Presidency (Government of Madras, 1937). This amendment, however, had significant limitations. It applied only to workplaces employing 20 or more workers and was restricted to the Madras Presidency. Leaders like A.K. Gopalan and E.K. Imbichi Bava mobilised strikes in Malabar, demanding enforcement of the Act and fair wages. Yet, employers found ways to circumvent these regulations by decentralising production—splitting large factories into smaller units that fell outside the scope of the law. Larger companies like Mangalore P.V.S. and Mangalore Ganesh Beedi maintained better wages and conditions, while strategically avoiding full compliance. Furthermore, to escape the stricter labour laws of the Madras Presidency, employers began relocating production to regions like Telangana, then under Nizam rule, where labour laws were more lenient. This shift not only undermined the protections intended by the legislation but also facilitated the continuation of exploitative practices (Kalathil & Abraham, 2020).

WWII intensified worker exploitation as the colonial government prioritised maximising production over protecting labour rights. This period saw extended work hours, wage cuts, and

mandatory night shifts, further worsening conditions for workers. Employers doubled down on decentralisation to evade oversight, contributing to the industry's fragmented structure.

However, these oppressive measures led to heightened militancy among workers. Rising prices and stagnant wages during the war years ignited widespread protests, such as the 1942 strike at the Ramakrishna Ramnath Beedi Company, which mobilised 7,000 workers. In North Arcot, Gudiyattam beedi workers secured notable labour victories such as improved wages, through union-led negotiations, often mediated by tripartite committees¹⁹ (Chauhan, 2001).

Despite these gains, decentralisation remained a persistent obstacle to the enforcement of labour laws. In 1941, employers successfully lobbied to exclude the beedi industry from the 1937 amendment to the Factories Act. This exclusion solidified the industry's informal and unregulated structure, leaving workers without the protections promised by the amendment. Scholars such as Anderson (1993) and Breman (2005) have analysed how the weak enforcement of labour laws and the informal nature of production, continued to undermine workers' rights during this period.

The labour struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, often marked by militancy, violence, and bloodshed, despite numerous challenges, laid the foundation for future reforms. Although the exclusion of the beedi industry from legal protections impeded progress, the persistent activism of unions and workers' movements set the stage for post-independence legislative action. During the post-war years, strikes in regions like Vidarbha and Malabar saw beedi workers advocating for broader social protections, including sick leave and maternity benefits. The push for industry-specific legislation to regulate the unique working conditions of beedi workers gained momentum, with demands for essential safeguards regarding wages, working hours, and workplace safety.

2.3 Post-Independence Legislation and the Rise of the Welfare State (1947-1990s)

Post-independence labour policies in India were shaped by the dual imperatives of industrial growth and worker protection. While retaining many colonial legacies, these policies introduced new frameworks to meet the demands of an industrialising economy. The state's

¹⁹ 'Tripartite committees' refer to formal bodies formed to discuss and resolve labour-related issues, consisting of representatives from the government, employers, and workers. These committees aimed to promote dialogue and reach mutually agreeable solutions, particularly in industrial disputes.

interventionist role continued to shape industrial relations, particularly in informal sectors like beedi production, where legislative reforms highlighted important achievements but often failed to address the complex realities of decentralised, home-based labour.

Key post-independence reforms included the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947, which introduced tripartite arbitration to manage industrial conflict and promote economic stability (Ahuja, 2020). Nehru's strategy favoured state-aligned unions, notably the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), as a counterweight to more militant bodies like the AITUC (Bhattacharya, 2015). Simultaneously, Ambedkar's tenure as the first Labour Minister embedded constitutional protections through Article 23 (prohibition of forced labour) and Article 24 (ban on child labour).

However, weak enforcement left informal workers, including those in the beedi sector, largely unprotected (Gupta, 1996). For instance, the Factories Act of 1948 applied only to establishments with more than 20 workers, effectively excluding the beedi industry, which was already moving toward decentralised, home-based production. This inadvertently incentivised further informalisation, allowing employers to bypass regulations on wages, hours, and occupational safety (Bhowmik et al., 2008; Kaviraj, 2010).

Labour's designation as a concurrent subject under the Government of India Act (1935) and the Constitution (1950) created inconsistencies in enforcement across states. In Maharashtra, relatively strict implementation of the Minimum Wages Act (1948) led many beedi manufacturers to shift production to states with weaker regulatory environments, such as Telangana (which became part of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 and later bifurcated in 2014). There, delayed enforcement of the Act until the 1960s enabled manufacturers to take advantage of abundant, low-cost labour (Mazumdar, 2018). This trend was reinforced by structural changes in regional economies—such as the decline of handloom weaving in northern Telangana—which made labour more readily available (Srinivasalu, 1997).

These practices were not new. As discussed in Section 2.2.2, beedi producers had historically moved operations to areas like Telangana under the Nizam's rule to evade colonial labour laws. The post-independence period saw a continuation of this logic, facilitated by the industry's low fixed capital and high sensitivity to wage costs. By the 1950s, capital flight from Maharashtra

to states like Bihar and Andhra Pradesh (BB) intensified, as companies such as Desai, Shivaji Thakur, and Telephone Beedi sought cheaper and less regulated environments (NCL, 1967).

As decentralisation deepened, labour unions pushed for industry-specific protections. The expansion of the beedi industry from the 1930s to 1950s was driven in part by capital mobility and the political influence of tobacco barons, who resisted unionisation and actively blocked the growth of alternative industries. Farmers were often coerced into tobacco cultivation over more profitable crops like banana and sugarcane, contributing to rural economic stagnation (Avachat, 1978; Saha, 1989; Russell et al., 2022).

Communist mobilisation, particularly in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Telangana, remained a key force shaping labour organising during this period. As discussed in Section 2.2.3, the mobilisation of beedi workers in the 1930s and 1940s—deeply influenced by Marxist ideologies—was central to resisting exploitation in informal industries. In Telangana, the Communist-led Telangana Rebellion (1946–1951) was not only a peasant uprising but also a significant moment in working-class mobilisation, particularly among tobacco and beedi workers. The rebellion instilled radical egalitarian ideals and intensified demands for labour protections.

These protracted struggles—marked by strikes, protests, and ideological resistance—culminated in the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act of 1966, a landmark legal intervention shaped by decades of union action. The Act, comprising 44 sections, was one of the first industry-specific legislations to recognise the distinct nature of home-based labour, a critical component of India’s informal economy. It mandated improved working conditions, including provisions for sanitation, ventilation, medical facilities, and regulated hours. However, its scope largely applied to formal workplaces, leading many employers to further shift production to informal, home-based settings to avoid compliance (Madhavi, 2006; Chauhan et al., 2014). As a result, many beedi workers remained excluded from the Act’s protections, continuing to work in precarious and unregulated environments.

2.3.1 The Rise of the Welfare State and Evolution of Labour Welfare in India

As Independent India evolved into a welfare state, a governance system where the state assumes responsibility for ensuring the well-being of its citizens—particularly through essential

services such as healthcare, education, social security, and housing (Brooks, 2001)²⁰—it was shaped by colonial legacies, labour movements, and a post-independence commitment to social justice (Rudra, 2007). The Constitution of India (1950), through its Fundamental Rights (Part III) and Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV), enshrines the state’s duty to promote economic and social welfare. Judicial interpretations by the Supreme Court—especially under Articles 14, 19, and 21—have expanded these guarantees to include workers’ rights to fair wages, safe working conditions, and social security. However, welfare policies were often neither universalised nor inclusive, remaining limited to certain states or industries and excluding much of the informal workforce (Agarwala, 2006).

The Indian Dock Workers Act of 1934 was an early example of industry-specific welfare legislation, developed in collaboration with dock workers’ unions and the ILO. Fully implemented in 1948, it provided compensation for injured workers and set a precedent for subsequent laws like the Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act (1946) and the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act (1947), which prioritised industry-specific safety and welfare (Agarwala 2013). Similarly, the Labour Welfare Fund Act, introduced in Maharashtra in 1953, marked a pioneering state-level initiative to enhance worker welfare by establishing community centres and recreational facilities for textile workers. This model was later adopted by states like Mysore, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since the 1950s, labour welfare has been a central focus of Indian labour legislation, reflecting the state’s commitment to improving worker well-being. Welfare initiatives targeted formal sector workers by providing amenities like canteens, housing, and recreational facilities, as recommended by the ILO and adopted by the Indian government in 1952. Reports such as the *1960 Labour Yearbook* emphasised the role of welfare laws in promoting industrial harmony and productivity (Government of India, 1960). However, informal workers, who constituted a significant portion of India’s workforce and were often employed by contractors, remained largely excluded, a gap acknowledged in the same report.

The feminisation of the beedi industry accelerated during this period, and by the 1960s, women constituted 83% of the workforce, as home-based production increasingly replaced male

²⁰ The idea of modern welfare state emerged in the late 19th-century Europe, particularly through Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s social insurance schemes in Germany and the UK’s Beveridge Report (1942) which aimed to address five “giant evils”: want, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness.

dominated, factory-based labour (Chauhan, 2001). The BCA of 1966 was a significant step in addressing the needs of beedi workers, establishing basic protections such as improved working conditions specific to their occupation. However, the continued decentralisation, informalisation, and increasing feminisation of the workforce created new challenges the BCA could not fully address. Unlike formal sectors with access to welfare benefits, beedi workers remained excluded from provisions such as healthcare, housing, and social security. This disparity prompted unions to shift their focus from wage demands to advocating for welfare benefits.

The struggle of beedi workers mirrored broader issues within India's labour welfare system. While industries like coal mining and dock work had specific welfare funds, the decentralised and home-based nature of beedi production left workers to fight for their own benefits. Central Trade Union Organisations (CTUOs) such as AITUC, INTUC, Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), and the All-India Beedi Cigar and Tobacco Workers Federation (AIBCTWF, established in 1970) have actively mobilised workers to demand comprehensive welfare measures. Their collective action led to the creation of the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess (BWWC) Act and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act in 1976. This legislation imposed a tax on beedis, starting at 5-10 *paise* per 1,000 beedis, which later increased to ₹5 per 1,000 by 2012, with the aim of funding healthcare, housing, and education for beedi workers (now replaced by GST and the Labour Welfare Fund).

The BWWF is managed by the Labour Welfare Organisation (LWO) under the Ministry of Labour, with a Director General of Labour Welfare (DGLW) at its helm. A tripartite Central Advisory Committee, along with 18 State Advisory Committees led by regional welfare commissioners, oversees the allocation of funds and coordinates with state governments to implement welfare initiatives locally. Additionally, the DGLW manages four other labour welfare funds²¹.

By the 1980s, the beedi industry had further feminised, with women making up the majority of the workforce in informal, home-based production. This shift, coupled with the undervalued and precarious nature of their labour, further highlighted the need for a welfare-focused approach (Madhavi, 2006; Chauhan et al., 2014). As unions increasingly focused on long-term welfare demands, the recognition grew that informal sector workers deserved the same

²¹ The Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act 1946; The Limestone and Dolomite Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1972; The Iron Ore, Manganese Ore and Chrome Ore Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act 1976; The Cine Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1981.

protections as those in the formal sector. Despite the progress made, gaps in India's labour welfare system persisted, leaving many informal workers still fighting for basic rights and protections.

The historiography of this period, informed by the works of Chakrabarty (1989), Ahuja (1999), and Sen (1999), illustrates the complex relationship between state policies, labour laws, and grassroots mobilisation in shaping the labour dynamics of the beedi industry. From its roots in colonial exploitation and early resistance, to its later alignment with communist ideologies and unionism, the movement underscores the resilience of informal workers in securing incremental gains despite systemic obstacles. By situating these struggles within the broader narrative of Indian labour history, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how informal labour not only shaped but was also shaped by the legal, social, and economic structures of both colonial and post-colonial India.

Recent scholarship has expanded on these themes, examining informal labour conditions, the exclusion of women and migrant workers, and the intricate interplay of state policies, legal frameworks, and worker resistance in shaping labour relations (Anderson, 1993; Amin and van der Linden, 1997; Ahuja, 1999; Breman, 2005). Research on industries like plantations, arecanut processing, tanning, textiles, and beedi production has shed light on how both colonial and post-colonial labour laws have reflected broader capitalist dynamics, shaping production relations in the process (Mohapatra, 2005; DeSousa, 2010; Parthasarathi, 2012; Behal, 2014; Wielenga, 2020).

Building on this historical trajectory, the next section examines the period of economic reforms from 1991 onwards, focusing on the feminisation of the beedi workforce, role of caste, shifting labour market dynamics, and the decline of the welfare state amidst liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation.

2.4 Economic Reforms and the Aftermath (1991–2023): Feminisation of the Workforce and Decline of the Welfare State

The 1991 Liberalisation Reforms in India shifted the economy from state control to a market driven one, fostering privatisation, globalisation, and deregulation. While these changes spurred ‘economic growth,’ they also transformed the labour market, leading to a decline in formal, secure employment (Marjit and Kar, 2011). The downsizing of the public sector and increased foreign competition contributed to this shift.

For the beedi industry, the 1990s brought heightened challenges due to growing competition, shifting consumer preferences, and the rise of mini-cigarettes, culminating in the 1995 nationwide strike, in which 35,000 workers—along with several employers—demanded a ban on mini-cigarettes to protect the industry (Chauhan, 2001). Despite these pressures, beedis remained a vital product in rural India.

As formal jobs declined, India’s informal sector grew exponentially, now accounting for over 90% of the workforce (see Chapter 1). In this context, home-based and self-employment—particularly among women—became increasingly common in sectors like textiles, handicrafts, and small-scale manufacturing. The rise of Global Value Chains (GVCs) further entrenched this trend, as informal workers became embedded in volatile, contract-based systems shaped by fluctuating market demands (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007)

This restructuring also drove rural-to-urban migration, with many women entering informal sectors such as construction, domestic work, and street vending—fields with little to no social protection. As discussed in Chapter 1, these changes disproportionately affected women workers and gave rise to new forms of organising. Women’s organisations such as SEWA, Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM), and the Working Women’s Forum (WWF) emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, prioritising credit access, collective bargaining, and recognition of informal work. Unlike traditional trade unions, these organisations addressed informal employment as industrial closures forced women into home-based work. The 1974 *Towards Equality* report highlighted declining female workforce participation, prompting feminist critiques and the rise of groups like the All-India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) in 1981 (John, 2015). The *Shramshakti Report* (1988) highlighted the continuing structural precarity of informal women workers.

These developments laid the foundation for later institutional efforts, such as the creation of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) in 2004. The NCEUS (2007) report revealed that SCs, STs, and OBCs are disproportionately represented in India's informal sector, with these marginalised groups, particularly women, facing heightened vulnerability due to caste-based discrimination and economic exclusion. Despite global and national efforts to secure formal recognition for home-based work, particularly through the ILO's Convention No. 177 on Home Work (1996), India has yet to ratify this convention, as highlighted in Chapter 1.

In this broader context, the beedi industry presents a revealing case of post-reform labour restructuring. Already marked by decentralised and informal production—often used by employers to evade regulatory oversight—the sector experienced further informalisation in the liberalisation era. This section examines: (2.4.1) the growing feminisation of the beedi workforce, particularly in home-based production, and the compounded exploitation of women through gendered and caste-based marginalisation; (2.4.2) the emergence of complex, often opaque informal production relations; (2.4.3) contemporary challenges in the enforcement of labour protections, including gaps in the implementation of key labour laws; and (2.4.4) concludes.

2.4.1 Feminisation of Home-Based Beedi Work: Gendered and Caste Exploitation

The beedi industry exemplifies the intersection of informal labour systems and gendered exploitation. Over 90% of the beedi workforce today comprises women, who predominantly work from home under precarious conditions (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2024). Despite their numerical dominance, female beedi workers face persistent wage gaps, hazardous working environments, and systemic discrimination (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2017). The feminisation of the workforce in this sector is rooted in colonial and post-colonial labour policies, which relegated women to informal, home-based work under the guise of protection, further reinforcing male dominance in formal employment (Sen, 1999).

Maria Mies (1981), in her seminal work on the lace makers of Narsapur, conceptualises “housewifisation” as the process by which women's labour, traditionally associated with the domestic sphere, is devalued and marginalised within capitalist economies. Mies argues that capitalist and patriarchal structures exploit both unpaid domestic labour and poorly paid informal work, such as lace-making, by framing them as natural extensions of women's

household roles, thereby obscuring their economic significance. Through “housewifisation,” the state and market profit from women’s cheap or unpaid labour without acknowledging its essential contributions to capitalist production. Consequently, women’s paid work in the informal sector, like lacemaking, is treated as supplementary and undervalued compared to formal waged work, reinforcing gendered economic inequalities.

Stevano (2023) employs a feminist social reproduction perspective to highlight the blurred boundaries between productive and reproductive labour in informal sectors, a dynamic exemplified in the beedi industry where women face a dual burden. Women’s productive labour, such as rolling beedis for meagre wages, is undervalued as secondary, while their reproductive labour, including caregiving and domestic tasks, remains unpaid and marginalised, despite both being essential to sustaining households and the workforce. This artificial division echoes Mies’ concept of “housewifisation,” which underscores how capitalist and patriarchal structures devalue women’s labour by framing it as a private, selfless extension of domestic roles, thus obscuring its economic significance (see also Cantillon et al., 2023). By perpetuating gender inequality, reinforcing economic dependence, and diminishing women’s bargaining power in both household and labour markets, housewifisation reflects deeper structural inequalities within capitalist economies (Ghosh, 2009).

The beedi industry provides a clear example where employers benefit from the low-cost, flexible labour of women who roll beedis at home without access to legal protections. The misclassification of home-based workers, including those in the beedi industry as “housewives,” enables employers to sidestep minimum wage laws and labour regulations (Prügl, 1996). This misclassification is part of a broader trend identified by Standing (1989), who attributes the global “feminisation of work” to economic deregulation and subcontracting, which have increased female labour force participation without improving their working conditions.

Trade liberalisation in developing countries has often contributed to the feminisation of labour, particularly in low-skilled manufacturing, as export-oriented growth strategies interact with existing gender inequalities in the labour market (Papyrakis, Covarrubias and Verschoor, 2012). While such shifts have expanded employment opportunities for women, they are rarely gender neutral—frequently involving the replacement of male workers with lower-paid female labour and contributing to widening gender wage gaps. These patterns are especially visible in sectors like beedi rolling, where structural inequalities and gendered forms of precarity remain deeply

entrenched. The gendered wage gap in the beedi industry remains stark. In 2000–01, women earned nearly INR 7,737.7 less per year than their male counterparts, and while this disparity has narrowed slightly, it persists (Nandi et al., 2015; Arora et al., 2020). Beedi rolling is paid on a piece-rate basis, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and subsistence-level earnings. Unlike factory workers, home-based beedi workers have limited access to legal protections, medical care, or labour rights. Although cooperatives in states like Kerala have made some strides by offering maternity benefits and improving workplace conditions (Isaac et al., 1998), gender inequalities persist.

Mitra (2021), however, challenges the idea that globalisation is the primary driver of homebased work in India, suggesting instead that the integration of women into global production processes often exploits pre-existing home-based manufacturing systems. Her macroeconomic analysis using National Employment Survey data, highlights that the decline in manufacturing jobs for women, particularly in rural India, is more influenced by stagnating domestic demand and increased global competition than by the direct impact of global market forces. By integrating Mitra’s argument, we can see that the feminisation of labour in sectors like beedi production is a complex, multifaceted process, shaped by both historical factors, such as colonial and post-colonial labour policies, and contemporary economic pressures, including globalisation and domestic economic stagnation. This helps explain the persistence of homebased work in industries like beedi production, where women’s labour is shaped by an intricate mix of local, cultural, and global economic forces, reinforcing gendered exploitation in informal labour markets. Moreover, women are often excluded from leadership and decision-making roles, limiting their ability to advocate for better conditions—a pattern common in other female-dominated informal industries like cashew processing, textiles, and handloom work (Samantroy, 2019).

Efforts to organise women in the informal sector therefore face considerable obstacles. Mainstream labour unions have traditionally prioritised male workers, focusing on securing a “family wage” for men while overlooking gender-specific issues such as job segregation, maternity benefits, and workplace harassment (Martens and Mitter, 1994; Rao, 2012). Male dominated union leadership structures and restrictive meeting schedules further alienate women from union activities (Gothoskar, 2013). Employers also retaliate against unionisation efforts by shifting production to home-based setups, making collective bargaining more difficult (Ramaswamy, 1977; Nayak, 1999).

Women's economic dependence further restricts their ability to organise. For many in India's informal female workforce—particularly those who are the sole earners—resistance against exploitative conditions is often seen as too risky (Geetika et al., 2011). Cultural norms promoting female docility, along with fears of employer retaliation, deter union participation (Harriss-White, 2003). The rise of globalised, flexible labour markets has fragmented the workforce, complicating the coordination of large-scale collective action (Mitter, 1994; Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996).

Despite these challenges, organisations like SEWA have made significant strides in organising beedi workers. For example, SEWA has successfully advocated for ID cards that grant workers access to welfare benefits in states like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, extending its reach to 18 states. However, many beedi workers remain undocumented and ineligible for social protections.

In addition to the feminisation of the workforce, caste-based exploitation and informality are central to understanding the structural dynamics of the beedi industry. While Chapter 3 offers a more detailed exploration of the intersections between caste and gender, a preliminary overview of the caste system—particularly in the context of India and Telangana—is necessary to contextualise the current discussion and set the stage for what follows.

Caste is a rigid and hierarchical system that has historically determined people's status, occupations, and social interactions based on birth. A defining feature of this system is the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution,' which governs social norms around food, touch, and spatial segregation. Traditionally, Indian society was divided into four broad varna categories—Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (labourers and service providers). Outside this hierarchy, Dalits (SC), were considered the most 'polluted' and subjected to severe exclusion, while Adivasis (ST) remained marginalised due to geographical and social isolation. Many Dalit communities were confined to stigmatised occupations such as manual scavenging and sanitation work, reinforcing systemic discrimination and economic deprivation (Ambedkar, 2014; Teltumbde, 2018).

To address caste-based inequalities, the Government of India (1950) introduced legal classifications—SCs, STs, OBCs, and Other Castes (OCs)/General Category. OBCs encompass socially and educationally disadvantaged castes that do not fall under SC or ST categories but still face systemic barriers. The OC includes castes that have historically held socio-economic advantages. These classifications form the basis for affirmative action policies in education,

employment, and political representation. Despite the abolition of untouchability in the Constitution of India (1950), caste discrimination persists in various forms. Laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, were enacted to combat caste-based violence and discrimination. However, disparities in social mobility, economic opportunities, and political participation remain.

In Telangana too, caste strongly defines social and economic structures. The state's official classification includes Backward Classes (BCs)—which align with the OBCs at the national level and are further divided into BC-A, BC-B, BC-C, and BC-D—alongside SCs, STs, and OCs. Additionally, Muslims are classified separately based on their socio-economic status, distinguishing between BC Muslims and OC Muslims. According to the Socio-Economic, Educational, Employment, Political, and Caste (SEEEPC) Survey (2024) conducted by the Government of Telangana, BCs constitute the largest group at 46.25%, followed by SCs (17.43%) and STs (10.45%). The OC category, which includes historically privileged castes, accounts for 13.31% of the population. Muslims make up 12.56%, with BC Muslims comprising 10.08% and OC Muslims 2.48% (The New Indian Express, 2025)²². These classifications play a crucial role in shaping reservation policies, welfare programs, and political representation, highlighting the persistent influence of caste in governance and development. As noted in Chapter 1, the beedi workforce is predominantly composed of workers from marginalised communities—particularly Dalits, Muslims, and OBCs—who therefore face intersecting vulnerabilities shaped by caste, gender, and class.

While the feminisation and caste-based inequalities of the beedi industry has increased marginalised women's participation in the labour force, it has not led to empowerment or improved labour rights. The industry's reliance on home-based subcontracting keeps women and marginalised caste groups as an invisible, underpaid workforce with minimal legal protections.

²² The SEEEPC Survey was conducted by the Government of Telangana in 2024. While the full report remains unpublished, key findings were presented in the Telangana State Legislature after approval by the state cabinet. Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy introduced the caste census survey in the Legislative Assembly, and its findings have been reported by various news outlets, including The New Indian Express.

2.4.2 The Rise of Complex Production Relations

The beedi industry's decentralised, subcontracted structure allows employers to bypass labour laws and shift economic risks onto workers. This complexity in production relations makes it difficult to regulate workers and provides minimal welfare benefits. Post-1991 liberalisation has further deepened informalisation, dispersing workers across unregistered networks and complicating labour law enforcement (Lerche, 2012). Tobacco and textiles, among the six major informal manufacturing sectors, exhibit particularly high levels of subcontracting, with 85% and 59% of household enterprises subcontracted in 2015-16 (Kesar, 2024). By 1999-2000, beedi rolling made up 22% of female home-based work, surpassing retail and food processing, yet wages remained below subsistence levels (Mazumdar, 2005). A dual economy persists, with large manufacturers controlling the formal sector while 89% of production occurs informally (Das, 2000).

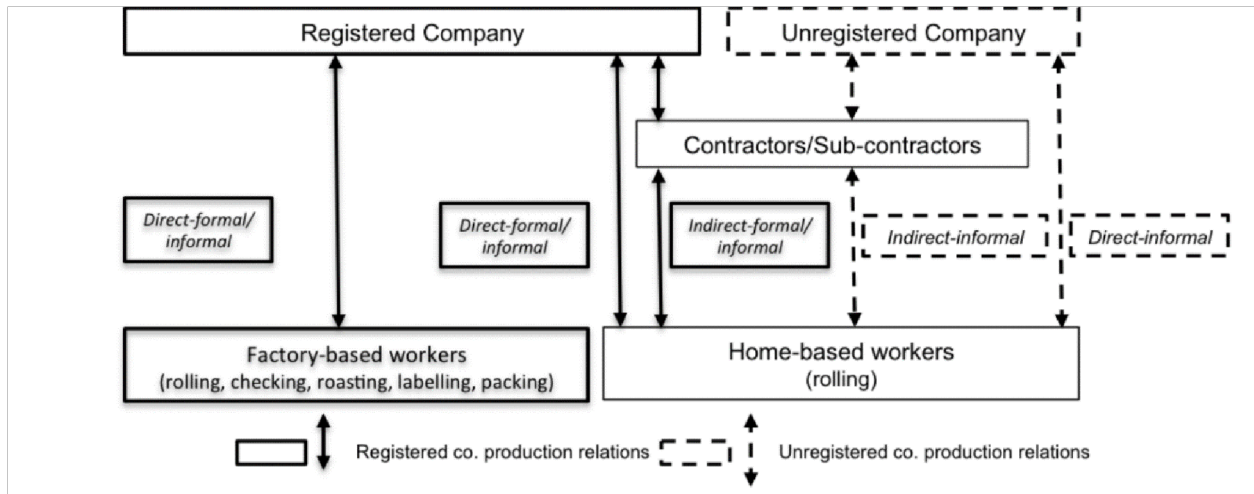
In Telangana, 72 beedi factories are concentrated in Warangal, Karimnagar, and Adilabad districts, producing around 100 crore beedis daily (Government of Telangana, 2021). As discussed in Section 2.1.1, the industry follows a multi-layered contract system, with major brands handling branding and distribution, while contractors manage production (Khanam and Anjum, 2021).

The industry includes both licensed (registered) and unlicensed (unregistered) establishments. Licensed producers, creating over two million branded beedis annually, pay excise duties and must comply with the BCA, 1966. Unlicensed producers, on the other hand, produce unbranded beedis, exempt from excise duties and GST if their turnover is below two million. While unlicensed producers contribute significantly to the industry, tracking their operations and workers is difficult, leaving many workers invisible to law enforcement (Mishra, 2014).

This decentralised system, combining registered and unregistered establishments, creates complex production relations that avoid direct employer-employee relationships (see Figure 2.6 below). In registered production, formal and informal direct relations exist within factory or home-based contract settings. However, workers in unregistered production face informal, indirect relationships, making them ineligible for welfare benefits under the BCA, 1966, and BWWF, 1976 (John, 2015). These informal relations, such as the sale-purchase system, contribute to the exploitation and invisibility of workers, especially those in unregistered establishments. Even registered manufacturers exploit legal loopholes by operating unregistered branches, where they hire home-based workers without legal protections. Furthermore, rejected beedis from formal production are often sold through illegal channels at

lower rates, allowing manufacturers to maximise profits while evading taxes (Madheswaran, 2006). The industry’s reliance on informal labour and subcontracting has fragmented the workforce, limiting worker rights and access to welfare.

Figure 2.6: Production Relations in Registered vs. Unregistered Beedi Companies



Source: (Madheswaran, 2006)

2.4.3 Current Landscape and the Declining Welfare State

Over the past two decades, evolving economic policies have intensified challenges for the beedi industry, particularly through the poverty-tobacco control paradox, where tobacco taxes aimed at reducing consumption disproportionately harm poor workers and consumers (Guindon et al., 2003). The Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976, previously imposed an excise duty (10 to 50 paise per thousand beedis) to fund the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWWF), 1976, supporting healthcare, scholarships, and skill development for workers. The introduction of the GST in 2017, which subsumed cess-based laws, repealed both the BWWF and its cess, redirecting welfare funding to the Labour Welfare Fund under the GST framework²³. However, no specific allocations have been made to the BWWF since 2017, despite substantial tobacco tax revenues (Satapathy et al., 2022). The 28% GST rate on beedis, classified as a “demerit good,” has spurred unlicensed production, undermining workers’ livelihoods and increasing

²³ In addition to the beedi sector, other industries—such as mining and cine—were also affected by the repeal of cess-based welfare funding. Prior to GST, funds were financed through sector-specific cess laws, including the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act (1976), the Iron Ore, Manganese Ore and Chrome Ore Mines Labour Welfare Cess Act (1976), and the Cine Workers Welfare Cess Act (1981), financed welfare funds. These cess acts have now been repealed, and their funding has been redirected under the Labour Welfare Fund.

health risks, while trade unions criticise the GST for fuelling informal sector growth (AIBWF, 2016). Lessons from countries such as Thailand and the Philippines—where tobacco taxes are earmarked for health and welfare programmes—could inform India’s approach (Karki et al., 2003; WHO, 2019).

Public health regulations, particularly the COTPA, 2003, have further strained the beedi industry. COTPA prohibits tobacco advertising, mandates health warnings, bans public smoking, restricts sales, and requires sealed packaging, with 2020 amendments banning loose beedi sales to curb consumption. These regulations, while advancing public health, have caused widespread unemployment or forced migration to lower-paying, less secure jobs for beedi workers, particularly in states like Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, and Karnataka, where additional restrictions have deepened economic insecurity (Pinto, 2021). Trade unions have advocated for alternative livelihoods, but government priorities remain focused on health goals, often overlooking worker welfare. This disconnect underscores the challenge of aligning public health with the economic needs of vulnerable populations, leaving beedi workers increasingly marginalised.

Labour reforms and a shrinking welfare state have worsened these challenges. Between 2019 and 2021, 29 central labour laws, including those protecting beedi workers, were consolidated into four labour codes²⁴—Wages, Industrial Relations, Social Security, and Occupational Safety and Health—under the “ease of doing business” initiative (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2020). The codes recognise beedi workers as a distinct category, but their implementation has been delayed due to incomplete state-level rules, as labour is a concurrent subject (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2020).

In November 2020, approximately 250 million workers joined a nationwide strike—one of the largest in history—organised by ten central trade unions to protest the new Labour Codes and broader economic policies affecting employment, social security, and workers’ rights. Critics have argued that the codes weaken protections by limiting union organising, promoting short-term contracts, and requiring mandatory Aadhar registration, which may exclude remote workers from benefits (Chaudhary and Remesh, 2021; Mazumdar and Pillai, 2022; Singh, 2023). Meanwhile, welfare funding has seen a steep decline, with no national budget

²⁴ Code on Wages, 2019; Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020; Code on Social Security, 2020; and The Industrial Relations Code, 2020

allocations to the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWWF) since 2017–18. Several states—Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha (since 2010–11), and West Bengal—had already stopped contributing earlier, leaving Bihar as the sole state to consistently support beedi worker welfare (see Figure 2.7) (Satapathy et al., 2022). The absence of alternative employment opportunities, coupled with these reforms, highlights the growing precarity of beedi workers and the broader marginalisation of informal labour in a declining welfare state (TII, 2001; Karki et al., 2003; Vasuki & Rambhatla, 2021).

Figure 2.7: Beedi worker welfare fund budget allocation from 2007-2008 to 2016-2017 across states.

Year	Andhra Pradesh	Bihar	Jhar-khand	Mahar-ashtra	Odisha	Tamil Nadu	Tripura	West Bengal
2007-2008	261.4	20.4	16.1	31.9	41.7	1.1	0.3	3.4
2008-2009	0	24.3	20.2	0	0	20.5	0.3	0.6
2009-2010	157.2	3.1	16	9.9	17.4	12.1	0.1	0
2010-2011	0	23.8	20.1	0	0	2.4	0.9	0
2011-2012	0	4.4	21	0	0	0	0	0
2012-2013	0	15.8	4	0	0	0	0	0
2013-2014	0	1.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
2014-2015	0	2.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
2015-2016	0	4.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2016-2017	0	2.4	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Knowledge Gap Study, AF Development Care (Compiled from Combined Finance and Revenue Accounts of Union and State Governments of India, CAG).

Source: (Satapathy et al., 2022)

2.4.4 Conclusion

The history of welfare legislation for beedi workers in Telangana reflects a broader tension between policy intent and implementation. Although the BCA, 1966, and the BWWF, 1976, aimed to provide social protections, their reach has remained limited. Early neglect in enforcement, the suspension of welfare cess collection in 1979, and a delayed revival in the

mid-1980s reveal the vulnerability of welfare schemes to shifts in political will and administrative capacity (Government of India, 1990). Subsequent amendments—such as the inclusion of family welfare and the compulsory issuance of ID cards in 1990—signalled progress, but the fragmented, home-based nature of the beedi industry continues to restrict effective coverage.

These limitations have been compounded by the broader forces of liberalisation and state withdrawal from welfare provisioning. Deregulation, declining union power, and fiscal constraints have collectively intensified the precarity of informal labour, particularly for marginalised women. In Telangana, where over 80% beedi production is deeply embedded in rural economies and social hierarchies, caste and gender intersect to shape workers' access to rights and protections (Satapathy et al., 2022). While the historical legacy of unionism in the region once enabled significant gains, contemporary unions face constraints, even as some have shifted strategies by supporting women-led organising.

Amidst these structural challenges, grassroots mobilisation remains a critical site of resistance. Women-led collectives, though limited in reach, have emerged as key actors in asserting labour rights and demanding accountability from state institutions. Telangana thus offers a unique lens to explore the evolving relationship between labour, gender, and welfare under neoliberalism. These insights lay the foundation for the next chapter, which draws on Sen's (1999) CA to evaluate how beedi workers' entitlements—and the denial thereof—impact their substantive freedoms and welfare.

3. Theoretical Framework: Labour Law as a Capability Enhancer—Collective Capabilities in Achieving ‘Labour Welfare’ and Beyond

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter traced the historical and socio-political evolution of the beedi industry in India, from its pre-colonial and colonial origins through post-independence state intervention and the liberalisation era. It showed how state policies, labour relations, and capital forces have shaped the industry, highlighting key developments such as the integration of agricultural labour into industrial production, the introduction of welfare-oriented labour laws, and the growing decentralisation, informalisation, and feminisation of the workforce.

Central to this history is the enforcement of the BCA, 1966, and the BWWF, 1976. These laws were intended to extend protection and entitlements to beedi workers but have been hampered by weak enforcement, inter-state disparities, and systemic barriers (Raghunath, 2001; Ansari & Raj, 2015; Vasuki & Rambhatla, 2021; Mallick & Satpathy, 2021; Pande, 2022). This raises key questions: What drives effective implementation? What explains uneven enforcement? And how might labour law better achieve its foundational goal of ensuring welfare?

In this study, ‘labour welfare’ refers specifically to the protective and entitlement-based provisions of Indian labour laws, designed to secure immediate improvements in workers’ lives (Government of India, 1969a). This conception is narrower than broader notions of wellbeing—such as happiness, social ties, or life satisfaction (Stone & Mackie, 2014; Adler et al., 2022). The Capability Approach (CA), developed by Amartya Sen, provides a way to expand the analysis: it shifts focus from legal entitlements alone to the real freedoms and opportunities workers have to lead lives they value (Sen, 1985a; 1999). Rather than treating labour law only as a regulatory mechanism, the CA—especially when linked to collective action—reimagines it as an instrument for justice, equality, and human dignity (Simon & Wilkinson, 2005; Langille, 2019).

The beedi industry’s long-standing tradition of collective action, dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, was central in shaping post-independence labour protections. As noted in Chapter 1, the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda identifies social dialogue as a core pillar, underscoring the role of

collective agency in advancing workers' rights. Within the CA framework, collective action functions as a *process freedom*—enabling workers to influence the conditions of their lives. Viewed this way, laws like the BCA and BWWF become tools for building *collective capabilities*, helping workers convert legal entitlements and resources into tangible outcomes such as healthcare access, income security, and skill development.

The industry's shift to a predominantly female workforce, however, presents new challenges. Earlier forms of mobilisation were largely male dominated (Hensman, 2003), and current efforts must reckon with entrenched inequalities of gender, caste, and socio-economic status. Inclusive, women-led, and intersectionally aware forms of collective action are essential to ensure that welfare outcomes are equitable and responsive to the realities of all beedi workers (Kabeer, 2004; Mazumdar, 2018).

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 3.2 introduces the CA as the central theoretical lens, with particular attention to *process freedom* and its role in legal implementation. Section 3.3 examines collective action in the beedi workforce, highlighting how intersectional inequalities shape the exercise of agency. Section 3.4 develops an integrated capability-based framework for labour welfare, mapping pathways from legal resources to capabilities, identifying barriers to conversion, and showing the cyclical role of collective action in sustaining welfare. Section 3.5 concludes by summarising the framework and outlining its application in subsequent empirical chapters.

3.2 The Capability Approach

The CA, developed by Amartya Sen in the 1980s and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000a), offers a normative framework for evaluating well-being, development, and justice. Its key concepts include:

- **Capabilities:** the genuine freedoms or substantive opportunities that a person has to achieve valuable states of *being* and *doing*.
- **Functionings:** the actual achievements or realised ways of being, such as being healthy, securely employed, or educated (Sen, 1974; 1985b; 1988; 1993).
- **Conversion factors:** the personal, social, and environmental conditions that affect how resources (like income or healthcare) are translated into capabilities (Sen, 1985a; 1999).

- **Process freedom:** the ability to shape and participate in the processes that enable the realisation of these capabilities, ensuring that individuals have the agency to influence opportunities that they can pursue.

Sen's (1979) "*Equality of What?*" marked a departure from economic paradigms equating development with income or resource distribution. Instead, Sen argued for expanding individuals' *substantive freedoms*—the real opportunities to *do* and *be* what they value. The CA thus shifts analysis from resource-based metrics of welfare to what people can genuinely achieve, stressing both *outcomes* and the *processes* by which they are realised. For example, legal access to healthcare improves welfare only if workers can actually use it—a possibility often constrained by caste discrimination, weak infrastructure, or informal employment.

The CA has shaped the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) (Gasper, 2002) and been applied across fields: education and inclusion (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007), Indigenous rights (Panzironi, 2012; Murphy, 2014), sustainable development (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010), public health (Venkatapuram, 2011), and climate justice (Holland, 2014). Non-Western traditions such as Māori thought, Ubuntu, and Buen Vivir have further enriched it by emphasising relational and ecological well-being (Watene & Yap, 2015; Hoffmann & Metz, 2017).

This framing is especially relevant for informal and marginalised workers, such as those in the beedi industry, where protections are weak or poorly enforced. Here, 'labour welfare' refers to entitlements defined in Indian labour law—fair wages, workplace safety, healthcare, housing, and education (Government of India, 1969a). The BCA, 1966, and the BWWF, 1976, reflect this framework but serve largely as proxies for welfare. They often fail to address broader wellbeing—such as autonomy, happiness, or meaningful social relationships (Tiberius, 2018; Stutzer, 2020). Thus, welfare (narrowly legal entitlements) must be distinguished from wellbeing (multidimensional). While welfare places responsibility on state and employers to deliver protections, it does not necessarily enable workers' agency or flourishing. Recent scholarship recognises the need to integrate subjective and social dimensions of well-being (Martinetti, 2000; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2002; Yang, 2018; Cooper et al., 2023).

Sen's CA bridges this gap by examining how laws and resources are converted into real opportunities. Housing schemes, for example, enhance welfare only if workers can

meaningfully access and retain them. This critique builds on Sen’s challenge to Rawls’ (1971) focus on distributing primary goods: because people differ in their ability to convert goods into *functionings*, equality requires attention to *conversion factors* shaped by gender, caste, disability, and other social structures (Sen, 1999). Nussbaum (2000a; 2011) further highlights how power relations enable or constrain capabilities. This makes the CA particularly relevant in India, where entrenched inequalities often prevent workers from transforming legal entitlements into substantive freedoms.

Indian labour welfare has historically oscillated between humanitarian, utilitarian, and rights based frameworks. Early reforms sought to mitigate exploitation and improve productivity, later evolving into constitutional commitments under the Directive Principles of State Policy²⁵, emphasising fair wages, decent conditions, and social protection (Government of India, 1969b; Mitchell et al., 2014; Routh, 2024). Yet implementation has lagged, especially in informal sectors. By viewing entitlements as means to *functionings* such as education, security, and dignity, the CA deepens our understanding of welfare. It also shifts labour law scholarship toward a human-centred framework that prioritises dignity, agency, and inclusion (Fudge, 2011; Punta, 2016; Davidov, 2018; Collins, 2019; Salais, 2019; Deakin, 2019; Langille, 2024).

Finally, the CA has proven useful in evaluating labour laws and welfare policies, showing how effectively they translate into lived well-being (Dean et al., 2005; Anand et al., 2005; Orton, 2011; Dang, 2014; Miles, 2014; Regier, 2024; Bartolomei et al., 2024). In India—and for beedi workers in particular—the CA exposes the disjuncture between legal protections and actual capabilities. Recognising labour law as a *social conversion factor* is therefore critical, a theme developed in the next section.

3.2.1 Labour Law and the Capability Approach

Traditionally seen as a mechanism for regulating industrial relations, labour law is increasingly reframed as a means of enriching workers’ capabilities and substantive freedoms (Simon & Wilkinson, 2005; Langille, 2019; 2024). This perspective challenges utilitarian and managerial interpretations, positioning labour law as a fundamental institution of justice, aimed at enabling dignified and meaningful lives (Sen, 2006; 2010). The BCA 1966 and BWWF 1976 exemplify how

²⁵ This trajectory was shaped by key moments in political and international labour history, including the 1931 Indian National Congress resolution on workers’ rights, the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944, and the findings of post-independence labour commissions. These developments conceptualised labour welfare as dynamic and occupation-specific, gradually expanding its scope to reflect the evolving realities of India’s workforce.

law can institutionalise labour rights as vehicles for capability enhancement, though their impact remains incomplete.

Labour laws establish foundations for fair wages, decent working conditions, and welfare provisions, functioning as *conversion factors* that support well-being. Yet without strong enforcement, awareness, and accessibility, laws alone cannot guarantee outcomes. As Sen (2002; 2009) notes, “*development as freedom*” depends on multiple, interrelated institutions—markets, governance, and democratic participation—working together rather than in isolation.

Indian law protects unionisation and collective bargaining: the Trade Unions Act, 1926, secures the right to form and join unions, while the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, safeguards against unfair dismissal and provides dispute resolution mechanisms. However, weak enforcement and limited awareness undermine their effectiveness. Legal frameworks often fail to reflect India’s largely informal economy (Deakin & Haldar, 2015). Overly rigid or misaligned laws can themselves act as *poor conversion factors*—unable to transform rights into *capabilities*. Structural barriers such as caste hierarchies, decentralised production, and widespread informality further blunt their effect. The Factories Act, for instance, has little impact when employers evade compliance by shifting to unregulated settings (Besley & Burgess, 2004; Basu, 2006). As Deakin & Haldar (2015, p. 48) observe, some laws are “set at an inappropriately high level,” deterring formal growth and deepening informality.

Viewed through the CA, this highlights the need to shift from a regulatory model to one that expands real opportunities for well-being. Labour law must be seen not merely as a distributive tool but as a *social conversion factor*, shaping conditions such as decent work, fair wages, and protection from exploitation (Sen, 2005; Langille, 2019; Deakin & Wilkinson, 2005). Legal entitlements like the right to unionise are necessary but insufficient without safeguards against retaliation or mechanisms for effective bargaining. In this sense, labour law creates enabling conditions that transform formal rights into actionable *capabilities* (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; Langille, 2014).

Nussbaum (2011) highlights the importance of workplace rights in securing core capabilities such as bodily health, affiliation, and “control over one’s environment.” Decent work, in this view, is both a valuable end and a means to achieving broader human freedoms. Sen (1999), while similarly focused on substantive freedoms, rejects fixed lists of capabilities, advocating instead for

participatory, context-specific identification. Although neither Sen nor Nussbaum explicitly apply the CA to labour law, their work has profoundly shaped scholars seeking to reframe labour law through a human capabilities lens. Nussbaum's structured framework underpins constitutional and policy commitments, while Sen's pluralistic approach emphasises democratic deliberation. Together, they converge on a shared insight: that law must go beyond formal entitlements to support real agency and substantive freedom (Langille, 2019).

The BCA 1966 and BWWF 1976 illustrate how labour law can function as both a *resource* and a *social conversion factor*. When effectively implemented, they expand workers' capabilities by enabling access to healthcare, education, and welfare schemes—thus enhancing dignity and opportunity. More broadly, aligning labour law with the CA shifts focus beyond contract-based frameworks, which often fall short in addressing the realities of informal or gig workers (Kesar & Bhattacharya, 2020). The CA offers a lens through which to confront modern challenges arising from complex production relations and structural informality, including the inadequacy of outdated legal categories such as 'employee' and 'employer.' By centring identity, social belonging, and civic contribution alongside economic protections, the CA enables a more inclusive and responsive approach to labour governance²⁶ (Nussbaum, 2019).

Scholars²⁷ have increasingly begun applying the CA to labour law, particularly in efforts to reimagine protections for vulnerable and informal workers. Though still an emerging field, this growing body of work includes proposals for labour laws specifically designed for underprotected groups—such as domestic workers (Shroff, 2019) and informal workers like waste pickers in West Bengal (Routh, 2014)—that are grounded in the CA. Much of this literature has focused on developed economies, with influential contributions from Deakin (2019), Salais (2019), Langille (2024), and Fudge (2011). This study builds on and localises that work by applying the CA to existing labour laws in India—specifically those governing beedi workers—to evaluate their real-world impact and assess how effectively they enhance workers' *capabilities* and *substantive freedoms*.

²⁶ The CA has been applied in various contexts to inform labour and welfare reforms. For instance, New Zealand utilised the CA in the 1990s to integrate employment, labour market, and welfare policies (Trebilcock, 2006). Furthermore, anti-discrimination laws and disability accommodations align with the CA by emphasising context-specific opportunities and addressing structural barriers. These examples demonstrate how the CA reframes labour law principles and drives innovative reforms.

²⁷ Alkire (2002a; 2005; 2013) extends CA by developing a participatory framework for evaluating development projects. Combining philosophical reasoning with community engagement, her two-stage methodology—first through philosophical reasoning to define core values, followed by participatory deliberation to refine them—ensures local voices are heard. Her fieldwork in Pakistan demonstrates how this approach can uncover community priorities that are often overlooked in traditional evaluations.

For beedi workers, the gap between rights and realisation remains stark. Even when legal entitlements exist, illiteracy, bureaucratic opacity, and weak outreach block access. To function as genuine *conversion factors*, laws must address these systemic barriers. Provisions such as workplace safety, minimum wages, and collective bargaining are not ends in themselves but means to expand capabilities like autonomy, dignity, and material well-being (Nussbaum, 2003; 2011; Bonvin, 2012).

A key CA contribution is its emphasis on freedom as both *opportunity* and *process*. Rights must not only exist but also be realised through participatory mechanisms of implementation and enforcement (Deakin & Koukiadaki, 2012; Bonvin, 2012). For beedi workers, this means that the practical drivers of enforcement—institutions, civil society, and worker agency—are as important as the statutory rights themselves. Understanding how these factors operate is critical to evaluating how labour law functions as a *social conversion factor*. The next section turns to these drivers of implementation.

3.2.2 *Process Freedom through Effective Implementation: Drivers*

Effective implementation of labour law depends not only on well-designed statutes but also on the broader set of drivers that shape how these laws are realised in practice. This section directly addresses the sub-research question:

What are the factors that contribute to the implementation and enforcement of these labour laws, and how do these factors explain the differential implementation and variations in impact?

To answer this, the chapter identifies and explores three interrelated drivers—*governance structures, economic and political contexts, and collective action*—each playing a crucial role in translating legal entitlements into real freedoms for workers.

While the state is centrally responsible for ensuring citizen well-being through access to public goods such as education, healthcare, and social security (Sen, 1992; Drèze & Sen, 2002), Sen (1999) cautions that market forces alone cannot secure equity or dignity. Legal implementation, therefore, depends on institutional and societal dynamics that extend beyond statutory design. Routh (2012) critiques Indian labour jurisprudence for prioritising economic growth over social justice, thereby weakening enforcement on the ground.

Governance structures, including mechanisms of accountability like parliamentary oversight, the judiciary, and a free press, operate as supply-side drivers that influence the effectiveness of implementation. Economic and political contexts further shape the environment in which laws function, determining state capacity and political will. At the same time, demand-side forces—particularly collective action—empower marginalised workers to assert their rights and hold institutions accountable.

This section argues that while governance and contextual factors are foundational, collective action emerges as the most decisive driver in converting formal legal protections into meaningful, lived outcomes for workers.

3.2.2.1 Governance Structures: Supply-Side Drivers

Governance structures define institutional responsibilities and mediate how legal entitlements are delivered on the ground. For beedi workers, these structures operate within India’s complex federal framework, requiring coordination across central, state, and local tiers (Deshpande et al., 2018). Labour is a Concurrent List subject under the Indian Constitution, allowing both Union and State legislatures to legislate on employment, trade unions, social security, and working conditions (Constitution of India, 1950, Seventh Schedule, List III, Entries 22–24, p. 327)²⁸. While this system aims to balance national priorities with local responsiveness, it often results in overlapping jurisdiction and fragmented accountability (Dyer, 1994; Jones et al., 1997; Dutta & Fischer, 2021).

The BCA, 1966, and the BWWF, 1976, assign distinct roles to central and state governments. The BCA, enacted by the Central Government, delegates enforcement to State Governments. Competent Authorities, appointed at the state level, oversee compliance with health, safety, and welfare standards, supported by inspectors empowered to enforce regulations and penalise violations (BCA 1966, Sections 2(c), 3–4, 6–7, 32–34). States may also issue context-specific regulations to ensure uniform but locally tailored enforcement (Section 44). However, actual implementation often hinges on administrative capacity and political will.

²⁸ Entry 22 deals with “trade unions; industrial and labour disputes,” Entry 23 pertains to “social security and social insurance; employment and unemployment,” and Entry 24 concerns the “welfare of labour, including conditions of work, provident funds, employers’ liability, workmen’s compensation, invalidity and old age pensions and maternity benefits”. Article 246 defines the legislative powers of Parliament and State Legislatures over the Union, State, and Concurrent Lists, enabling both to legislate on concurrent subjects like labour.

In contrast, the BWWF is centrally enacted and centrally enforced. It establishes advisory committees in each beedi-producing state to guide the welfare fund's administration, coordinated nationally by the Central Advisory Committee (BWWF 1976, Sections 5–6). Since 2017, the fund is supported through the GST regime, with beedis and similar products attracting a 28% tax. Welfare Commissioners, appointed by the Central Government, inspect establishments and administer benefits (BWWF 1976, Section 8).

Despite this robust framework, India's decentralised federalism often weakens implementation. As DeGroff and Cargo (2009) argue, successful governance depends on effective coordination across multiple levels. In practice, split responsibilities—such as central oversight of the BWWF and state-level enforcement of the BCA—create implementation gaps. Divergent political priorities, resource constraints, and bureaucratic inertia further contribute to inconsistency.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment implements these laws through the Labour Welfare Organisation (LWO), which operates via Regional Welfare Commissioners (RWCs) in 18 offices. These officials collaborate with registered beedi companies to administer benefits and maintain worker profiles. While designed to enable a bottom-up approach, weak inter-agency coordination often limits outreach and reduces impact.

Local self-governance bodies, such as Panchayati Raj institutions, are crucial in tailoring welfare delivery to local needs. However, they often lack the resources, staff, or political alignment necessary for effective implementation (Omvedt, 1988; Agarwala, 2019; Kalathil, 2023). These challenges are exacerbated by the fragmented, subcontracted nature of the beedi industry, where dispersed and informal workplaces make it difficult to identify eligible workers or ensure compliance.

In summary, while the BCA, 1966 and BWWF, 1976 provide a detailed governance architecture, their potential is undermined by fragmented responsibilities, insufficient capacity, and poor coordination. To realise the transformative potential of these laws, greater policy coherence and vertical integration across government levels is essential, along with increased investment in institutional capacity.

3.2.2.2 Economic Factors and Political Landscape: Contextual Factors

Economic and political conditions significantly influence how labour laws such as the BCA are implemented. Although the beedi industry appears fragmented, it is effectively dominated by large companies and powerful intermediaries who exploit its informal structure to evade taxes and regulatory oversight (Avachat, 1978). These actors often prioritise cost minimisation—through low wages and limited social security benefits—thereby undermining the intent and effectiveness of welfare provisions.

Financial limitations, both for employers and within the welfare system itself, hinder compliance. The BWFF remains reliant on cess-based funding, which has been irregular even under the GST regime (as discussed in Chapter 2), with inconsistent allocation and unclear budgetary priorities. Broader economic trends—like GDP growth or fiscal constraints—affect both central and state capacities to enforce labour protections (DeGroff & Cargo, 2009; Mukherjee & Bali, 2019; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020).

Politically, regions where the beedi industry contributes significantly to employment and revenue may deprioritise enforcement out of fear of economic disruption. Political will—including support for inspections, penalties, and monitoring—is essential for effective implementation. Yet, shifting political landscapes and the increasing role of regional parties have sometimes deprioritised labour rights enforcement in favour of investor confidence and economic liberalisation (Mosse, 2004).

3.2.2.3 Collective Action: A Key Demand-Side Factor for Amplifying *Process Freedoms*

Bonvin (2012) articulates *process freedom* as the capability to participate in collective decision-making and shape policy outcomes. This “*capability for voice*” (Bohman, 1996; Bohman & Rehg, 1998) emphasises not just access to work, but participation in its governance. Bonvin (2009, 2012) argues that empowering people with both *opportunity freedom* and *process freedom* enables authentic choice and meaningful agency.

Sen (1999) conceptualises agency as the capacity to act and bring about change. Robeyns (2017) extends this to the freedom to pursue goals aligned with one’s values. For marginalised workers, however, structural constraints—poverty, informality, social exclusion—significantly limit individual agency. *Collective agency*, by contrast, can overcome such constraints by enabling shared action to challenge injustice (Deveaux, 2021).

In the beedi sector, collective action has been foundational to rights advocacy. Organisations such as SEWA, AIBWF, and AITUC have mobilised workers, amplified their voices, and fought for legislative protections including the BCA and BWWF. SEWA has been particularly significant in empowering women beedi workers to assert their labour identities, negotiate wages, and challenge patriarchal norms. AIBWF has persistently campaigned for stronger legal protections and compliance.

Collective organising generates “power within” (self-worth), “power with” (alliances), and “power to” (claim rights) (Kabeer, 2021). This empowers workers to move from passive recipients to active agents in reshaping labour governance.

Beyond industry-specific contexts, India’s history of grassroots movements showcases the transformative power of collective action as a demand-side driver. Movements such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, the Right to Food Campaign of 2013, and the Right to Work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 have used collective organising to secure legal protections and ensure their implementation. Though contextually distinct, these movements reflect extensive literature on collective action and mobilisation across disciplines such as public goods, common-pool resources, industrial relations, and labour unions, drawing on foundational theories (Tilly, 1977; Nicholson & Kelly, 1980; McAdam, 1988; Beetham, 1991; Kelly, 1991; Scott, 1992; Gamson et al., 1992; Kelly, 1998; Ostrom, 1992, 1998, 2004; Vollaard & Ostrom, 2010; Hardin, 2015).

For instance, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) used *Jan Sunwais* (public hearings) under the RTI movement to expose corruption and push for transparency (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). The Right to Food Campaign, supported by grassroots collectives, catalysed reforms in the Public Distribution System (PDS) and led to initiatives like mid-day meal schemes (Drèze & Khera, 2017). Similarly, under MGNREGA, rural collectives have monitored implementation, exposed wage delays, and ensured that guaranteed work provisions translated into tangible benefits (Dutta, 2015). These movements exemplify how collective organising turns demand-side pressure into institutional response.

Collective action thus serves as both a catalyst for legal implementation and a vehicle for policy transformation. It bridges the gap between individual and collective agency, empowering marginalised groups to claim rights, demand accountability from employers and the state, and

actively shape the policies that govern their lives. Rooted in the CA's emphasis on expanding substantive freedoms through participatory engagement, collective action is indispensable for realising process freedom.

In contexts marked by informality and structural exclusion, collective action transcends barriers, amplifies worker voices, and ensures that formal legal protections become lived realities. As both a demand-side force and a cornerstone of social justice, it plays a critical role in translating abstract rights into meaningful protections—making it a vital mechanism for advancing transformative labour governance.

3.3 Collective Action as the Force Behind Building Collective Capabilities

The previous section highlighted how collective action functions not only as a crucial process freedom but also as a transformative force that ensures the implementation of laws and holds institutions accountable. Yet, its role extends beyond enforcement. Collective action fosters long-term empowerment by building durable social capital and strengthening democratic structures (Davis, 2015). It operates on two fronts: resolving immediate concerns such as wage non-payment and denial of welfare and transforming legal entitlements into meaningful opportunities. In contexts marked by illiteracy, low awareness, or bureaucratic opacity, collectives serve as intermediaries—facilitating enrolment, correcting exclusion errors, and converting rights into tangible capabilities. This capability conversion enables workers to attain well-being outcomes that surpass minimal legal thresholds.

While Sen's (1999) CA primarily emphasised individual freedoms, scholars have increasingly highlighted the concept of *collective capabilities*—those realised only through joint action. Introduced by Evans (2002) and developed by Stewart (2005), Ibrahim (2006), and Rosignoli (2019), these capabilities empower communities to address structural challenges that individuals alone cannot overcome. Rosignoli's framework of combined capabilities is particularly instructive, showing how collective efforts interact with external systems such as legal structures, political institutions, and social norms. *Collective capabilities* are not merely aggregated individual freedoms; they are ontologically distinct in their transformative potential.

Rosignoli (2019) also distinguishes between two dimensions of *collective capabilities*: *resistant capabilities*, which allow workers to challenge injustice through strikes, petitions, or protests

(as beedi workers did to secure legislative protections), and *resilient capabilities*, which enable adaptation to systemic challenges like wage volatility and informality through organised action around healthcare and social protection (Fennell, 2013; Bonvin, 2012).

Nussbaum's (2000a) typology of basic, internal, and combined capabilities provides further clarity. Combined capabilities, which blend internal faculties with enabling external conditions, are shaped decisively by collective action—especially in contexts of entrenched inequality. Freedoms such as demanding better wages or safer working conditions are inherently collective.

Critics of the CA have argued that its individualist orientation limits its capacity to address systemic injustice. Fudge (2011) and Von Broembsen (2013; 2016) suggest that without explicit recognition of collective agency, the CA risks overlooking the social infrastructure required for real empowerment. However, scholars such as Robeyns (2005) and Routh (2014) assert that the CA's normative individualism does not negate the value of collective structures. Sen's idea of “social opportunities” (Drèze & Sen, 2002) reflects the essential role of institutions in expanding freedoms. Routh (2014) further argues that the CA, through its participatory ethos, invites a more democratic and collective interpretation of rights.

The historical experiences of beedi workers in India powerfully illustrate the development of collective capabilities. Long before the Trade Unions Act of 1926 provided legal recognition, beedi workers organised to demand better conditions, eventually securing significant protections under the BCA (1966) and BWWF (1976). These movements demonstrate that unions are not merely reactive structures but proactive agents of legal accountability and social transformation (Gooptu, 2002; Mahmud, 2002; Langille, 2016).

Institutional support is critical for nurturing collective capabilities. Legal protections, welfare schemes, and the right to organise (as established in the Trade Unions Act) create the structural conditions for collective agency. Welfare provisions under the BWWF are often accessed only through organised mobilisation. Meanwhile, social capital—shared trust, norms, and mutual accountability—enables sustained cooperation (Kabeer, 2003; van Staveren, 2024). As workers organise, they generate feedback loops that enhance both institutional responsiveness and community cohesion (Ibrahim, 2006).

Collective action bridges the gap between formal legal rights and lived realities. While laws, such as the Trade Unions Act, establish formal conditions for *opportunity freedoms*—providing workers with the legal right to organise—the actual realisation of these freedoms, and the ability to claim entitlements under other laws such as the BCA (1966) and BWWF (1976), depends critically on *process freedoms*, exercised through collective action and participatory processes. As Ibrahim (2006) aptly describes, collective action serving as the “engine” driving this transformation. For home-based beedi workers, this means that legislative promises translate into substantive benefits only when workers organise, mobilise, and actively engage with the institutions designed to protect their rights. This framing clarifies that laws alone are often insufficient to generate *opportunity freedoms* in practice, while still recognising their role in creating the structural conditions that enable collective agency. In doing so, it challenges critiques of the CA as overly individualistic (Bonvin, 2012; Ibrahim, 2013) and aligns with critiques of neoliberal labour policies that prioritise flexibility over worker agency (Supiot, 2001; Bonvin, 2008).

In sum, embedding collective capabilities within the CA highlights the interdependence between individual freedoms, collective agency, and institutional frameworks. For beedi workers, collective action not only addresses immediate concerns but initiates a self-sustaining cycle of empowerment. By expanding the capability for voice and building resilient networks, workers are better equipped to pursue sustainable well-being and confront structural inequalities. Ultimately, this affirms the transformative power of collective action in realising labour rights and social justice for marginalised groups.

3.3.1 An Intersectional Feminist Lens to Inclusive Collective Action: Agency and Capabilities for All

Early collective action in the beedi industry was predominantly male dominated, shaped by broader gendered dynamics and entrenched social structures that have historically characterised Indian labour movements (Hensman, 2003). As the workforce became increasingly composed of women, especially from lower-caste and socio-economically marginalised backgrounds, the limitations of this legacy became more apparent. Addressing the specific needs of women workers, particularly in informal and precarious sectors, requires reimagining collective action through a feminist lens that is intersectional and attentive to the interplay of gender, caste, and class (Chakraborty, 2003; Kabeer, 2004; 2021). This reimagining is not only essential for equity but necessary for transforming collective action itself—from

traditional, hierarchical, male-led trade unionism to more inclusive, transformative, and women-led models (Mazumdar, 2018).

An intersectional feminist approach reveals how social identities mediate individuals' ability to organise and achieve well-being (Addabbo, 2017; Hobson, 2018). It calls for inclusive agency—not just for women broadly, but particularly for lower-caste and marginalised women—thus broadening who gets to live a life they have reason to value. Scholars like Nussbaum (2000a) and Kabeer (2021) argue that capabilities must be situated within real-world structural constraints. Gendered, caste-based, and class-based inequalities not only limit available choices but also determine whether individuals can act upon those choices. A right may exist on paper, but its meaningful exercise depends on one's embedded social location.

Within this context, collective action becomes a critical mechanism for enhancing worker capabilities. It enables individuals to convert resources into *real freedoms* and *functionings*, strengthens their ability to demand further rights, and creates a virtuous cycle of empowerment and inclusion. Structural constraints, such as entrenched gender norms and caste hierarchies, limit agency even when legal protections are present. This is particularly true in informal sectors like beedi work or domestic labour, where informality and social expectations restrict women's ability to claim their rights (Sen, 1999).

Informal workers, especially women in the Global South, face unique challenges in organising due to dispersed workplaces, irregular income, and limited awareness of legal protections. These obstacles are intensified for lower-caste women, whose socio-economic vulnerabilities further curtail their ability to act collectively. Robeyns (2003) and Walker et al. (2014) emphasise that these inequalities do not merely reduce agency; they shape the entire terrain upon which agency must be exercised. Nonetheless, women's collective action has played a key role in challenging patriarchal constraints and negotiating more just labour conditions.

Women's organising efforts, both in unionised spaces and informal economies, have redefined socio-economic roles and advanced empowerment (Agarwal, 2015). Organisations like SEWA have pioneered innovative bargaining models for informal workers (Carr et al., 1996). SEWA and similar groups, such as María Elena Cuadra (MEC) in Nicaragua, adopt negotiation and alliance-building over adversarial tactics, embodying a feminist ethic of collaboration and care (Ledwith, 2012; Agarwal, 2002; 2021). These approaches have improved material outcomes while also building solidarity, legal literacy, and identity-based empowerment. However, even

these spaces often suffer from upper-caste dominance in leadership, limiting their transformative potential.

Legal literacy is a particularly important empowerment tool used by collectives like SEWA to enhance capabilities. It allows women to access entitlements, engage with employers, and challenge structural inequalities (Habbig & Robeyns, 2022). But inclusivity must go beyond gender representation; it requires addressing internal hierarchies. Leadership structures often reflect dominant caste positions, weakening the collective's ability to dismantle intersecting injustices. Similar patterns are seen in Collective Forest Groups (CFGs), where women's participation in decision-making was minimal without external support from NGOs or dedicated women's groups (Agarwal, 2015).

Stewart (2005, p. 199) rightly notes that “becoming a member of some such groups forms an individual capability.” Group affiliation determines whether marginalised women can access collective agency. However, the internal dynamics of collectives—who leads, who speaks, and whose priorities are represented—significantly shape their inclusiveness. Stewart also warns that inequality in group capabilities can lower well-being and destabilise social cohesion. Dominant-caste leadership can lead to selective capability enhancement, sidelining transformative goals like dignity, recognition, and autonomy.

The distinction between horizontal inequalities (between social groups) and vertical inequalities (within groups) (Stewart, 2005) helps analyse these internal power dynamics. Kabeer's (2021) notion of ‘intersecting inequalities’ across cultural, political, and economic dimensions deepens this insight, as does Robeyns' (2006) argument that group-based inequalities are central in shaping individual capabilities. For instance, in rural Tamil Nadu, discriminatory debt practices severely restrict lower-caste women's access to credit, reinforcing their economic and social marginalisation (Reboul, Guérin, & Nordman, 2021).

Crenshaw's (2015) concept of intersectionality is vital here. Power does not operate along a single axis—gender and caste intersect to produce layered exclusions. Even women-led organisations may silence lower-caste voices if leadership remains homogeneous. Stewart (2005) reiterates that group dynamics determine which capabilities are pursued and prioritised. When collectives reflect the interests of dominant members, they risk excluding the needs of the most vulnerable.

Pandey and Varkkey (2020) underscore that caste-based exclusion within unions weakens solidarity and limits representational equity. Without caste-inclusive leadership and decision-

making, labour collectives can reproduce the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. Feminist labour activism must explicitly prioritise caste equity alongside gender justice to ensure genuinely inclusive and transformative outcomes.

In conclusion, feminist perspectives on collective action and capabilities demand an intersectional approach to labour, leadership, and empowerment. True transformation occurs not just when choices are expanded, but when the structures that limit them are dismantled (Kabeer, 1999). Collective empowerment requires that all voices—especially those of lower caste, informal, and precarious workers—are included in decision-making processes. Otherwise, collective action risks preserving the status quo rather than promoting social justice. Intersectional feminist capability approaches offer a rigorous and ethically grounded framework for reimagining labour movements that foster genuine dignity, equality, and wellbeing for all.

3.4 A Capability-based Framework for Labour Welfare

This section presents a capability-based framework for labour welfare, focusing on how legal provisions are transformed into meaningful outcomes for workers. It highlights the interplay between *resources*, *capabilities*, and *functionings*, with collective action playing a central role in ensuring that welfare laws lead to tangible improvements in workers' lives.

At its core, the framework posits that while labour laws provide essential resources—such as healthcare, education, and housing—these alone do not ensure improved well-being. For resources to have impact, they must be converted into *capabilities*: the genuine ability to access and utilise these opportunities. *Capabilities*, in turn, lead to *functionings*, or realised outcomes such as *being healthy, educated, or securely employed*.

Unlike tangible rights, *conversion factors* are the intangible conditions that enable or constrain the “freedom to choose.” These include personal attributes, social norms, institutional quality, and environmental conditions. They determine whether a worker can transform legal entitlements into real-life improvements. For instance, access to healthcare becomes meaningful only if services are of high quality, culturally appropriate, and physically accessible. Similarly, scholarships must be comprehensive and inclusive to truly enhance educational capabilities.

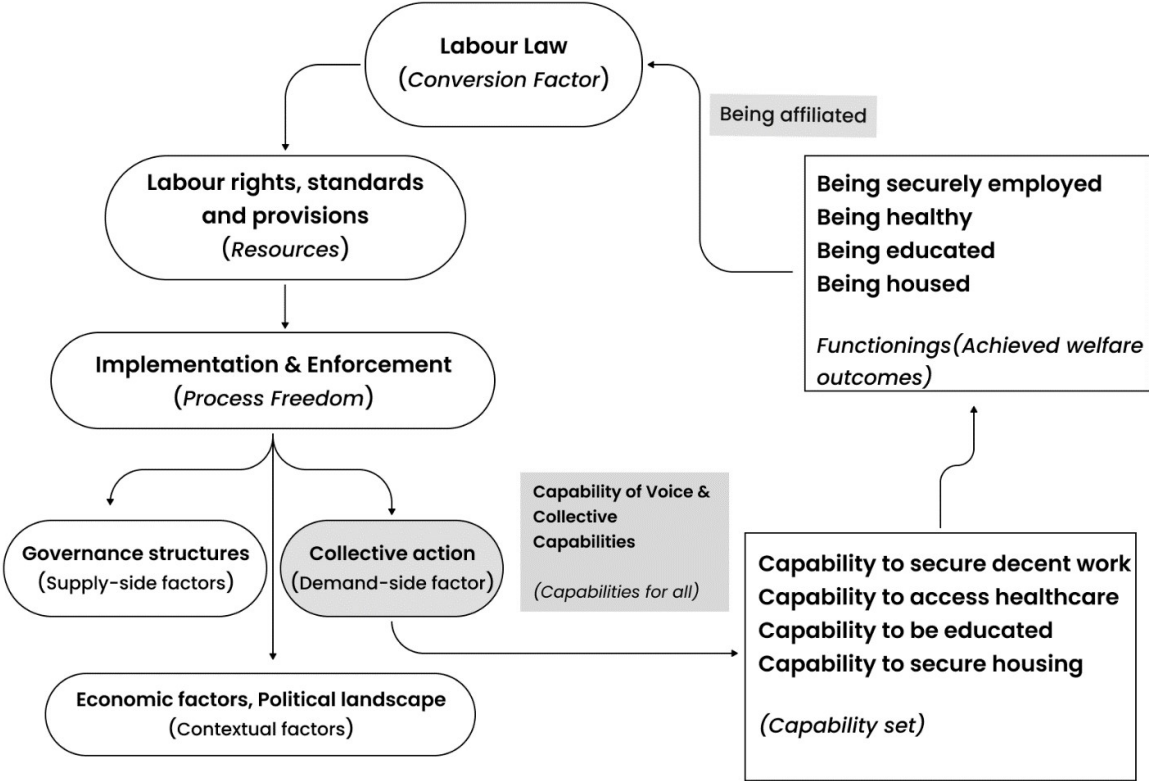
Labour law provisions—such as working conditions, health benefits, children’s education scholarships, skill development programs, and housing support—are vital. Yet their effectiveness hinges on accessibility, adequacy, and enforcement. Here, collective action becomes pivotal. Workers’ *capability for voice* refers to a set of valued *functionings* in Sen’s CA—*doings* and *beings* that enable meaningful participation and collective empowerment. These include the ability to affiliate with others through unions or collectives, to organise collectively, to claim entitlements, to negotiate working conditions, and to hold institutions accountable. This capability is essential in overcoming systemic barriers such as bureaucratic inefficiency, weak enforcement, and social discrimination.

In the beedi industry, for example, collective action has been crucial in improving healthcare delivery, skill development access, and working conditions. Through unions and community groups, workers can convert entitlements into *functionings* such as improved health, secure employment, and decent housing. This transition from mere productive work to capability enhancing work is central to sustainable empowerment (Bueno, 2022; Stephens, 2023).

A key insight of this framework is that affiliation within collectives is both a *capability* and a *functioning*. Being part of a group empowers workers, enhances solidarity, and provides a platform for advocacy. Affiliation reduces isolation, strengthens bargaining power, and fosters a sense of belonging—directly contributing to well-being.

Figure 3.1 below illustrates this framework, showing how resources, when combined with enabling factors like collective action, lead to enhanced capabilities and ultimately to improved *functionings*.

Figure 3.1: Capability Based Framework for Labour Welfare of Beedi Workers



Source: Author’s creation

Table 3.1 below provides a detailed mapping of this framework, linking specific labour law provisions to *capabilities* and resulting *functionings*, with collective action as a key enabler throughout.

Table 3.1: Labour Law Provisions and Collective Action as Enablers of Capabilities and Functionings

Labour Law Provisions + Collective Action	Capabilities	Functionings
Working Conditions	Capability to secure decent work	Being securely employed
Health Benefits	Capability to access healthcare	Being healthy
Scholarships & Skill Development	Capability to educate children & workers	Being educated
Housing Benefits	Capability to secure housing	Being housed
Collective Action	Capability of voice and collective capabilities	Being affiliated

Source: Author’s creation

As shown above, legal provisions serve as foundational resources. But it is the enabling environment—particularly collective action—that determines whether these provisions translate into *capabilities* and real-life achievements. The *capability of voice* is especially crucial: it enhances worker agency, enables access to entitlements, and drives systemic reform.

This process generates a virtuous cycle. As workers realise *functionings* like better health and education, they strengthen their collective capabilities and social capital. This in turn reinforces their ability to organise and advocate for improved policies and implementation, creating a self-reinforcing loop of empowerment.

In conclusion, a capability-based approach to labour welfare recognises that legal provisions alone are insufficient. The transformation of *resources* into *capabilities* and *functionings* requires attention to structural barriers, conversion factors, and the enabling role of collective action. Affiliation within collectives is both a means and an end—enhancing individual agency while advancing systemic change. This cyclical, participatory process is central to fostering dignity, inclusion, and sustainable improvements in workers’ well-being.

3.5 Conclusion

The BCA, 1966, and BWWF, 1976, represent significant but ultimately limited efforts to improve labour welfare within the beedi industry. While these laws introduced formal

protections and welfare entitlements, their transformative potential has been constrained by entrenched socio-structural inequalities and weak enforcement mechanisms. This chapter has argued that a shift toward a more transformative framework is necessary—one rooted in the CA, which moves the focus from legal entitlements to the actual freedoms that workers have to achieve well-being.

Central to this transformative process is collective action, which not only facilitates the enforcement of welfare provisions but also helps build *collective capabilities*. These capabilities act as the critical link in converting legal resources into real opportunities and achievements—or *functionings*—such as being healthy, securely employed, or educated. Importantly, collective action is both a means and an end: it is a capability in itself (the “capability for voice”) and a functioning (“being affiliated”). The functioning of affiliation is a key dimension of labour welfare, empowering workers to assert their rights and shape the policies that affect them.

This creates a virtuous cycle—collective action enhances workers’ capabilities, enabling them to convert resources into meaningful outcomes, which in turn reinforces their agency and collective strength. This process not only strengthens welfare outcomes but expands the scope of what workers can aspire to achieve. This aligns closely with the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, where social dialogue is recognised as a foundational pillar of decent work, underscoring the critical role of collective voice in securing and sustaining labour rights.

As Subramaniam (2006) notes, for collective action to address the realities of today’s workforce—particularly informal women workers—it must become more inclusive and intersectional, sensitive to the intersecting inequalities of caste, class, gender, and socioeconomic status. Without such responsiveness, mobilisation efforts risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle. Applying an intersectional feminist lens is therefore crucial in analysing the efficacy of these labour laws. Given that the beedi workforce today is predominantly female, yet the laws were framed within male-centric policy paradigms, it is essential to interrogate whether they adequately address the constraints and aspirations of women workers.

This chapter contributes a theoretical reframing of beedi labour laws through the lens of the CA. By focusing on actual freedoms rather than formal entitlements alone, it reconceptualises

labour welfare in terms of workers' lived capabilities. It also sets the foundation for the empirical investigation to follow, which adopts a feminist epistemological stance—centring the voices and lived experiences of women workers. The upcoming methodology chapter will elaborate on how this empirical approach examines whether existing legal protections are genuinely transformative or whether they merely entrench existing gendered and structural inequalities.

Moreover, this chapter establishes the structure for the empirical analysis. Based on the CA framework, five key dimensions of labour welfare are identified: *being housed*, *being securely employed*, *being healthy*, *being educated*, and *being affiliated*. These dimensions guide the analysis in subsequent chapters and are directly tied to the central research question:

What is the impact of the legislation designed to protect the rights of beedi workers in India, [Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966; Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976] on their welfare?

However, two of these dimensions— "*Being Housed*" and "*Being Healthy*"—are excluded from detailed empirical evaluation due to the limited implementation of relevant welfare provisions. For "*Being Housed*", although 27.81% of surveyed workers qualify as renters and are theoretically eligible for housing benefits, there is no evidence that any have received such support. With no actual implementation or uptake, it is not possible to assess the impact of these housing measures on worker welfare. For "*Being Healthy*", meaningful evaluation is constrained by the near collapse of healthcare infrastructure, such as the Korutla²⁹ beedi dispensary. Since 2019, its services have been reduced to basic medicines only. Most workers now rely on more accessible sub-centres nearby, given the 10–20 km distance to the dispensary. The severe decline in services and minimal usage render a health impact analysis unfeasible.

These conceptual insights lay the groundwork for the methodological framework and fieldwork design, which will be elaborated in the next chapter. They also reinforce the chapter's central argument: that labour laws alone are insufficient for ensuring welfare—what is essential is their transformation, through collective action and inclusive implementation, into genuine capabilities and freedoms for marginalised workers.

²⁹ The Korutla beedi dispensary serves six mandals in Jagitial district: Ibrahimpatnam, Metpally, Mallapur, Kathlapur, Korutla, and Medipelli. For medical care, beedi workers from the study's fieldwork sites, Sirikonda and Thandriyal in Kathlapur mandal, would need to travel approximately 10 kilometers and 20 kilometers respectively to reach Korutla.

4. Methodological Approach and Fieldwork

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the theoretical framework used to assess the impact of beedi workers' legislation on their welfare, specifically through the lens of the CA and the emphasis on collective capabilities. It highlighted the use of an intersectional feminist perspective to promote welfare for all beedi workers—particularly women across caste groups. This chapter outlines the methodological approach to the research, building on the feminist lens that underpins the study.

The first section of this chapter reflects on the origins of the study, examining the researcher's positionality, motivations, and how these shaped the feminist epistemological grounding and guided the overall direction of the research (section 4.2). The chapter then explains the research methodology and design, outlining why a mixed-methods approach and a theory-based evaluation framework were chosen for this impact evaluation study (section 4.3). The subsequent section describes the research location and context, offering reasons for their selection and explaining their relevance to understanding the welfare of beedi workers (section 4.4). It then moves on to explain the data collection methods, covering both qualitative and quantitative methods, along with the processes involved in data management and analysis (section 4.5). Reflexivity and ethical considerations are discussed in section 4.6. Finally, section 4.7 concludes the chapter by summarising the methodological approach and reflecting on its contribution to the overall study.

4.2 Positionality and Motivation: Locating Myself in the Research

This research is deeply personal. As an Indian national and a young Dalit woman from a lower-class background, born into a beedi-working family in a village in Telangana, my identity fundamentally shapes my approach to this work. I am not a detached observer but someone whose life is deeply intertwined with the caste-based, gendered, and economic realities I am studying. In North Telangana, where beedi rolling is a prominent livelihood, my mother, like many women in the region, worked under exploitative conditions for low wages, often resulting in health issues.

As a child, I was not merely an observer but a participant in this labour. Helping tie threads, sorting tobacco leaves, and rolling beedis were daily tasks that became so routine that I rarely questioned them. In our village, beedi work was seen as an essential part of life, framed as a way for women to contribute economically while staying at home and adhering to traditional gender roles. For many young women, learning to roll beedis from their mothers or aunts was not only a survival skill but also a means to enhance their chances of a good marriage, deeply embedded in the culture. These early experiences had a lasting impact on me, shaping my understanding of how caste, gender, and labour come together in the daily lives of women beedi workers.

My journey into academia was fuelled by a desire to understand and critically engage with the conditions I grew up in. My undergraduate studies first exposed me to the work of SEWA, whose advocacy for informal women workers highlighted the systemic neglect of labouring women like my mother. Inspired, I conducted my first fieldwork for an undergraduate thesis on welfare schemes for beedi workers in Telangana. That project revealed not only the exploitation and precariousness of this labour but also the resilience and agency of the women who sustain this industry. These early academic explorations laid the groundwork for this doctoral research, which employs an intersectional feminist lens to examine the socioeconomic realities of beedi workers.

This study focused on a comparative analysis of two villages in Telangana: Sirikonda and Thandiryāl. Eight months of fieldwork, conducted from October 2022 to May 2023, enabled a deeper, more immersive exploration of the beedi industry within its specific context.

Conducting fieldwork at ‘home’ presented a dynamic blend of connection and distance. Although I am from a nearby village, Sirikonda and Thandiryāl hold significant personal and cultural meaning for me, not just geographically but also through familial and social ties. As a Dalit woman and the daughter of a beedi worker, my personal identity was intricately woven into the research process, reflecting the complexities of the blurred lines between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in fieldwork, as discussed by scholars like Narayan (1993) and Srinivas (2009). The conventional dichotomy of ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ fails to capture the fluidity and context specific nature of my positionality. My experience highlighted how these roles are not fixed but constantly negotiated, shifting based on the evolving dynamics of the field and the relationships I built with participants.

On the one hand, my identity as a Telugu-speaking woman from a rural background provided me with an insider perspective. My accent, dialect—closely aligned with the Telangana

*yaasa*³⁰—and lived experiences as the daughter of a beedi worker, fostered a sense of trust and relatability among workers, who often welcomed me as “one of their own.” Many women saw me as a role model, viewing my academic achievements as a source of pride for the beedi working community. These shared experiences allowed me to access conversations and spaces that might have been inaccessible to an outsider.

On the other hand, this closeness also created complications. My positionality as a young, unmarried, first-generation PhD researcher positioned me as an anomaly. I often encountered questions such as, ‘Why are you doing this work?’ and ‘Why are you not married yet? When will you have children? Why are you walking around with pen and paper like this?’ These questions reflected cultural expectations about gender roles and made some interactions more complex. I handled these situations with patience, humour and kindness, explaining my research and shifting the focus back to work, which helped build understanding and connection.

Beedi workers come from a range of caste groups, as mentioned in Chapter 1, and caste dynamics shaped some of my fieldwork experiences. While my Dalit identity fostered solidarity with participants from Dalit caste groups, it also positioned me as an outsider in interactions with beedi workers from dominant caste or sub-caste groups. Despite the legal abolition of caste discrimination under Article 17 of the Constitution of India (1950) and subsequent laws such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), the social realities of caste remain deeply entrenched. I experienced microaggressions, exclusion, and subtle discrimination from dominant caste participants. Choudhary’s (2019) critique of caste as not merely a structural reality but a pervasive, lived experience that shapes the dynamics of every interaction resonates with my own experience. Similarly, his fieldwork, where his caste identity was foregrounded by respondents, mirrored my own encounters. Despite the professional veneer of fieldwork, caste dynamics subtly but powerfully conditioned the social interactions that occurred between me and participants. Caste functions not only as a structural hierarchy but also as a subjective force that shaped both my research process and relationships with participants.

³⁰ *Telangana yaasa* refers to the unique dialect and accent spoken in rural Telangana, characterised by distinct phonetic and linguistic variations from standard Telugu

One experience during fieldwork in Thandriyal village clearly illustrates this:

The Beedi Worker (Padmashali, BC caste): ‘Wow, you’ve done so well! But *meeremetollu?* (translated as “who are you?”)³¹ Padmashali only, no? Same caste as mine?’

Me: I took a deep breath and replied, “Aunty, I’m a Dalit. I belong to the *Mala*³² sub-caste, part of the Scheduled Caste.”

The Beedi Worker: There was a pause, followed by a soft, drawn-out ‘ohhhhh....,’ with a noticeable shift in her tone. Moments later, she stood up abruptly, looking uneasy. ‘I... I have to go. Take care,’ she said, leaving without offering the snacks and water she had initially intended to share.

Caste dynamics were starkly evident during fieldwork, with varying treatment not only across caste groups but even within sub-castes, such as *Mala* and *Madiga*. The sudden withdrawal or guardedness from some participants highlighted how deeply caste prejudices persist, even among marginalised beedi-working communities. These experiences resonate with Choudhary’s (2019) insights into how caste remains a pervasive and often unspoken barrier, complicating interactions even among those who share similar socio-economic struggles. For me, such moments are not just memories but foundational to my intellectual inquiry, shaping my understanding of the complex, enduring impact of caste on social interactions and identity.

These experiences of caste-based rejection and discomfort became integral to my research, offering insights into the enduring persistence of caste in Indian society, even in spaces that purport to have overcome it. Choudhary (2019) draws attention to the profound impact of the researcher’s caste identity on fieldwork. He recounts how respondents often foreground the caste identity of the researcher, overriding their professional role and disrupting the ideal of value-neutral inquiry. For marginalised-caste researchers, this dynamic is particularly challenging, as they are frequently met with suspicion or prejudice, especially from dominant

³¹ ‘*Meeremetollu*’ or sometimes ‘*Meerenti*’ can be interpreted as a way of inquiring about one’s caste identity in a subtle or indirect manner. ‘*Meerentandi*’ literally means “Who are you?” and may serve as a polite way of asking about caste in certain social contexts (this is the closest translation in Telugu).

³² *Mala* is a Dalit subcaste (SC) in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Another major Dalit subcaste in the region is *Madiga*.

caste respondents (Franks, 2002). Choudhary reflects on his own experiences, noting how his caste identity was frequently invoked during his fieldwork, challenging his ability to position himself as a neutral observer. These moments, he argues, are not merely obstacles but ‘valuable data’ that reveal the pervasive influence of caste in shaping social interactions.

This duality of familiarity and marginality reflects broader debates on “fieldwork at home” (Srinivas, 1960; Narayan, 1993), where researchers must navigate the fluid dynamics of power, identity, and privilege. Laura Nader’s (1972) concept of “studying up” addresses the challenges researchers face when studying powerful, elite groups. These challenges include gaining access, dealing with ethical issues, and managing power dynamics. Nader emphasises the difficulty of navigating institutional barriers and negotiating relationships within ‘elite’ spaces while also confronting the researcher’s own identity. Priyadarshini (2003) builds on this idea, discussing the obstacles of researching elite institutions like business schools in India. She highlights that many of these challenges stem from the researcher’s self-image and professional identity. Priyadarshini argues that studying up requires researchers to have flexible identities that can change and evolve, as rigid identities limit their ability to adapt. She draws on Foucault’s (1997) idea that a belief in fixed identities prevents change and suggests that a fluid identity can actually be beneficial in researching the powerful. Priyadarshini also critiques the simplistic view of power—either avoiding it or becoming complicit—and instead advocates for a strategic, less adversarial approach to studying power. This allows for deeper engagement with the powerful and reflection on the researcher’s own role in shaping power dynamics.

These insights are particularly relevant to my own research as a lower-caste researcher studying dominant-caste groups. Priyadarshini’s emphasis on flexible identities and a strategic approach to studying power, aligns with my experience of navigating caste hierarchies in elite spaces. It encourages a more dynamic and reflexive engagement with the powerful, while also making me critically examine my own position within these power structures. These dynamics required me to engage in constant reflexivity, prompting questions such as: *How does my academic privilege shape the narratives I hear? How do my personal experiences as a Dalit woman both illuminate and limit my understanding of others’ realities?*

By critically examining my positionality, I sought to honour the voices of the women I worked with, while acknowledging the boundaries and biases shaped by my own identity. These

reflections deepened my understanding of the complexities of fieldwork and informed my approach as both a participant and observer of the social realities I aimed to study.

One of the most critical decisions during my fieldwork was whether to disclose my caste identity. Drawing from Choragudi (2017), who examines the ethical dilemmas of caste-based ethnography, I chose to be open about my identity as a Dalit (SC) Mala. While this decision exposed me to caste-based prejudices and condescension, as noted earlier, it also enabled honest engagement with participants. Unlike Choragudi's approach of adopting a 'fake' caste identity to navigate barriers, my transparency allowed me to confront caste dynamics directly and document them authentically as they unfolded.

This approach was also emotionally demanding, as caste-based interactions—however harsh—often lay bare the deeply entrenched hierarchies that sustain caste as a system of 'graded inequality' (Ambedkar, 1990, p. 13). Following Choragudi's (2017, p.392) view that 'any remark coming from them is data, however harsh or gentle it might be', I reframed these encounters not as personal affronts but as valuable insights into the ongoing power of caste in everyday life. They offered insight into how caste continues to operate through subtle and overt expressions of power.

As Choudhary (2019) argues, generating inclusive and balanced knowledge requires more grounded, bottom-up approaches—ones that integrate perspectives from below and challenge dominant narratives. Maintaining reflexivity throughout (see Section 4.6), I used my identity as an interpretive lens to uncover the lived realities of caste oppression. In doing so, I sought to ensure that my research remained both authentic and deeply attuned to the structures of inequality it aimed to critique.

4.2.1 Feminist Epistemological Stance

This research is founded on a feminist epistemological stance that centres the voices of women beedi workers and challenges systemic structures that have historically marginalised their experiences. Feminist epistemology critiques the supposed objectivity and neutrality of dominant knowledge systems, arguing that all knowledge is socially situated and shaped by power dynamics. Standpoint theory scholars such as Code (1981, 1991), Hartsock (1998), and Harding (2004) assert that marginalised groups, especially women, possess unique and often more comprehensive insights into social structures through their lived experience of oppression. This study also draws on Haraway's (2013) concept of situated knowledge, which

rejects the ‘god trick’ of an impartial, omniscient viewpoint and emphasises that knowledge is always produced from specific embodied perspectives. Further, Crenshaw’s (2015) notion of intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression, including gender, race, and class, shape both experiences and knowledge production. Scholars like Łapniewska (2018) argue for frameworks that account for the social and economic realities of women, aligning with Jackson’s (2006, p.8) call for ‘socially engaged research’ that transcends narrow objectivity by incorporating women’s voices and experiences on the ground. Collectively, these frameworks critique patriarchal exclusions of women’s voices from defining ‘valid’ knowledge and advocate for methodologies that prioritise diversity, subjectivity, and lived experience as epistemic resources.

The beedi industry is predominantly driven by women, yet their labour, often home-based, has been systematically undervalued and rendered invisible in National Accounting Statistics (Samantroy, 2019; Jha et al., 2020). Feminist epistemology exposes this androcentric bias in knowledge production and calls for methodologies that are inclusive, reflexive, and engaged with women’s lived realities. By adopting this stance, this research centres women’s voices in knowledge production, challenging the invisibilisation of their labour and the androcentric paradigms dominating policy and economic analyses (Cantillon et al., 2023). Engaging foundational feminist scholarship—including Rose (1983), Harding (1987), and Doucet and Mauthner (2006)—this study highlights the inadequacies of traditional methodologies in addressing women’s gendered social positions.

This feminist epistemological stance not only critiques traditional knowledge but also offers a transformative approach by democratising knowledge production and acknowledging the agency and expertise of women beedi workers (Wasserfall, 1993; Hughes-Stanley, 2021). It challenges the invisibilisation of women’s contributions and produces socially engaged research that amplifies their experiences and informs more inclusive policy and economic frameworks.

4.3 Research Methodology and Design

This research is designed as an impact evaluation of legislation targeting women beedi workers, focusing on causal attribution between policy interventions and their welfare outcomes. Impact evaluations examine both intended and unintended effects of an intervention, assessing whether

observed changes can be directly attributed to the policy (White, 2009; Leeuw and Vaessen, 2009; Duvendack et al., 2011; Bamberger et al., 2012). The core aim is to establish causal relationships—*what works, for whom, and under what conditions*—by comparing the outcomes of an intervention to a counterfactual scenario: what would have occurred without it (Chambers et al., 2009).

However, this study diverges from traditional before-and-after comparisons or Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) due to the challenges of evaluating a law that came into force over fifty years ago. The welfare legislation under examination, introduced in the 1960s and 1970s to improve the socio-economic and health outcomes of women in the beedi industry, predates the availability of reliable baseline data or a clearly defined counterfactual. While RCTs continue to be used in impact evaluation, their status as the ‘gold standard’ has lessened. Increasingly, researchers emphasise qualitative methods, life histories, ethnography, and field-based approaches to better capture the complex and context-specific realities of social policies and development interventions (Camfield & Duvendack, 2014).

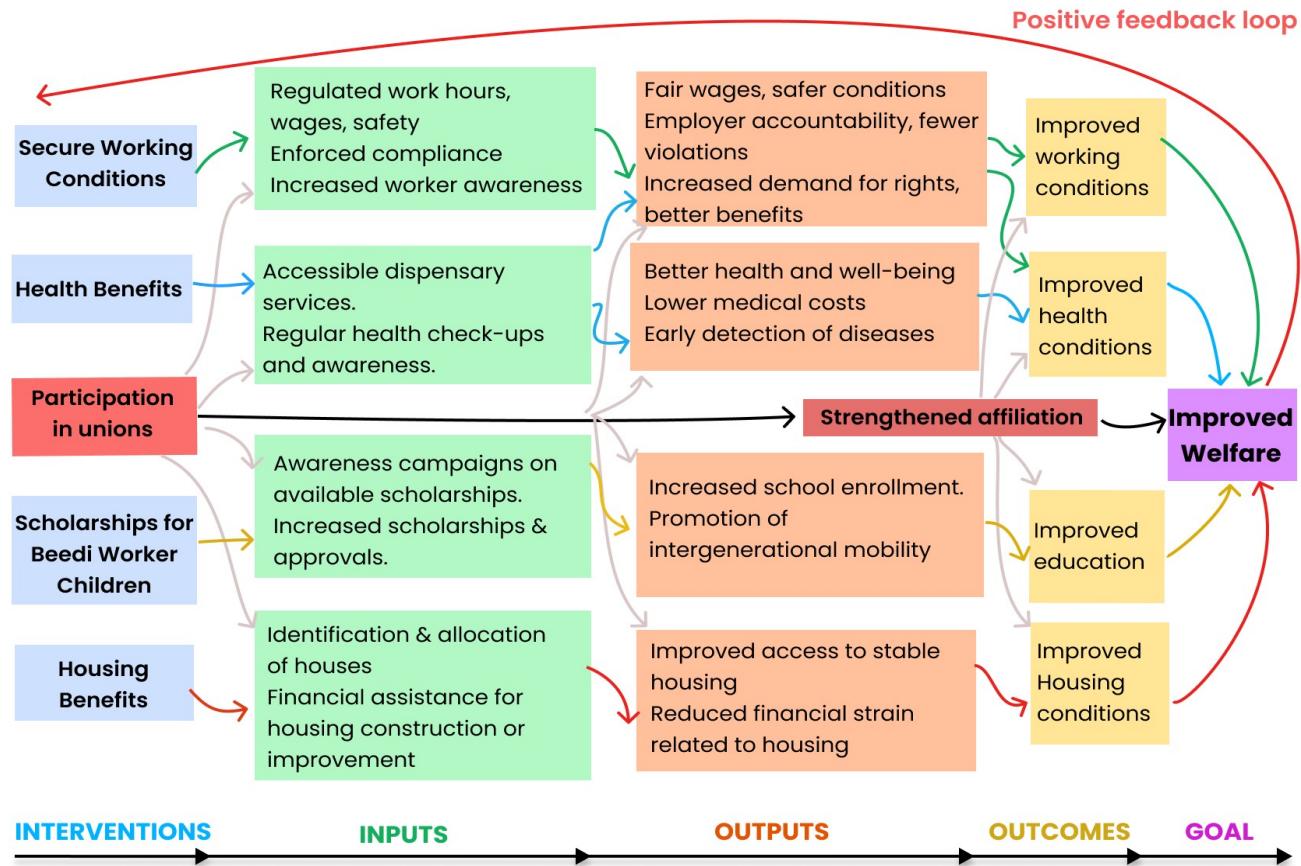
In response, this study adopts a generative, theory-based approach to causality (Tilley & Pawson, 1997; Mayne, 2011; Forss et al., 2011; Morton, 2015). Rather than asking simply *whether* the policy worked, it investigates *how* and *why* specific outcomes emerge, focusing on causal mechanisms and the contextual conditions in which they operate. This is particularly well-suited to long-standing legislation like the beedi welfare law, where socio-economic and institutional transformations have occurred alongside the policy. It aligns with theory-based evaluation principles (Weiss, 1997; Stame, 2004), offering a nuanced, process-oriented understanding of causality.

Drawing on the capability-based framework outlined in Chapter 3, this study now turns to how these conceptual elements are operationalised within a theory-based impact evaluation design. The Theory of Change (ToC) presented below builds on the idea that legal provisions act as resources which must be converted into *capabilities* and *functionings*. It provides a structured evaluative tool for tracing causal mechanisms from legislative inputs—such as secure work, education, and unionisation—through intermediate steps to long-term welfare outcomes.

The ToC maps causal pathways from interventions to outputs, intermediate outcomes, and long-term impacts, while making explicit the assumptions underlying each link in the causal chain. As Funnell and Rogers (2012) argue, ToCs enhance theory-based evaluations by structuring data collection, refining evaluation questions, and distinguishing between implementation

failure and theory failure. In this study, the ToC links three key policy provisions—secure working conditions, scholarships for beedi workers’ children, and participation in unions—to their intended welfare outcomes, as outlined in Chapter 3. Figure 4.1 below synthesises this logic and anchors the generative approach in a structured evaluative framework. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 each develop specific theories of change focusing on individual benefits, while remaining connected to this broader framework.

Figure 4.1: Theory of Change: Impact of legislation on welfare of beedi workers



Source: Author's creation

To capture how these policy interventions are mediated in practice, the research adopts an intersectional feminist lens. This perspective foregrounds how caste, class, gender, and institutional power shape women's experiences of welfare. Rather than merely tracing policy outputs, it interrogates the structural conditions and relations of power through which those outputs are accessed—or denied. Women beedi workers are approached not just as beneficiaries, but as agents navigating complex social hierarchies and institutional arrangements (Mertens, 1999; Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002).

Although the legislation formally guarantees provisions such as healthcare, maternity benefits, and social security, the actual distribution and implementation of these entitlements is mediated by patriarchal norms, bureaucratic practices, and localised power structures. This study critically examines how these factors shape uneven outcomes. Recent Indian scholarship has increasingly recognised the need for such gender-aware, context-specific analyses of social policy and labour rights (Sudarshan et al., 2016; Sudarshan & Nandi, 2018; Nandi & Sudarshan, 2021).

By foregrounding mechanisms and contextual conditions, the study moves beyond linear or decontextualised assessments to investigate how policy outcomes are shaped by gendered and institutional dynamics. The ToC developed for this research provides a structured framework for tracing the pathways between legislative interventions and welfare outcomes, clarifying key assumptions and guiding the evaluation logic. The comparative analysis of Sirikonda and Thandriyal, alongside a mixed-methods approach, enables a multidimensional understanding that links structural patterns with lived experiences. By centring marginalised voices and interrogating power relations, the research contributes to more inclusive, accountable, and transformative models of policy evaluation.

4.4 Research location

This study is situated in Telangana, specifically focusing on the Jagitial district in the northern region. Telangana was chosen due to its significant beedi worker population, ranking as the third largest in India, with approximately 422,246 beedi workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2024). Jagitial district's beedi worker population consists of 89,409 individuals, according to Telangana Statistical Abstract 2021-2022 (Government of Telangana, 2022) and ranks second in the state in terms of the number of beedi workers, just behind Nizamabad. Despite its substantial

beedi worker population, Jagtial has been under-researched compared to other districts such as Nizamabad (see Pande, 2022).

Within Jagtial district, Kathlapur mandal³³ was selected due to its historical association with the beedi industry. The Desai Beedi Company, founded in 1901 in Pune, expanded to Telangana and established one of its first factories in the Kathlapur mandal. This historical link has made Kathlapur a prominent hub for beedi production, with a large proportion of the local population, especially women, engaged in beedi rolling. The mandal's long-standing association with the beedi trade makes it an ideal location for examining the socio-economic and gender dynamics of the industry.

Telangana has a historical legacy of labour activism, with central trade unions such as the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), and Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). Unlike in the 18 states where SEWA has made significant inroads, Telangana lacks such alternative organising models for beedi workers. However, the Navayuga Beedi Karmika Sangham (NBKS), primarily based in Hyderabad city, organises women in the sector. As a result, I focus on the underdocumented traditional unions, which to some extent have women's cells, yet remain the central forces shaping labour movements in the region.

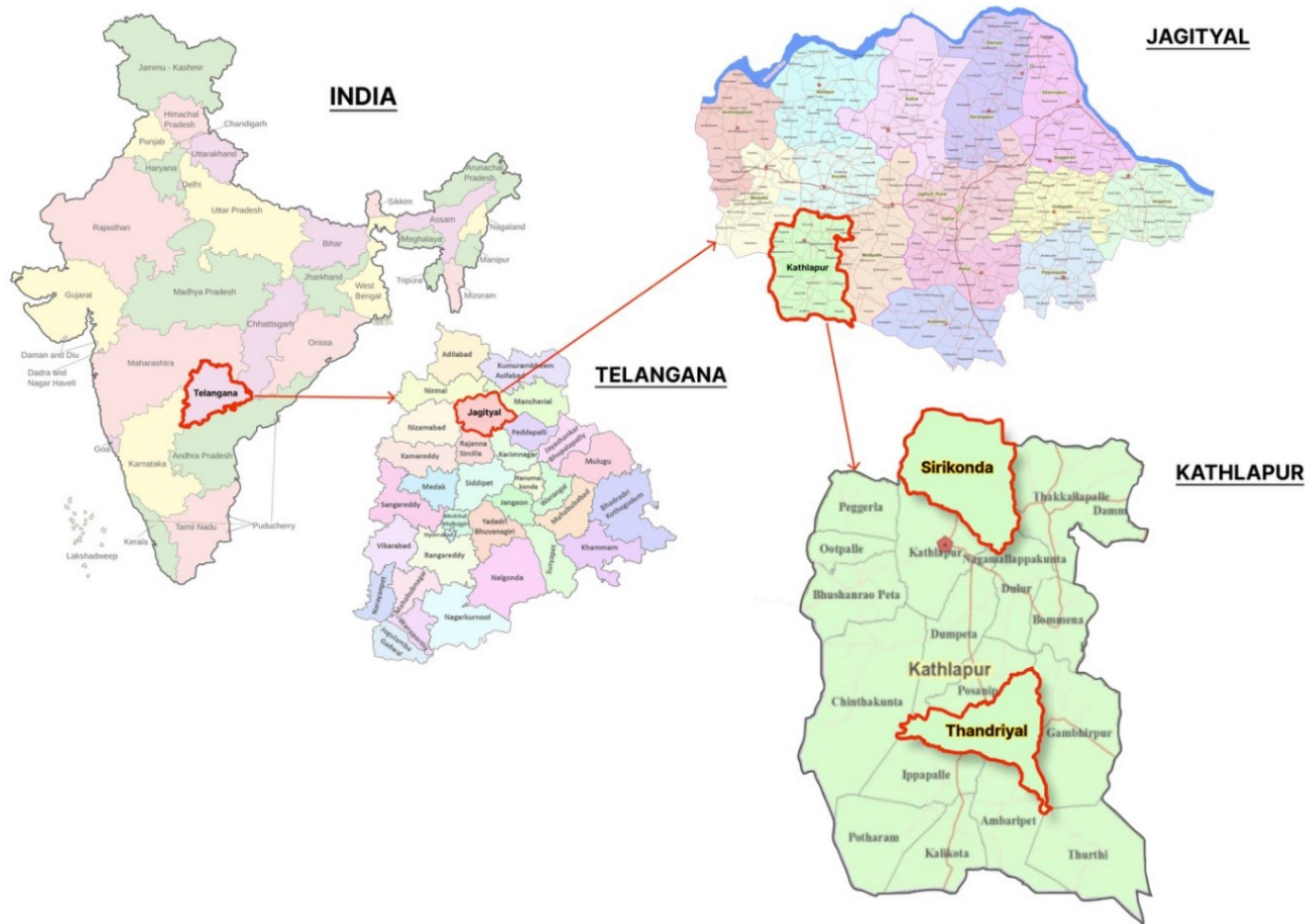
In Kathlapur, the IFTU emerges as the most influential union. IFTU serves as the labour wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) New Democracy [CPI(ML) ND], a political faction that originated in 1988 after splitting from the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI(ML)]. Within the CPI(ML) ND framework, the Pragatisheel Mahila Sangathan (PMS) functions as the women's wing, while the Telangana Pragatisheela Beedi Worker Union (TPBWU) serves as a key union for beedi workers. The TPBWU is particularly notable as a women-led organisation dedicated to addressing the concerns of beedi workers in Telangana. I focus on IFTU and the TPBWU (women beedi worker wing of IFTU), which have been

³³ A mandal is an administrative unit in India, primarily used in states like Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, functioning as a subdivision of a district. It consists of multiple villages and towns and is overseen by a Tahsildar [Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO)] for governance and revenue administration.

instrumental in advocating for the rights of beedi workers. This makes Telangana a significant site for examining labour rights and welfare policies.

Kathlapur also has a rich union history, with strong labour movements that have shaped the lives of beedi workers over the decades. The historical presence of unions, particularly the TPBWU, has contributed to a complex landscape of labour rights advocacy, making it an important field site for this research. Within Kathlapur mandal, the villages of Sirikonda and Thandriyal were selected for this study due to their contrasting leadership structures. To examine how these dynamics manifest on the ground, the research employs a comparative design. In Sirikonda, male-led collective action reflects entrenched patriarchal structures; in contrast, Thandriyal's women-led organising highlights the transformative potential of gendered agency. This comparison allows for a grounded understanding of how leadership models, social norms, and local power relations interact with formal entitlements, influencing both policy implementation and everyday experiences of welfare. Figure 4.2 below provides a geographical overview, locating the study villages within Jagtial district, Telangana, and situating the district within the broader map of India.

Figure 4.2: Map Showing Study Villages - Sirikonda and Thandriyal in Telangana



Source: (Govt of Telangana, 2022) [Map of District | JAGTIAL | India](#)

Sirikonda and Thandriyal were selected for their contrasting leadership structures within a shared socio-economic context. Demographic and caste data show both villages are broadly comparable in population size, gender distribution, caste composition, and the presence of beedi establishments and workers (see Table 4.1 below). Their similarities provide a controlled setting for comparative analysis, while differences in union leadership offer a valuable lens to investigate the intersection of labour activism, gender dynamics, and social policy.

The data below is collected from multiple local sources, including Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA)³⁴ workers, Anganwadi workers³⁵, and beedi *karkhanas* (*workshops*) in the villages. The challenges in obtaining this data and the reliance on local sources will be discussed in Section 4.5.

Table 4.1: Demographic, Caste, and Beedi-related Data for Thandriyal and Sirikonda

Category	Thandriyal (Women-led Union)	Sirikonda (Male-led Union)
Demographics & Caste		
Population	4,348	4,845
Males	2,266	2,288
Females	2,082	2,557
Families	1,037	1,282
SC (Scheduled Castes)	727	818
ST (Scheduled Tribes)	181	112
BC (Backward Classes)	2,547	3,304
OC (Other Castes)	589	445
Minorities	300	173

³⁴ ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers are community health workers instituted by the Government of India under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). They serve as the first point of contact for healthcare at the village level, providing maternal and child health services, promoting immunisation, and facilitating access to public health programs.

³⁵ Anganwadi workers are grassroots functionaries under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, responsible for providing supplementary nutrition, early childhood education, and basic healthcare services, including immunisation and health check-ups, to children under six years and pregnant/lactating mothers.

Total Population	4,344	4,852
Missing Data	4	7
Beedi-related Data		
Beedi Establishments	9	11
Beedi Workers	1,080	954
Provident Fund (PF)	889	785
Non-PF	191	169 (including sale-purchase)

Sources: ASHA, Anganwadi workers, and beedi *karkhanas* in villages.

Having established the research location and contextual background, the following section examines data collection, management, and analysis.

4.5 Data collection, management and analysis

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both measurable outcomes of welfare interventions and the lived experiences of women beedi workers (Rossman & Wilson, 1985; Carcelli & Greene, 1993). This design enables a holistic understanding of how policy translates into practice across different social and institutional contexts.

Quantitative methods—including primary survey and the analysis of secondary data—were used to assess welfare uptake and socio-economic conditions in Sirikonda and Thandriyal. These methods identified disparities in how labour legislation is implemented and experienced across the two sites. However, quantitative data alone may overlook the structural and relational factors that shape access to entitlements (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

To address this, qualitative methods were employed to examine the underlying processes and power dynamics that mediate these outcomes. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and secondary data analysis—through archival and document review—provided insight into how collective action unfolds and how relationships

among workers, contractors, welfare boards, and state agencies influence the realisation of statutory rights. These methods helped surface the gendered, caste-based, and institutional forces that condition welfare access in the beedi industry.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods follows the principles of triangulation, strengthening the study's validity through the convergence of multiple data sources (Greene et al., 1989; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). More than a strategy for verification, this mixed-methods approach enables complementary forms of insight: quantitative data illuminate broader patterns—such as differences in welfare uptake—while qualitative data deepen the understanding of the social, political, and institutional mechanisms behind them (Fetters et al., 2013; Scammon et al., 2013; Guetterman & Fetters, 2018).

By combining these layers of analysis, the research offers both a macro-level view of welfare legislation and a grounded understanding of how it is experienced by women beedi workers within stratified social contexts. This layered methodology is particularly effective for tracing how formal entitlements interact with informal structures of power, enabling a context-sensitive analysis of labour rights and social policy.

4.5.1. Data collection methods

To capture both the measurable impacts of welfare policies and the nuanced realities of women workers in the beedi industry, this study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The fieldwork was conducted in two phases: a scoping phase from October 2022 to January 2023 and a primary data collection phase from February 2023 to May 2023. Despite structured planning and consistent efforts, significant challenges were encountered, particularly in accessing data from official sources.

4.5.1.1 **Phase 1:** Scoping (October 2022–January 2023)

The scoping phase was dedicated to identifying key data sources and understanding ground realities across administrative levels. It also laid the foundation for much of the qualitative data collection, as the majority of key informant interviews and the collection of archival documents were conducted during this phase.

Under the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, government data should be accessible³⁶; however, obtaining relevant records proved challenging. Initial efforts involved visits to village, mandal, and district-level offices, including the Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO), District Revenue Development Officer (DRDO), Mandal Labour Officer, District Labour Office, and Statistics Department. Despite these attempts, significant obstacles were encountered in accessing reliable data.

At the village level, the lack of infrastructure became an immediate obstacle. Officers often expressed frustration over their inability to provide data, citing issues like the absence of computers, electricity, and even basic amenities like fans. As one officer candidly remarked, “*No fan, no light, no computer—what data should I give you?*” With limited success at the village level, efforts shifted to mandal offices, which in turn redirected me back to village offices, creating a frustrating cycle of unproductive visits.

Recognising the need for formal authorisation, I attempted to secure a letter from the District Collector to gain unrestricted access to data across mandals and villages. Despite multiple visits, these efforts also proved unsuccessful. The Assistant Collector denied entry, suspecting us of being journalists despite presenting the university Identity Card (ID) and UEA ethics approval letter, while the Collector remained unavailable during subsequent follow-ups.

Further efforts to obtain specific data on beedi workers, including their registered population and access to welfare benefits, proved challenging. Attempts to access the Telangana Integrated Household Survey (IHS) (2014), the state census data, were unsuccessful. An online RTI request I filed for this data was met with a response stating that the survey was never conducted. Similarly, a visit to the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) office yielded limited results. While the Public Relations Officer (PRO) was cooperative and provided insights into beedi workers’ welfare conditions, the requested data was only accessible via RTI online³⁷. Despite filing around

³⁶ The Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, grants public access to government data but includes exemptions under Sections 8 and 9, restricting disclosure of information related to national security, personal privacy, trade secrets, ongoing investigations, and other sensitive matters.

³⁷ In India, Right to Information (RTI) applications can also be filed online through the RTI Online portal ([RTI Online](#)) for central government departments and some state governments. However, the availability of online filing varies across states, with some requiring physical submissions.

5 RTIs, responses were repeatedly redirected across departments without yielding any substantive information, reflecting a pattern of bureaucratic evasion and interdepartmental blame-shifting.

Amidst these challenges, some notable successes emerged. The Beedi Medical Officer at the mandal level provided key insights into workers' health benefits and facilitated connections with unions and leaders. Collaborations with unions like AITUC, IFTU, and CITU were instrumental, with IFTU leaders offering guidance on population composition and leadership structures. This support enabled the selection of two case-study villages—one with a women-led union and the other with a men-led union—allowing for a comparative analysis of gendered dynamics in labour organising.

Efforts to gather village-level statistics were further hindered by the outdated 2011 census data. To address this, I turned to ASHA and Anganwadi workers, who provided more recent village-level demographic data. Additionally, I directly approached *karkhanas* (*workshops*) in the villages to estimate the number of beedi workers. While some contractors were initially skeptical, persistent efforts ultimately yielded approximate figures, including the proportion of workers with and without Provident Fund (PF) coverage.

4.5.1.2 **Phase 2: Primary Data Collection (February 2023–May 2023)**

The second phase of the study focused on data collection through survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (See Annexure V for questionnaires and guides). From February to mid-April, a survey was conducted in the selected villages, capturing demographic details, welfare access, and employment patterns among beedi workers.

Following the survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted between mid-April and the end of May. The entire qualitative data collection phase was carried out independently by me. These qualitative methods allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of beedi workers, union leaders, and other stakeholders. Focus groups, in particular, explored the role of gender in labour organising, contrasting the dynamics of women led and men-led unions. This phased approach ensured a nuanced dataset, despite the significant challenges encountered during the scoping phase. The study's success in obtaining valuable information can largely be attributed to the persistence of these efforts, the collaboration with unions, and direct engagement with grassroots-level workers and leaders.

• *Survey*

The survey was designed to evaluate the impact of legislation on the welfare of beedi workers by uncovering the factors influencing its implementation and the variations between the two villages, Sirikonda and Thandriyal. To obtain a macro picture of the villages, the survey gathered comprehensive information on the lives of beedi workers, including demographics, socioeconomic status, living conditions, work patterns, and access to welfare benefits such as health schemes, housing programs, skill development initiatives, pensions, and PF coverage. Additionally, it examined the role of collective action and union participation in shaping workers' lives. A specific section focused on educational benefits for the daughters of beedi workers, particularly the availability and utilisation of scholarships. This approach ensured the survey captured both the immediate and broader impacts of the legislation.

The survey design drew from established methodologies in labour studies and welfare evaluations. Prior literature highlights the role of surveys in revealing the intersection of policy implementation and lived realities (O'Toole Jr, 2000; Mosse, 2005). By framing the survey around both access to welfare benefits and structural barriers, the study builds on these approaches to understand how legislation translates into material benefits at the ground level. It also aligns with scholarship that emphasises the importance of disaggregating data to reveal variations across social and geographic contexts (Garg and Karan, 2009; Nawaz, 2015).

The survey targeted 320 beedi workers, with 160 participants from each village, along with an additional 80 daughters of beedi workers (40 from each village) aged 18 and above, ensuring a well-rounded analysis of both worker and household-level impacts. To select the households for the survey, a systematic random sampling method was employed. Initial information about the villages was collected with the help of ASHA and Anganwadi workers, who provided detailed data on household clusters, population distribution, and caste groupings. Based on this information, households were first grouped by caste and geographical clusters. Satellite maps of the villages were then downloaded from Google Maps³⁸, and households within each cluster were identified and marked.

³⁸ Satellite imagery and geographic mapping were referenced using Google Maps to verify village locations and key landmarks. Available at: <https://www.google.com/maps>.

Within each caste-based cluster, households were selected systematically by choosing every fifth household. Eligibility was defined as households containing a beedi worker or an eligible daughter of a beedi worker. Where the selected (fifth) household did not meet this eligibility criterion, the immediately following household was selected. For the purposes of this study, a household was defined as individuals sharing a kitchen. The same procedure was applied when selecting daughters for the survey, ensuring consistency across samples.

This procedure ensured that the final sample reflected the caste composition of the villages, with approximately 50% of respondents from the BC category, 35% from the SC category, and 15% from the OC category. The ST community in these villages is not engaged in beedi rolling and was therefore excluded from the sample. However, ST households play an important role in tendu leaf collection and trade, including selling leaves at prices lower than contractors, an issue explored further in Chapter 5.

Each survey took approximately 30–50 minutes to complete. Before beginning, participants were informed about the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained. Emphasising informed consent aligns with ethical research practices in the social sciences (Laine, 2000), ensuring voluntary participation and respect for respondents' autonomy.

The data collection team consisted of three members: me and two trained enumerators. The enumerators were carefully selected based on their familiarity with the region, fluency in Telugu, and academic qualifications—they both held master's degrees and demonstrated a strong understanding of the social and cultural context of the villages. Their presence helped immensely in building trust with participants and ensuring smooth communication. This aligns with findings in field research literature that emphasise the importance of locally embedded research teams in overcoming trust deficits (Shaffir and Stebbina, 1990). Both enumerators were paid for their work, and their local knowledge proved critical in navigating any challenges during the survey.

The survey data was collected digitally using Google Forms, which allowed for efficient real-time recording and automatic backup. This streamlined the process, as the data could be directly exported to Google Sheets and later integrated into software for analysis (see also section 4.5.2).

Using Google Forms reduced errors and ensured that data remained secure throughout the collection process.

The enumerators and I encountered some shared challenges during the survey process, particularly around how respondents perceived us and how they reported income data. Despite explaining that the study was part of a PhD project, some participants mistook us for government officials or journalists. This perception, though unintended, created a few hurdles. For instance, when it came to reporting income, many respondents appeared hesitant or cautious. In some cases, there were indications of underreporting, possibly stemming from a belief that sharing lower income figures might qualify them for welfare benefits we could potentially provide—though we were clear that this was not the purpose of our research. While we do not suggest any deliberate inaccuracies, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of income ambiguity in the data (for further discussion, see Chapter 5).

This ambiguity might also arise naturally from the nature of home-based work, which is characterised by flexible hours, irregular workflows, and earnings that depend on several variables. Factors such as the quality of the beedi leaves, the time invested, the volume of rejected products, and fluctuations in daily production can significantly influence how much workers earn in a given month. These complexities make it difficult to capture a fixed income figure. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, this variability itself offers valuable insights into the economic precarity and unpredictability of earnings in such work settings (see Chapter 5).

The combination of sampling, ethical considerations, and contextual sensitivity reinforced the accuracy of the data in capturing the lived realities of beedi workers in Sirikonda and Thandriyal.

• *Semi Structured Interviews*

The inclusion of semi-structured interviews (SSIs) was crucial to complementing the survey data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the beedi workers' experiences, particularly around collective action and union involvement. As Creswell and Clark (2017) highlight, SSIs offer the flexibility to explore participants' individual experiences in detail while maintaining consistency in key topics. This approach was ideal for capturing the complex, subjective realities of the workers, which a survey alone could not fully represent.

SSIs are particularly valuable in exploring the nuances of participation in collective action, as they provide space for workers to share their perceptions of unions, their involvement in strikes, and the challenges they face in accessing welfare benefits (Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2013). A total of 60 beedi workers—30 each from Sirikonda and Thandriyal—were selected through purposive sampling from the survey pool. Participants were chosen based on their availability and willingness to engage in longer conversations, ensuring representation across union members and non-members. Slight adjustments in questioning were made to account for the contrasting gendered leadership structures in the two villages.

To complement these local-level insights, additional interviews were conducted at the mandal, district, and state levels with leaders from IFTU (3), CITU (2), and AITUC (2)—the three major unions active in these villages. While other unions such as BMS, HMS, and INTUC operate in Telangana, their presence in these sites is minimal. These interviews also allowed for an exploration of the socio-political factors influencing workers' decisions to join or abstain from unions.

As Rubin and Rubin (2011) emphasise, qualitative interviews allow for the exploration of sensitive topics such as income, working conditions, and intra-household dynamics—areas often difficult to capture through quantitative methods. In this study, the interviews were essential in illuminating how collective action and union participation influence beedi workers' lives, both materially and emotionally.

- *Focus Group Discussions*

The study also incorporated two focus group discussions (FGDs)—one in Sirikonda, led by a male union leader with five union members, and another in Thandriyal, led by a female leader with five union members. These discussions included key figures from the IFTU, a central organisation in this investigation. The design of these discussions aimed to capture a range of perspectives from different stakeholders, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the role of collective action in the lives of beedi workers.

FGDs are widely recognised in the literature for their ability to facilitate dynamic, collective dialogue, making them an ideal tool for exploring complex issues like union participation and collective action (Wilkinson, 2004; Munday, 2006). By bringing together participants in a group

setting, FGDs enable individuals to share insights and experiences, often uncovering common themes and perspectives that might not emerge in one-on-one interviews. This method encourages participants to engage with one another, providing opportunities for richer, more nuanced data to emerge through group interactions (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

In the context of this research, the focus groups served as a valuable platform for discussing the demands and challenges faced by beedi workers, including their experiences with unions and collective action. By examining shared interests and concerns, the FGDs helped reveal the ways in which collective action shapes the lives of beedi workers. This approach aligns with the view of Hesse-Biber (2013), who emphasises the importance of qualitative methods like FGDs in capturing the complexities of social movements and labour activism. Through these discussions, the study was able to explore how union leaders and members navigate issues of work conditions, welfare benefits, and participation in collective actions, thus offering a more holistic view of the beedi workers' collective experiences.

- *Secondary Data: Archives and Documents*

Secondary data played a crucial role in understanding the history of unionisation, collective action, and their impact on legislation and policy implementation. In studying these phenomena, scholarly books, policy reviews, laws, and review articles provided essential contextual information (Bowen, 2009). Archives and documents also offered a counterfactual perspective, shedding light on the potential outcomes for beedi workers had the policies discussed in this thesis not been implemented (Bamberger, 2012; Peersman, 2014; Bamberger & Mabry, 2019).

In this study, secondary data also included union records, such as *Poru Batalo* (translated as “In the Battle of Struggle”) and strike records from the Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers Union, as well as an archival document titled *Bathuku Poru* (translated as “Fight for Life”), all of which are in Telugu. These records, provided by union leaders, offered valuable insights into the historical context of labour movements. Additionally, archival materials such as photographs, newspaper articles, and government documents—particularly those from the Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Ministry of Education—further contextualised the research, offering a deeper understanding of the policy landscape surrounding beedi workers.

Finally, secondary data sourced from the Digital Indian Labour Archives (DILA) and other government records, helped to establish a broader historical and policy framework, which complements the primary data collected in the field.

- *Key Informant Interviews*

Key informant interviews (KIIs) are essential in qualitative research, particularly when studying complex, hierarchical systems such as the beedi industry. Building on the tripartite advisory board approach, this study conducted 26 KIIs with representatives from government bodies, employers/producers, and employee representatives (including union leaders already interviewed through SSIs). This tripartite framework was crucial for obtaining a balanced perspective on the functioning of welfare funds (Rehman, 2007; Chauhan et al., 2020), ensuring that all relevant stakeholders contributed to discussions on policy improvement.

KIIs also provided insights from individuals with deep institutional knowledge and lived experience, offering a window into the dynamics, practices, and structural forces shaping the lives of beedi workers (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted using a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to ensure a broad and representative range of stakeholder voices. These included the following participant categories:

- **Contractors and Subcontractors:** Using snowball sampling, 10 interviews (five from each village) were conducted with contractors and subcontractors. These interviews shed light on the distribution of work, labour relations, and the mediating role of contractors in the beedi supply chain.
- **Beedi Packers:** Four interviews (two from each village) were conducted with beedi packers. Their accounts provided critical insights into production processes, working conditions, and their interactions with contractors and factory personnel.
- **Factory Personnel, Government Officials, and Labour Commissioners:** Purposive sampling was used to interview four government officials across village, mandal, district, and state levels, along with three labour commissioners. These interviews offered a

grounded understanding of policy implementation, labour law enforcement, and institutional constraints.

- **Education Officials:** Three principals and teachers from local government and private schools were interviewed to assess access to and the effectiveness of educational opportunities for beedi workers' children, particularly in relation to scholarship schemes.
- **Beedi Dispensary Medical Officer:** One division-level medical officer was also purposively selected to offer insights into health services specific to beedi workers and their integration with broader welfare and labour policies.

This diverse set of informants enabled a comprehensive understanding of how the beedi industry functions and the complex ways welfare legislation is mediated in practice. The methodological approach aligns with the work of Patton (2002) and Baker (2016), who stress the value of engaging with key stakeholders to uncover the realities of policy implementation and social inequality.

4.5.2 Data Management and Analysis Methods

The survey data was initially recorded in Google Sheets and later exported to Microsoft Excel for graph creation and other relevant analysis. It was subsequently imported into STATA for quantitative analysis. The initial dataset contained 308 variables, reduced to 275 after cleaning, with a total of 320 observations. Additionally, a smaller subset focusing on beedi worker scholarships for daughters included 20 variables and 80 observations.

Notes from SSIs, FGDs, and KIIs were recorded in a notebook during fieldwork. Additionally, audio recordings were made where consent was given by the participants. All qualitative data—from SSIs, FGDs, KIIs, and some archival material—was originally collected in Telugu. These recordings and notes were later translated and transcribed into English manually. Qualitative data was then uploaded to NVivo software where necessary. Software Figma³⁹, a design software, was used to draw relevant diagrams that emerged out of data and analysis.

³⁹ Link to Figma is available here: <https://www.figma.com>

Quantitative and qualitative data management and analysis were carried out separately but in a sequential manner so that the two informed and complemented each other. Mixed methods allowed for triangulation of data from multiple sources. This ensured the richness of the data, allowing for comparison and cross-verification of findings. By sequencing qualitative and quantitative analyses in such a manner, emerging patterns could be compared, and any divergence between the results could be explored further. When evidence from various sources converged, it strengthened the overall findings, whereas in cases of conflicting data, explanations were sought from different data sources to interrogate the discrepancies (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

4.5.2.1 Data Analysis Methods

The use of quantitative analysis methods such as summary statistics, chi-square tests, and correlation analysis laid the groundwork for a deeper exploration of the beedi workers' welfare conditions. These methods provided essential insights into the demographic and socio-economic profiles of the workers and offered preliminary data to inform further qualitative analysis.

- *Quantitative Methods*

Summary Statistics were employed to offer a general overview of beedi workers' profiles. Key measures such as the mean, median, standard deviation, and range were calculated for variables like age, income, education, and welfare benefits. These descriptive statistics provided a clear picture of typical beedi workers' socio-economic conditions, including income levels and how workers accessed benefits such as health schemes and pensions.

Chi-square (χ^2) tests served as a starting point for exploring relationships between categorical variables, such as union membership and access to welfare programmes. By comparing expected and observed frequencies, these tests examined whether union membership was significantly associated with the likelihood of accessing government benefits. The results highlighted important trends that needed further exploration, particularly how union involvement might influence access to welfare.

Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between continuous variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was applied to investigate how variables such as income, working hours,

and welfare benefits were related. For example, it was used to assess if higher income levels were linked to increased access to welfare programmes like pensions and health benefits. This analysis identified key variables that influenced access to welfare benefits and highlighted areas where further qualitative analysis was needed to understand the reasons behind these relationships.

- *Qualitative Methods*

Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from SSIs, FGDs, and KIIs by identifying recurring patterns and ideas. This approach helped reveal how beedi workers perceive their working conditions, union involvement, and the role of welfare benefits in their lives. It also facilitated exploration of gendered experiences, especially regarding leadership in union activities.

The process involved systematic coding of transcribed interviews, allowing key themes to emerge (Patton, 2002). For instance, common themes such as “economic insecurity,” “union participation,” “poor working conditions” and “access to social protection” were frequently mentioned. This analysis provided rich insights into workers’ lived experiences and deepened understanding of how collective action influences their welfare.

Document Analysis was used to analyse archival materials and policy documents related to the beedi industry. Key search terms such as “*beedi*,” “*bidi*,” “*tobacco*,” “*manufacturing*,” “*scholarships*,” “*education*,” “*children*,” “*financial assistance*,” “*labour*,” “*labor*,” “*labour welfare*,” “*labor welfare*,” “*welfare*,” “*labour welfare fund*,” and “*beneficiaries*” were used to retrieve relevant information from government records, union reports, and other digital archives. Document Analysis helped trace the historical development of beedi worker policies, legislation, and their impact on the workers. This method also helped in understanding the nature of union action and its effectiveness in securing better wages and working conditions.

By analysing government policies and union documents, it was possible to contextualise the beedi workers’ experiences and connect them to broader national and regional trends in labour rights, welfare legislation, and unionisation efforts. Archival material from unions such as the IFTU and AITUC provided valuable historical perspectives, which were essential in understanding how beedi workers’ rights evolved over time.

- *Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data*

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was central to a comprehensive analysis (Venkatesh et al., 2013). Quantitative methods provided an overview of beedi workers' socioeconomic conditions and welfare access, while qualitative data offered deeper insights into the factors shaping their experiences. By triangulating these data sources, it was possible to assess the convergence or divergence of findings, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation.

For example, while quantitative analysis revealed a correlation between union membership and access to welfare benefits, qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the underlying factors, such as lack of awareness or barriers to accessing those benefits. This combination enriched the study, providing a fuller understanding of workers' conditions and the impact of collective action.

Table 4.2 below summarises the data collection and analysis methods, data sources, and response counts. Collectively, these methods informed the main research question and, in doing so, also addressed the corresponding sub-questions.

Table 4.2: Summary of data collection and analysis methods

Data collection method	Data source	No. of respondents	Data analysis methods
Primary survey data	Beedi workers, daughters of beedi workers	400 (320 [160*2] +80 [40*2])	SS, CS(χ^2), CAS
Semi structured interviews	Beedi worker union and non-union members, beedi worker union leaders	60 (30+30), Leaders: 10 (5 + 5)	TA
Focus group discussions	Beedi worker union members and leaders	12 (6+6)	TA
Key informant interviews	Beedi contractors, packers, factory personnel, government officials, labour commissioners, health departments, educational institutions, and the beedi worker medical dispensary officer.	26 (5+5+2+2+2+4+3+4+3)	TA
Archives/documents	DILA, union records/archives, Ministry of Labour and Employment documents, and Ministry of Education records.	N/A	DA

(SS = Summary Statistics, CAS = Correlation Analysis, CS = Chi-Square, TA = Thematic Analysis, DA = Document Analysis)

Source: Author's creation

4.6 Reflexivity and Ethics

Reflexivity played a crucial role in this research, necessitating constant critical reflection on how my positionality influenced both the data collection process and the knowledge produced. As Bourdieu (1999) argues, reflexivity involves questioning the researcher's role and how their identity shapes the research. In my case, navigating privilege and marginalisation was pivotal—my Dalit identity helped foster solidarity and trust with participants who saw parallels in our struggles, though I also faced microaggressions from dominant-caste groups. Simultaneously, my academic background, fluency in English, and outsider status sometimes created distance between myself and the participants (see section 4.2). Following Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity, I came to see that this process was not just self-reflection but a continuous challenge to how my identity and social positioning shaped the research journey. Feminist scholarship further reinforces this by urging researchers to reflect on their positionality throughout every stage of the research process—from fieldwork to interpretation—not just as a methodological concern, but as an ethical imperative (Rose, 1983).

Ethical considerations were central throughout the study. Some beedi workers hesitated to speak openly, fearing potential repercussions like retaliation from contractors or job loss. These concerns were addressed with the utmost care—interviews were held in private, secure spaces, and participants were assured of anonymity. Explicit consent was always obtained, ensuring that participants were comfortable and willing to share their experiences. I emphasised a voluntary, safe environment, respecting participants' autonomy and allowing them to decide when and where to speak.

Navigating caste dynamics presented specific challenges. On occasion, subtle caste-based discrimination arose, with participants withdrawing or becoming guarded upon learning of my caste background. These moments highlighted the emotional complexities of fieldwork but also offered valuable insights into the lived realities of the caste system. Guided by feminist ethics, which stress building trust and fostering mutual understanding (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006), I navigated these charged moments with empathy, allowing me to remain resilient and compassionate.

Throughout the data collection, participant anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised. A strict ethical protocol, approved by the UEA Global Development Research Ethics Committee, was adhered to, ensuring full ethical compliance. Local gram panchayats (village councils)

were consulted and provided approval before fieldwork commenced, further ensuring ethical rigour. Participants were informed of the research's objectives and the intended use of data prior to giving consent. I maintained transparency with participants, assuring them that the research was purely academic and had no private or financial interests.

Though initially intending to provide monetary compensation for participation, cultural factors prevented most beedi workers from accepting money. Instead, I offered refreshments, which were well-received. Occasionally, participants offered food, which I accepted, fostering mutual respect and camaraderie. These moments deepened my rapport with participants, enhancing the trust essential for quality fieldwork. No direct financial payments were made during the entire fieldwork, except to enumerators, who were compensated through my stipend. While dealing with bureaucratic evasion and interdepartmental blame-shifting, I was once asked for a bribe in exchange for data, but I refused to engage in such practices.

In line with ethical standards, no photos or recorded information were shared without prior consent, and all identifiable information was anonymised during analysis. Personal details, including names, were replaced with pseudonyms, and age, caste, and village were included only when relevant to the narrative. All participant identities were rigorously protected. My field notebook and audio records were securely stored, accessible only to me.

In summary, this research adhered to strict ethical guidelines, reflexivity, and respect for participant autonomy, ensuring the integrity of the data and the well-being of all involved.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach for this impact evaluation, rooted in a theory-based evaluation framework and grounded in feminist epistemology. The study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture not only measurable outcomes but also the lived experiences of women workers, highlighting the gendered dynamics often overlooked in traditional economic analyses. Feminist epistemology ensures that women's voices remained central, challenging power structures and offering a deeper understanding of how policies intersect with the realities of these marginalised communities.

The mixed-methods design integrates the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data, facilitating a comprehensive evaluation of welfare legislation in the beedi industry. This approach goes beyond assessing outcomes to interrogate the power structures and systemic inequalities that shape policy implementation. It examines how welfare policies impact beedi workers, particularly women, and explores the intersection of gender, caste, and labour.

The study also reflects on the researcher's positionality as a Dalit woman, navigating the insider-outsider dynamic. The ethical considerations guiding the research—such as participant protection, informed consent, and the researcher's emotional well-being—have been integral to ensuring the validity and integrity of the data collected.

By focusing on two under-studied villages, this research contributes critical insights into the impact of beedi legislation, addressing significant gaps in both the population studied and the methodologies employed. The next three chapters, 5, 6, and 7, present the empirical findings of this study.

5. Being Securely Employed

5.1 Introduction

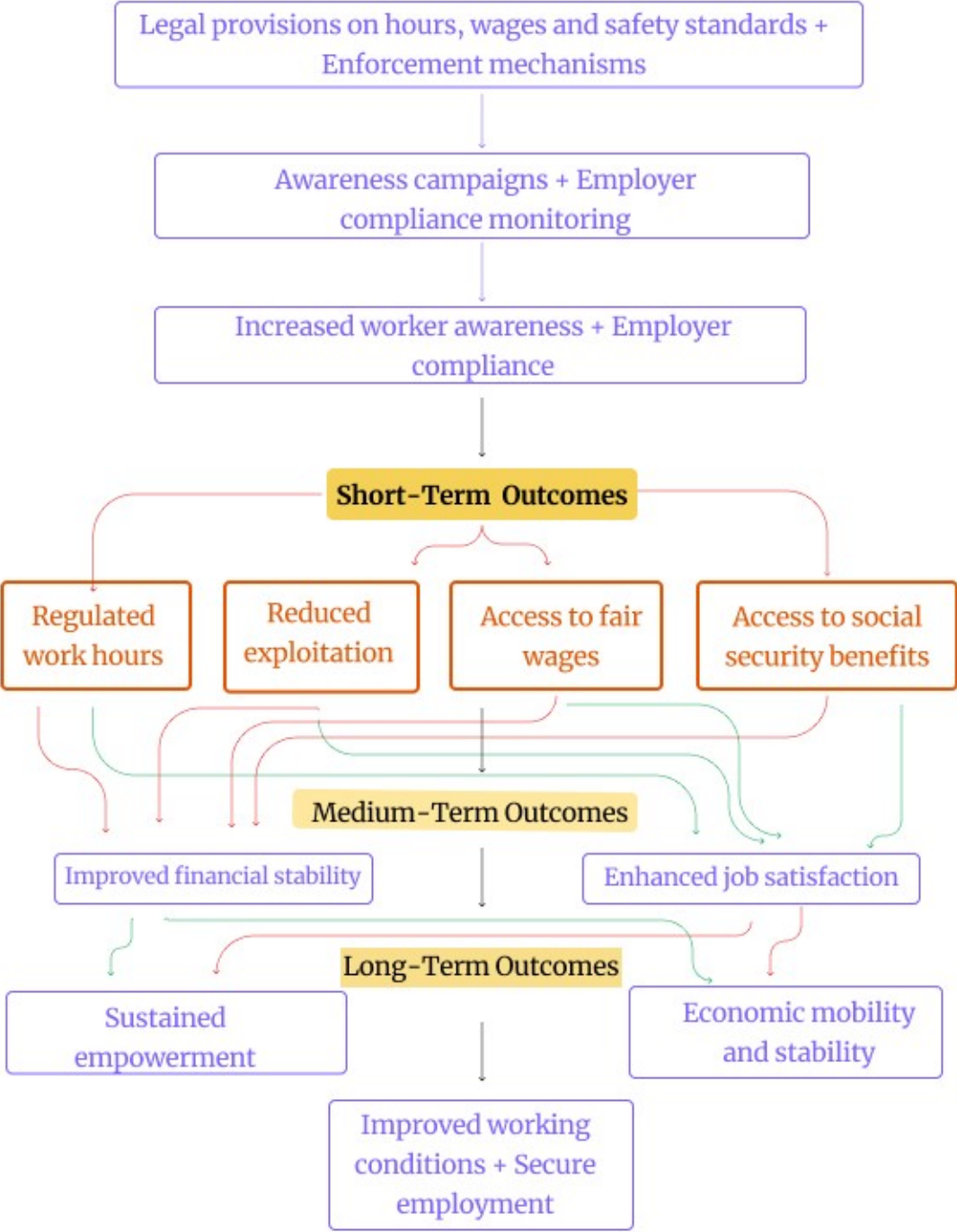
This chapter examines the first *functioning* identified in this study— “*Being Securely Employed*”. It reflects the realisation of the *capability* to secure decent work, as outlined in Chapter 3.

The focus of this chapter is on evaluating the impact of legislation on the working conditions of beedi workers. Secure employment ensures decent work conditions and safeguards workers’ rights. The BCA, 1966, was introduced to improve the working conditions of beedi workers, encompassing both factory-based and home-based labour (see Annexure-I). Sections 8-16 of the Act outline provisions such as cleanliness, ventilation, overcrowding, access to drinking water, latrines, washing facilities, creches, first aid, and canteens. These measures aim to establish safe and healthy working environments, especially in formal workplaces such as industrial premises. Sections 17-27, on the other hand, focus on employment conditions, including regulated work hours, rest periods, weekly holidays, overtime pay, annual leave with wages, and wages during leave. While these provisions offer a strong framework for worker protection, their application to home-based workers presents significant challenges due to the informal and dispersed nature of their work.

Stable and dignified employment is essential for fair wages, safe conditions, and social security, directly influencing workers’ well-being (Mazumdar, 2018; Gopal, 2018). In line with the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda—particularly its first three pillars: *employment creation, rights at work, and social protection*—decent work must not only uphold these standards but also foster capability-enhancing work. As discussed in Chapter 1, decent work encompasses not just the presence of employment, but the quality, security, and dignity embedded within it.

Building on the broader theory of change framework outlined in Chapter 4, this chapter presents a simplified, high-level theory of change (Figure 5.1 below) focused specifically on legislative enforcement to secure safe and dignified working conditions for beedi workers. From the provisions (Sections 8–27), a select few were identified based on their functionality in the field, emerging data patterns, and key aspects of home-based work observed in both the field research and the literature.

Figure 5.1: Simplified high-level theory of change on working conditions



Source: Author’s creation

As depicted in Figure 5.1, the analysis focuses on four key short-term outcomes that are essential for enhancing the capabilities and well-being of beedi workers: (i) regulated work

hours, (ii) reduced exploitation (especially concerning raw materials and contracting practices), (iii) access to fair wages, and (iv) access to social security benefits such as provident funds. These outcomes are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, highlighting key areas where the BCA's provisions need to better reflect the realities of home-based work. Strengthening one aspect can create ripple effects that improve overall conditions for beedi workers. Regulated work hours reduce physical strain and support work-life balance, while fair wages and reduced exploitation ensure stable incomes and greater financial security. Expanding access to social security benefits provides a crucial safety net, helping workers navigate economic uncertainties. Together, these factors contribute to long-term economic stability and overall well-being. By evaluating these four areas, this analysis will assess what aspects of the existing framework are working well and where challenges persist in supporting beedi workers in achieving secure and dignified employment.

This chapter draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from surveys, SSIs, FGDs, KIIs, and archival research. Section 5.1.1 provides a demographic overview from the survey, establishing the context for understanding the production relations in the villages. Section 5.2 to 5.5 examine four short-term outcomes: regulated work hours, reduced exploitation, access to fair wages, and access to social security benefits such as provident funds. Section 5.6 concludes the chapter by synthesising the findings on the impact of legislation across these four outcomes. It connects the empirical analysis to the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3, where “capability to decent work” was discussed as a *capability* and “being securely employed” as a *functioning*—highlighting the critical role of enabling environments in advancing labour welfare.

5.1.1 Demographics in Brief

Table 5.1 below presents the demographic profile of the 320 female beedi workers surveyed, highlighting key characteristics of this population. Most respondents (75.9%) are married, with a third (35%) falling within the 35-44 age range. The majority (65.3%) have no formal education, while only a small percentage have completed secondary (15%) or bachelor's degrees (1.3%). Caste distribution maintains the proportions of the general population, with 50% from BC, 34.4% from SC, and 15.6% from OC groups. A snapshot of sub-caste composition is also detailed in the table. Over half (56.6%) are illiterate, and only 26.9% can read and sign. All participants identify as Hindu, reflecting religious homogeneity.

Table 5.1: Demographic snapshot of the women beedi workers (n = 320)

Details	Percentage (%)	Number of Respondents
Age Group		
19-24 years	18	58
25-34 years	17.2	55
35-44 years	35	111
45-54 years	24.7	79
55+ years	5.3	17
Marital Status		
Married	75.94	243
Never Married	12.50	40
Divorced/Deserted/Widowed	11.56	37
Caste Background		
BC [Chakali (5.00), Gouds (12.19), Kuruma Golla (4.06), Mudiraj (3.12), Munnuru Kapu (11.56), Padmashali (11.56), Teniga (2.50)]	50	160
SC [Mala (20.31), Madiga (14.06)]	34.4	110
OC [Komati (4.69), Reddy (10.94)]	15.6	50
Religion		
Hindu	100	320
Muslim/Christian	Negligible	
Education		
No Formal Education	65.31	209
Pre-primary	3.44	11
Primary	9.06	29
Secondary	15	48
Higher Secondary	5.94	19

Bachelor's Degree	1.3	4
Literacy		
Cannot Read/Sign	56.6	181
Can Sign, Cannot Read	16.6	53
Can Read/Sign	26.9	86

Source: Author's creation based on primary data from survey

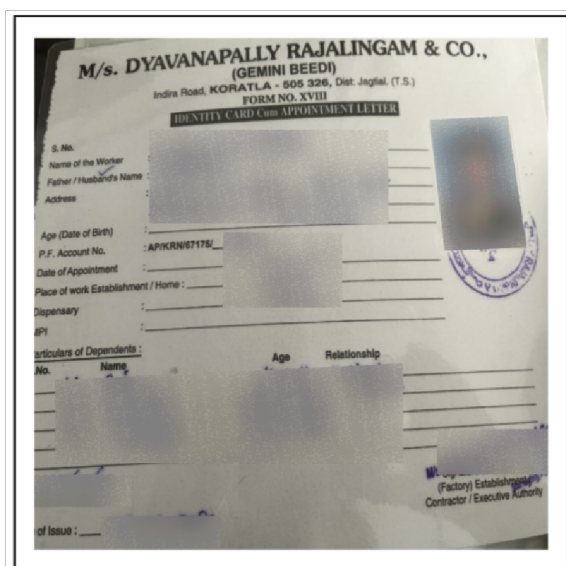
In Sirikonda and Thandriyal, 95% of the workforce operates within a home-based, contract system, with subcontracting as the primary operational model. Among the workers, 91.6% are engaged in registered production, while 7.8% work in unregistered production. The latter includes both indirect and direct informal relations (sale-purchase) system, unique to Sirikonda. The *wardhi*⁴⁰ system, a small-scale unregistered production model, is present in both villages.

Formality in this context is multifaceted and cannot be solely determined by possession of an Identity Card (ID) (see Figure 5.2) or Provident Fund (PF)⁴¹ (see Figure 5.3) card, though both serve as key indicators of formal recognition and eligibility for legal benefits. In Sirikonda and Thandriyal, 80.6% of workers hold IDs, signalling formal recognition and access to welfare provisions under labour laws. Similarly, 77.2% possess PF cards, indicating coverage under the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976, which provides social security benefits. However, the system reveals significant complexities: 16.9% of workers with IDs lack PF cards, meaning they are formally recognised but not covered by essential social security benefits. Additionally, 13.4% of workers have PF cards but no IDs, creating a gap where workers are enrolled in the PF system but are unable to fully access legal welfare benefits due to the absence of IDs. Moreover, 6% of workers lack both IDs and PF cards, leaving them highly vulnerable and without fundamental legal protections.

⁴⁰ *Wardhi* refers to a system where rejected beedis from workers are sold in the market without offering any compensation to the workers. These beedis are often marketed under unregistered branding, though sometimes even registered companies sell these unregistered products.

⁴¹ A provident fund is a retirement savings scheme established by employers to provide financial security to their employees after retirement. Contributions to the provident fund are made by both the employer and the employee, with the funds accumulating and growing over time.

Figure 5.2: Beedi Identification (ID) card



Source: Fieldwork

Figure 5.3: Beedi Provident Fund (PF) card



Source: Fieldwork

The challenges surrounding formality and access to welfare benefits, as reflected in the possession of ID and PF cards, will be explored further in Section 5.5, which addresses access to social security.

5.2 Regulated Work Hours: Short-term Outcome One

This section examines the work hours and daily beedi production patterns of workers, alongside the socio-economic and political factors that influence these patterns, with the aim of evaluating the first short-term outcome: regulated work hours. Under the BCA, 1966, regulations are in place to govern work hours and conditions for employees in industrial settings. The law stipulates that no employee shall be required to work more than nine hours in a day or 48 hours in a week. However, it also allows for some flexibility, stating that ‘any adult employee may be allowed to work... subject to the payment of overtime wages if the period of work... does not exceed ten hours in any day and in the aggregate 54 hours in any week (Section 17)’. These provisions are intended to ensure that workers are not overburdened and that they receive appropriate compensation for overtime work.

Despite these legal stipulations, enforcing work-hour regulations in home-based work settings remains a challenge. For the majority of beedi workers, who are employed in informal, homebased environments, adherence to these regulations is difficult to monitor. The flexibility in home-based

work is both a benefit and a complication. Workers can set their own schedules, which allows them to accommodate domestic responsibilities such as childcare and household chores (Sinha, 2006; Chen and Sinha, 2016; Dadheech and Sharma, 2023).

A majority of the workers surveyed (65.9%) reported working less than nine hours per day, while 34% reported working more than nine hours. While this seems to align with the legal limit of nine hours, the nature of beedi work complicates these figures. Many workers, especially those involved in home-based production, often find it difficult to track their hours accurately. As one worker, Kanakamma (37, BC, Sirikonda), shared, “I am not sure how many hours I work per day; it differs from day to day.” This uncertainty is common among the workers, underscoring the challenge of quantifying work hours in a context where flexibility is essential.

In SSIs with 60 workers, 83% highlighted the complexity of their daily routines, which extend far beyond rolling beedis. Workers often start calculating their work hours from the moment they submit the beedis they made the previous day. Their day begins with delivering the previous day’s beedis to subcontractors, where they wait for them to be counted and then receive new dry tendu leaves and tobacco for the day. The leaves are carefully stored indoors to maintain their quality (as shown in Figure 5.4). After returning home, they soak the leaves, attend to household duties, and wait for the leaves to soften. Once ready, they dry them slightly and cut them into precise sizes using scissors, ensuring they meet quality standards to avoid rejection. They use a measuring tool called the *pathra* (as shown in Figure 5.5) to maintain consistency. The cut leaves are stored in baskets covered with damp cloths to retain moisture. After a break, they return to sorting and cutting leaves, sometimes preparing more if the subcontractor's quality is poor (as shown in Figure 5.6).

After lunch, they resume rolling beedis, often working with friends until the evening, when they take a break for children’s return from school. They then continue rolling with their friends. The rolling process involves binding the leaf pieces with thread, inserting a specific amount of tobacco into each beedi, and tightening them using a *Pulla* tool (a tool used to tighten and secure rolled beedis for uniformity) (as shown in Figure 5.5). Once rolled, the beedis are tied into bundles of 24/25, depending on the brand’s requirements (as shown in Figure 5.6). This routine underscores the skill, precision, and effort involved at each step of the beedi production process.

Figure 5.4: Cutting tendu leaves into measured sizes using scissors and pathra (leaf size measuring tool)



Figure 5.5: Tendu leaves in measured sizes and woman rolling beedis using tobacco, thread and pulla



Figure 5.6: Woman tying them into bundles



Source: Fieldwork in Sirikonda

“My work never ends. I wake up at 5:30 AM to clean, wash clothes, do dishes, cook, and get the children ready. By 9:30, I go to the subcontractor, submit beedis, and get leaves. By 10:30, I soak the leaves, take a break, then start drying and cutting them. I break for lunch, then roll beedis with friends until 5 or 6 PM, with tea breaks. After the children come home, I feed them, spend time with them, and roll beedis again until 8:30 PM. Sometimes, we stay later if our husbands come home late, but never past 10 PM.”

— (Ramamma, 42, BC, Thandriyal)

Ramamma’s narrative exemplifies the highly variable nature of beedi workers’ schedules. The flexibility in their work hours, while offering a degree of autonomy, also leads to long, irregular hours that are difficult to track. Many women who work from home also bear the responsibility of managing all household duties, which adds to the strain. The data reveals that nearly 72.5% of respondents find it difficult to manage household responsibilities alongside beedi work, while only 27.19% say they handle it well. These varying experiences underscore the double burden that many women face in managing both domestic duties and economic work, a theme that aligns with broader research on the complex intersectionality of women’s roles in informal labour (Pande, 2022).

The piece-rate payment system intensifies pressure to work long hours, stripping away the protections of a fixed work structure. With an inelastic labour supply—driven by poverty, lack of alternatives, and skill specificity—workers continue despite low wages and poor conditions. The

labour-leisure trade-off is particularly constrained for women, whose work is shaped by economic necessity and social norms that merge productive labour with domestic responsibilities.

The BCA, 1966, mandates rest breaks (Section 19) and substituted holidays (Section 21), but these rights are largely unenforceable in home-based settings. Financial insecurity forces workers to maximise hours at the cost of rest, while the supposed flexibility of home-based work leaves them working irregular hours with no real bargaining power. The blurred boundary between work and personal time reinforces a system where legal protections remain largely theoretical, trapping workers in cycles of overwork and economic vulnerability.

The hardships of beedi workers are not only reflected in contemporary narratives but also in historical records. APBWU (1997), in *Poru Batalo*, an archival document detailing the history of the Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union, provides a first-hand account of workers' struggles through poetry. *Poru Batalo* translates to *In the Battle of Struggle*, symbolising the ongoing resistance against exploitation. The poem below, translated from Telugu, offers a structured depiction of a beedi worker's daily life—from early morning household labour to relentless work, meagre earnings, and ultimately, a call for collective action.

The following Table 5.2 presents the poem in thematic sections, linking each verse to the key issues it highlights:

Table 5.2: Evidence from archival research—beedi workers' struggles through poetry

Theme	Poem Excerpt	Key Issues Highlighted
Opening	<i>Mother, how many struggles and burdens you face!</i>	Acknowledging the hardships faced by beedi workers.
Morning Routine	<i>At the crack of dawn, small chores, menial tasks, swiftly you get them done.</i>	Unpaid domestic labour alongside paid work.
Daily Struggles	<i>Harvest work and household chores all done in a rush, you still find time to head to the factory.</i>	Long work hours starting early in the day.
Work	<i>Drenched leaves are spread out, your veins strained, with scissors in hand, snip, snip goes the work, rolling beedis all day.</i>	Physically demanding, repetitive labour.

Earnings	<i>Yet earning only half a share, oh mother!</i>	Wage disparity and undervaluation of labour.
Lunch Break	<i>By noon, you hurriedly eat what little you can. If you head to the workshop, there's no place to even sit.</i>	Poor working conditions, lack of rest spaces.
Work Conditions	<i>Twenty huddled together, sixty squeezed into a corner, even if there's a spot, the wage is a mere pittance.</i>	Overcrowding and low wages.
Tobacco Work	<i>You bring tobacco leaves, for a fraction of the payment. You sort and grind them, your hands blistering, your eyes aching, tirelessly working.</i>	Health risks, unsafe working conditions.
Illness and Strain	<i>Even when illness strikes, you press on. If you dare to take a break, the pay disappears.</i>	No sick leave or job security.
Criticism	<i>No matter how perfectly you work, they criticise endlessly, saying it's not clean enough, the edges aren't straight.</i>	Harsh supervision without fair compensation.
Physical Toll	<i>Your body is shrinking; your clothes are worn out. Despite all your effort, you only earn a fraction.</i>	Malnutrition, exhaustion, and long-term health issues.
End of the Day	<i>Mother, after a day's toil, you still earn less than four rupees.</i>	Extremely low wages despite intensive labour.
Debt and Exploitation	<i>The fire burns fiercely, yet debts drown us. The one who thrives on our suffering refuses to listen when we ask for higher wages.</i>	Debt bondage and economic exploitation.
Call to Action	<i>We must unite as one, raise the flag of our union high, and march together for a world free of exploitation!</i>	Collective action as the path to justice.

Source: (APBWU, 1997)

This poem serves as both historical testimony and resistance literature, capturing the lived realities of beedi workers and highlighting the persistence of their struggles

over time. Through its emotional depth, it reveals the physical, financial, and psychological toll of informal labour, exposing systemic vulnerabilities that remain relevant today. Key issues such as exploitative working conditions (discussed further in Section 5.3), meagre wages (explored in Section 5.4), lack of social security benefits (analysed in Section 5.5), and the burden of unpaid domestic labour are central themes in the poem, all of which will be examined in detail in the following sections.

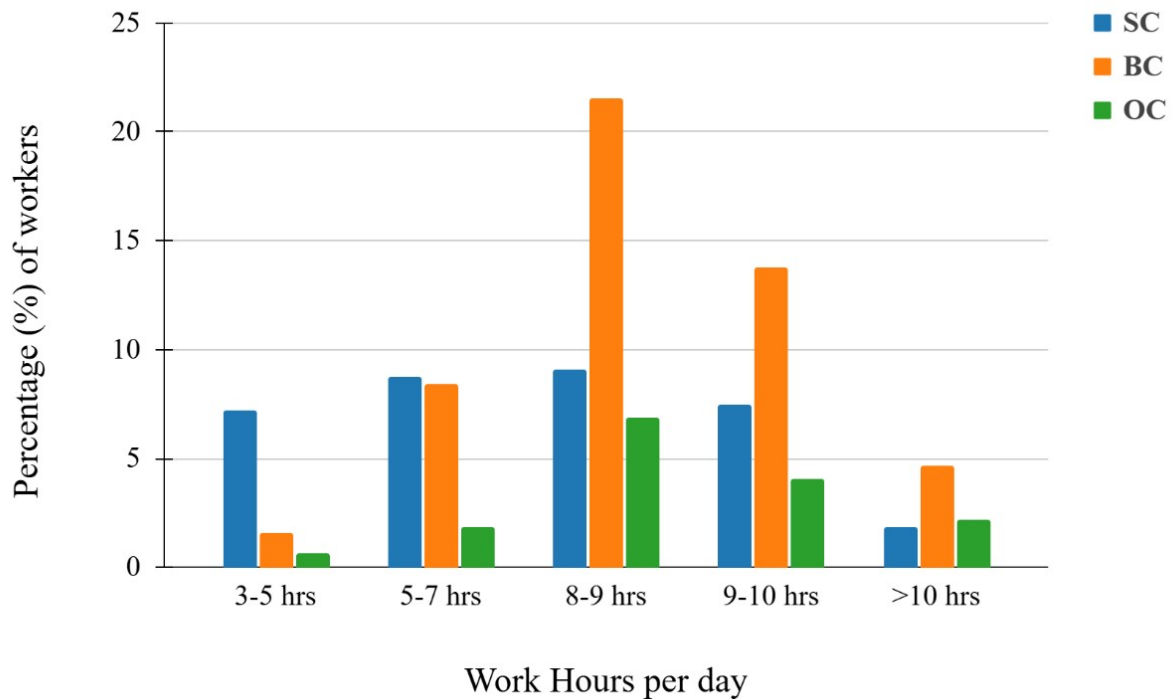
Furthermore, the poem underscores the power of collective organising, as seen in the final call for unity and struggle. This aligns with contemporary discussions on labour rights, particularly the need for formal recognition, fair wages, and social protection mechanisms. By bridging past and present, the archival record serves as both testimony and a rallying cry for ongoing labour movements.

5.2.1 Disaggregated Analysis: Caste and Gender in Work Hours Dynamics

Work hours among beedi workers are shaped by deeply entrenched caste and gendered divisions, reflecting both socio-economic necessity and cultural constraints. A chi-square test confirms a statistically significant association between caste and work hours ($\chi^2 = 37.29$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the need for a nuanced analysis of how caste influences work patterns.

To unpack these dynamics, this section triangulates quantitative findings with qualitative narratives, providing a deeper understanding of the structural factors that dictate labour participation. As shown in the Figure 5.7 below, the data reveals that SC women generally work fewer hours per day compared to BC and OC women. However, this does not suggest less work overall but rather a redistribution of labour across multiple domains. SC women often engage in a “triple burden” of beedi rolling, agricultural labour, and unpaid domestic responsibilities, significantly shaping their overall time use patterns.

Figure 5.7: Work hours per day by caste



Source: Fieldwork survey

The lower reported beedi rolling hours among SC women requires careful interpretation, as multiple intersecting factors may account for this pattern. Based on qualitative interviews with 20 SC women, 15 (75%) reported engaging in agricultural work in the mornings before switching to beedi rolling later in the day. As Janeramma, a 36-year-old SC worker from Thandriyal, explains:

"I have no choice but to do both. Beedi rolling alone doesn't pay enough, and my husband's income is uncertain. I split my time between agriculture and rolling beedis whenever I can. It's exhausting, but necessary."

— (Janeramma, 36, SC)

However, this study lacks precise quantitative data on the hours SC women allocate to agricultural labour versus beedi work, making it difficult to definitively attribute the difference in beedi rolling hours solely to agricultural employment. As documented in Section 5.3.3 below, SC women systematically receive lower quality raw materials from subcontractors and face higher arbitrary rejection rates. Poor quality tendu leaves require additional processing time, and

rejected beedis must be re-rolled without compensation or workers simply accept reduced payment for their output. Ten SC women interviewed reported being made to wait significantly longer than upper-caste workers when collecting materials, with some describing experiences of public humiliation during beedi submission. These temporal and psychological burdens may reduce the time available for productive beedi rolling. Additionally, spatial segregation requires SC women to walk 15-20 minutes to BC and OC colonies to submit beedis and collect materials. Combined with longer waiting times and the emotional toll of caste-based discrimination, these factors may cumulatively reduce their effective working hours for beedi production. Differential household composition and care burdens across caste groups may also contribute to the observed pattern.

While the qualitative data suggests agricultural labour as a significant factor in SC women's work patterns—particularly given their husbands' precarious and low-paid employment—this study did not systematically collect comparable data on agricultural work hours across all caste groups. BC women uniformly reported being prohibited from outdoor work by caste norms, suggesting minimal to no agricultural labour in their schedules, but this was not quantitatively verified. Similarly, while OC women reported their husbands' incomes as generally sufficient, precise comparative data on their time allocation was not collected. Future research would benefit from time-use diaries tracking hour-by-hour activities across caste groups, systematic documentation of rejection rates by caste, and quantitative measurement of discrimination-related time costs. The interpretation presented here represents the most plausible explanation given the available evidence, but acknowledges these data limitations.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, it is important to note that the income figures in this analysis may be underreported due to participants potentially perceiving the research team as government officials, which could have affected their willingness to accurately disclose their earnings. The financial instability faced by SC families is compounded by their husbands' low-paying jobs. Approximately 44.5% of these men earn between ₹5,000-7,000 per month, primarily through agricultural labour (30.9%), daily wage work (30.9%), or construction (22.4%) in local or foreign (Gulf) contexts. This lack of economic security forces SC women to pursue additional work outside of beedi rolling, often in the agricultural sector, underlining the necessity of seeking supplemental income to support their families.

In contrast, BC and OC women report longer working hours in beedi rolling. However, their engagement in home-based labour is largely driven by cultural norms rather than economic need. All 20 BC women interviewed stated that they were not allowed to work outside the household, as dictated by their community's expectations. Pochakka, a 42-year-old BC woman, shares:

“I'm a Padmashali, and beedi rolling is our caste occupation; it has supported our families for generations. Beedi rolling is all I know. I started as a child, just like my mother. My husband won't allow me to work elsewhere. This is my only option.”

— (Pochakka, 42, BC)

The Padmashali⁴² community, from Telangana, is renowned for its exceptional skill in rolling beedis, particularly for precise leaf cutting without measuring tools and sealing the fire end without implements. For them, beedi rolling is not just a livelihood but a core aspect of their caste identity, historically tied to the craft since beedi production began in 1901 (Chauhan, 2001).

For OC women, all 20 respondents noted that while their husbands' incomes are generally sufficient, beedi rolling serves as a way for them to stay engaged and contribute to household income. Janakamma, a 47-year-old OC woman, notes:

“My husband earns enough, but beedi rolling keeps me busy. It's something to do, and it helps with extra expenses.”

— (Janakamma, 47, OC)

The caste-based economic disparities are also apparent in the differing income levels of the husbands across these groups. In BC colonies, 71.8% of husbands earn between ₹ 5000-9000 per month, largely from running small businesses (49.4%) or engaging in skilled trades such as weaving (12.5%). In contrast, husbands in OC colonies report a slightly higher income range, with 38% earning over ₹ 11,000, often through agricultural land ownership (40%) or real estate (18%).

⁴² *Padmashali* refers to a sub-caste within the Backward Class (BC) community, traditionally associated with weaving and beedi rolling, particularly in the Telangana region.

The role of beedi work within caste structures extends beyond mere economic necessity. For SC women, it serves as a survival strategy, often supplemented by external labour (Bardhan, 1985; Banerjee, 2013; Pratibha, 2022). For BC women, it is an inherited occupation tied to caste identity and reinforced by societal restrictions. For OC women, it remains a voluntary choice, enabled by greater financial stability. In the beedi industry, many women are perceived as housewives rather than workers, undermining the value of their labour (Mies, 1981; Sinha, 2022). Even with union efforts, many beedi workers are still unrecognised as formal workers, facing exploitation without formal acknowledgment of their conditions or hours, further marginalising them in the labour market.

Based on both SSIs and existing literature, while SC women may appear to exercise economic agency, this visibility also subjects them to societal stigma. When SC women engage in outdoor agricultural labour, they face not only caste-based discrimination but also gendered violence, as stepping outside traditional gender roles is seen as transgressive and undermines societal expectations of their conduct. This dual marginalisation—due to both caste and gender—makes their labour precarious and reinforces harmful stereotypes about their worth and propriety. Despite their economic necessity, SC women are often negatively judged for breaking these social norms, further compounding the challenges they face in the labour market.

As Latha, a 45-year-old SC worker, reflects:

"We have no value as women. We need to go out and work to survive."

— (Latha, 45, SC)

In contrast, BC and OC women are more constrained by caste expectations. For them, working outside the home risks declassification and erosion of their caste status, which is deeply tied to maintaining the purity of the home and family. This cultural and social constraint reinforces their subordination within the labour market. The decision to work outside the home would threaten their caste identity, highlighting the intersection of caste, gender, and labour, where women's roles are dictated not only by economic necessity but also by entrenched societal norms.

These dynamics resonate with Stevano's (2015) research on labour conditions in the cashew nut processing industry, where women's productive and reproductive labour are closely intertwined. Her social reproduction framework emphasises how women's factory labour is

often temporary and supplementary to agricultural work, marked by low wages, weak contracts, and absenteeism. Similarly, in the beedi industry, paid labour is often entangled with unpaid domestic and agricultural work, reinforcing the gendered nature of labour exploitation and the constant struggle to balance household duties with economic survival. These patterns, shaped by caste, gender, and socio-economic constraints, are evident both in the lived experiences of workers and in historical accounts.

Building on the first short-term outcome regarding regulated work hours and the disaggregated analysis by caste, Section 5.3 focuses on the second short-term outcome: the reduction of exploitation. This section assesses the extent to which efforts to reduce exploitation have been achieved, examining how the implementation of legislation has impacted workers' conditions and whether it has effectively addressed their vulnerabilities.

5.3 Reduced Exploitation: Short-term Outcome Two

Exploitation in the beedi industry is largely driven by the piece-rate compensation system outlined in Section 18 of the BCA, 1966, where workers are paid based on the quantity of beedis rolled, not the time spent working. This complicates the enforcement of labour protections like overtime pay, rest periods, and holidays, especially for home-based workers. As mentioned in the previous section, while the law mandates overtime pay at time rates, the decentralised nature of home-based labour makes monitoring difficult. Consequently, workers often extend their workday beyond the standard nine hours, but their additional hours are not compensated for at the legally required overtime rates.

The piece-rate system exacerbates this exploitation. Beedi workers are generally assigned 700 to 1,000 grams of tendu leaves and 250 to 300 grams of tobacco to roll 1,000 beedis, a target set by the subcontractor who supplies the raw materials—and are expected to complete this task within a standard nine-hour workday. However, the actual time required to meet this target often exceeds nine hours, depending on factors such as the quality of raw materials and individual skill levels. The piece-rate system either forces workers to work longer hours or results in them producing fewer than 1,000 beedis per day, in both cases preventing them from receiving fair compensation for their labour and contributing to their exploitation.

As highlighted by Dithhi Bhattacharya, Director of the Centre for Workers' Management (CWM), 'The beedi industry is the only industry in the country where there is only a piece rate.

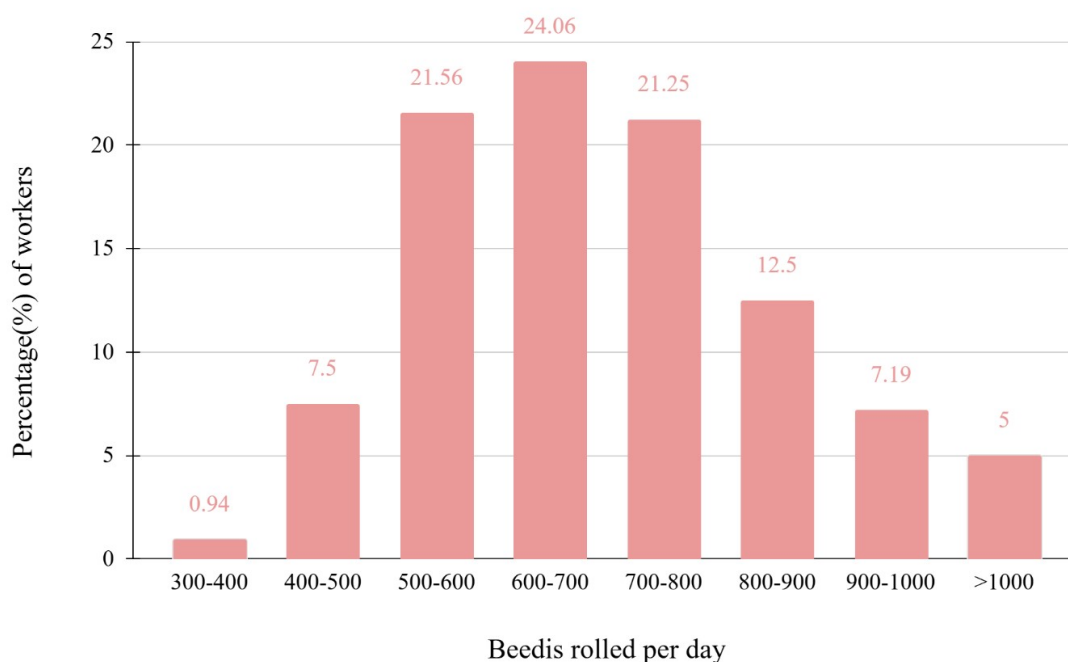
In every other industry, you have both—a time-rate and a piece-rate. The industry’s rationale for standardising the 1,000 beedi rate: Some high-skilled male workers could roll 1,000 beedis in eight hours. So, it was standardised.’ (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 6). This exploitation is particularly severe for women workers, who often struggle to meet the 1,000beedi target. In SSIs with 60 women workers, 40 reported requiring ten to 12 hours or more to meet their production targets.

This section explores the specific exploitation workers experience due to the piece-rate compensation system and the limited enforcement of labour protections, particularly concerning overtime and worker welfare. It also examines how demographic factors, such as age, length of service, and marital status (5.3.1); challenges related to raw material quality and supply (5.3.2); and caste-based dynamics (5.3.3), affecting daily production levels.

5.3.1 Demographic Factors Influencing Daily Beedi Output

The data on beedis rolled per day reveals significant variation in output—from 300 to over 1,000 beedis daily. As shown in Figure 5.8, most workers, approximately two-thirds, produce between 500 and 800 beedis per day. Only a small minority, about 5%, achieve the contractually expected target of rolling 1,000 or more beedis daily. While much of this variation reflects differences in hours worked (discussed in Section 5.2), the piece-rate structure creates exploitative conditions by transferring all productivity risks onto workers, who are paid solely for completed output regardless of time invested or obstacles encountered. The variation reveals systematic unpaid labour embedded in the production process: workers spend unreimbursed time sorting defective materials, re-cutting improperly sized leaves, and re-rolling rejected beedis. As detailed below in Section 5.3.2, poor quality materials, arbitrary rejections, and health problems create structural obstacles for which workers bear the full temporal and financial cost while receiving proportionally reduced piece-rate compensation. The gap between the 1,000-beedi target (which determines the piece rate of ₹221.21) and actual average output (500-800 beedis for two-thirds of workers) means that most workers receive only 50-80% of an already below-minimum-wage daily rate.

Figure 5.8: Beedis rolled per day



Source: Fieldwork survey

This variation in output is significantly associated with several demographic factors, such as age, experience, and marital status (see Table 5.3 below). These factors influence workers' productivity and contribute to their exploitation within the beedi industry. This calls for further examination by triangulating with qualitative data.

Table 5.3: Chi-square test results of age, experience, and marital status with beedis rolled per day.

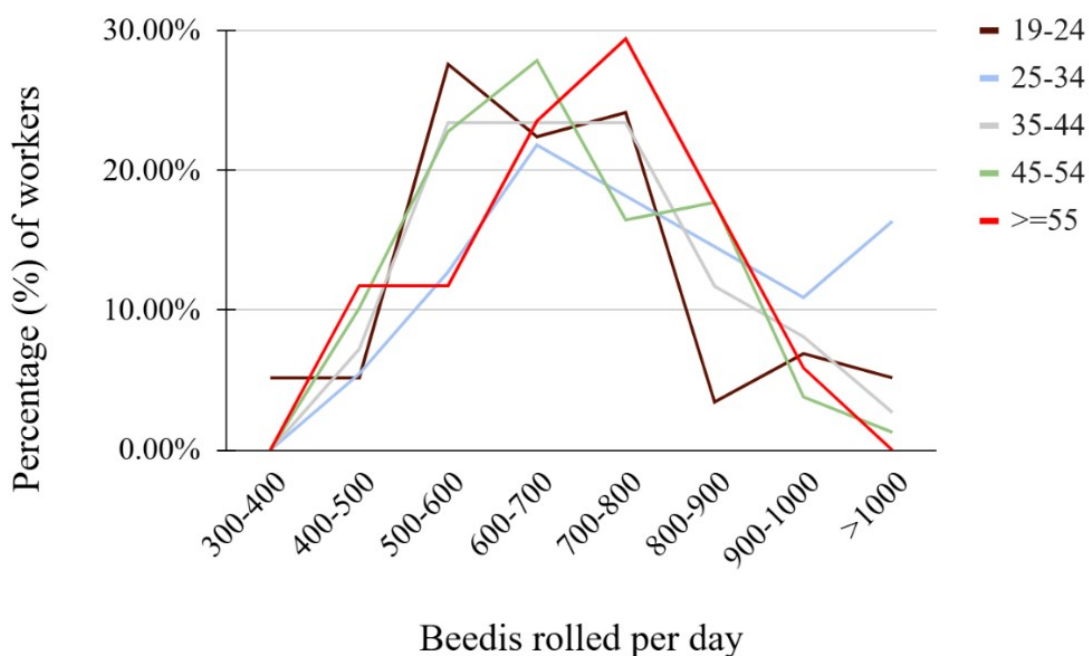
Variables Cross tabulated	Chi-square (χ^2) Value	Significance
Age \times Beedis Rolled per Day	49.22	Significant (p-value = 0.008), associated at 5% significance level.
Experience \times Beedis Rolled per Day	84.86	Significant (p-value = 0.008), associated at 5% significance level.
Marital Status \times Beedis Rolled per Day	49.91	Significant (p-value = 0.007), associated at 5% significance level.

Source: Fieldwork Survey

The age distribution of the study sample reveals a concentration of workers in the 35-44 age bracket (35%), followed by those aged 45-54 (24.7%). Younger workers (19-24 and 25-34) make up 18% and 17.2%, respectively, suggesting beedi rolling is a long-term occupation where workers gain skill and experience over time.

Across all age groups, the most common production range is between 600-700 beedis per day. Younger workers in the 19-24 age group, typically with one to five years of experience, tend to produce around 500-600 beedis, with 27.6% reporting this level of output (see Figure 5.9 below).

Figure 5.9: Beedis rolled per day by age



Source: Fieldwork survey

One worker explained,

“I try so hard to roll 1,000 beedis per day... but I mostly roll 600, sometimes only 500”.

— (Akanksha, 23, BC)

As workers gain experience, output increases. In the 25-34 age group, 16.4% roll more than 1000 beedis per day. One worker noted,

“Cutting tendu leaves takes about two to three hours for 1000 beedis, filling with tobacco takes four to five hours, rolling takes three to four hours, and closing the beedi tip takes 40 minutes to an hour. In total, this process adds up to 11.5-13 hours for 1000 beedis.”

— (Lavanya, 28, BC)

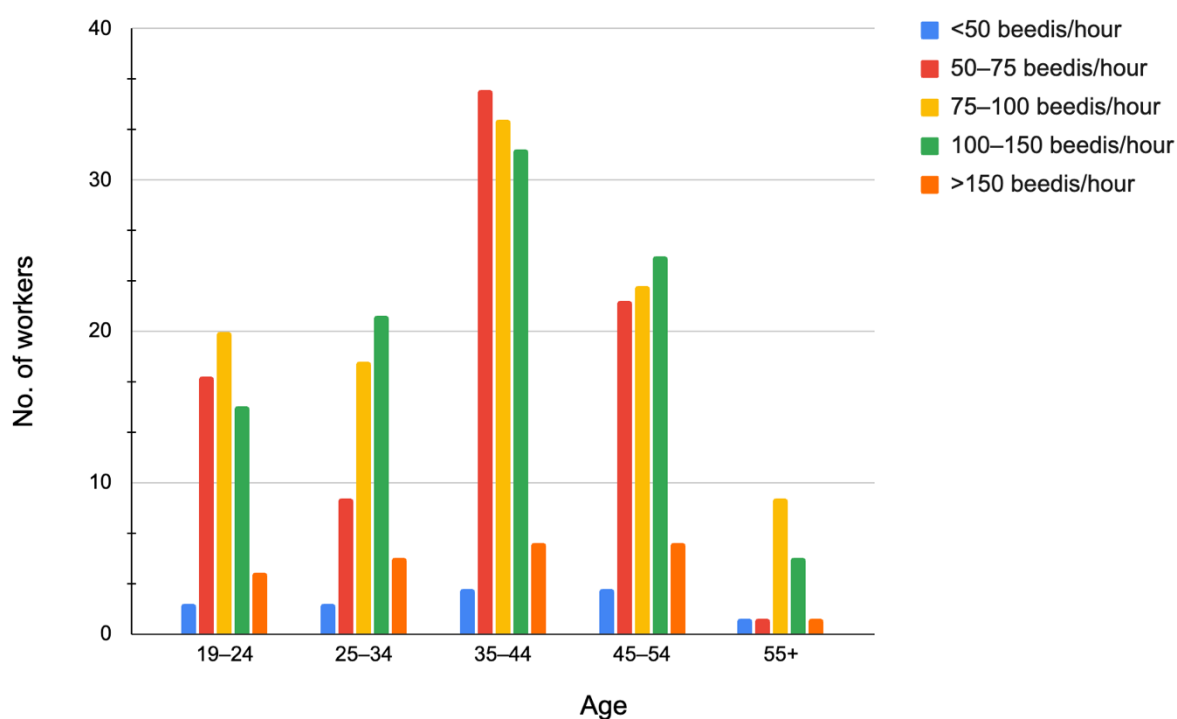
Workers in the 35-44 age group tend to maintain stable productivity, with 27.9% producing 600-700 beedis daily. This group benefits from both experience and a balanced work-life dynamic. One worker shared,

“I take up to ten hours to complete 1000 beedis.”

— (Latha, 38, BC)

To better assess whether the variation in daily output primarily reflects skill development through experience, Figure 5.10 examines hourly productivity rates across age groups. This measure controls for differences in hours worked and provides a more direct indicator of rolling efficiency.

Figure 5.10 Distribution of worker productivity (beedis/hour) by age group



Productivity was calculated as the number of beedis rolled per hour. For each worker, the midpoint of their reported daily output range was divided by the midpoint of their reported working hours per day. For example, a worker reporting 600–700 beedis in 8–9 hours would have a productivity of approximately 76.5 beedis per hour ($650 \div 8.5$). Given the challenges workers faced in precisely quantifying daily work hours (as discussed in Section 5.2) the survey collected data in categorical ranges. These calculations therefore represent approximations rather than exact measurements.

The distribution shows how productivity varies across age groups. Younger workers (19–24) predominantly fall in the 50–100 beedis/hour range, consistent with a learning phase. The middle-age groups (25–44), which contain the largest number of workers, show broader distribution across productivity ranges, with most clustering in the 75–150 beedis/hour range, suggesting peak productivity occurs with 5–15 years of experience. Older workers (45–54 and 55+) show fewer workers achieving rates exceeding 150 beedis/hour. However, even at higher productivity levels (100–150 beedis/hour), achieving the 1,000-beedi target requires 6.7–10 hours of continuous rolling, excluding preparatory tasks—beyond the 9-hour legal limit under Section 17 of the BCA, 1966.

However, older workers (45–54) show a decline in productivity, particularly in the >1000 beedis category, due to physical constraints and health issues, supported by data showing steady output (600–800 beedis per day) after 10–15 years of experience. Health problems are a significant factor in beedi production. Over half (53.6%) of workers report coughing due to tobacco exposure, 31.9% suffer from neck pain, and 27.2% experience shoulder pain from prolonged sitting. As health issues accumulate, production declines. One worker shared,

“I suffer from back pain because I sit for such long hours, and tobacco is our biggest enemy. I just wish I earned more for all the beedi rolling I do and the health sacrifices I make for my family.”

— (Anasuya, 42, BC)

Workers often miss work due to health problems, leading to inconsistent income. As one worker explained,

“I do not consistently work for 26 days a month because of health problems... I often miss out on wages”

— (Ganganarsu, 51, SC).

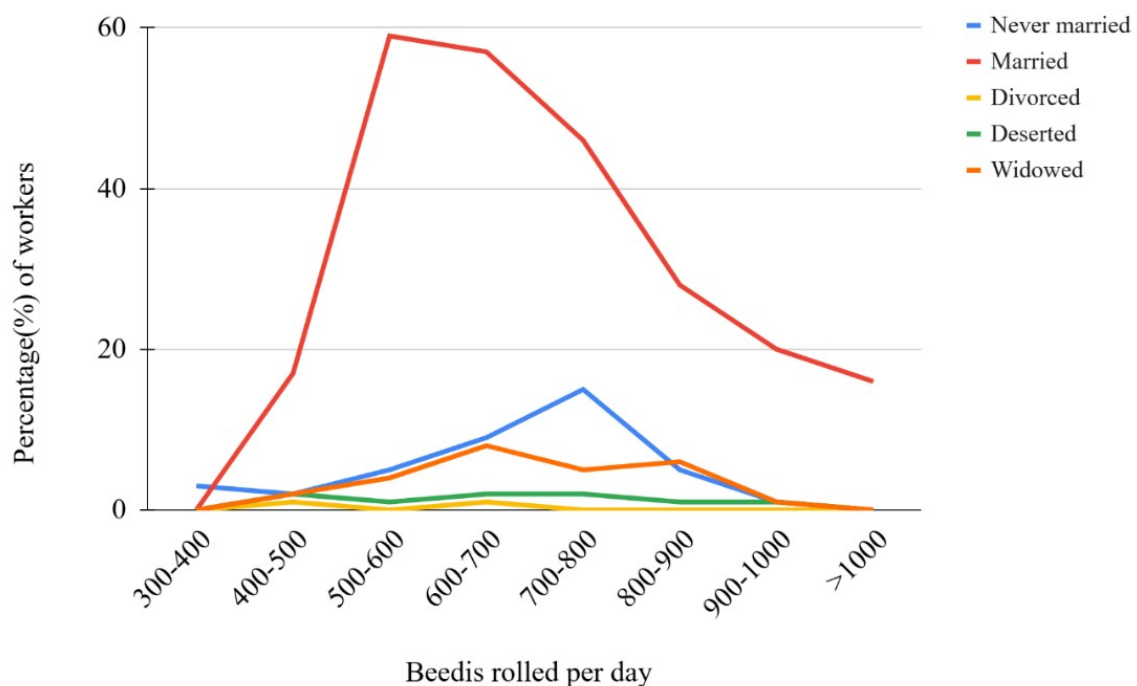
Marital status significantly impacts productivity, with 75.9% of the sample being married. Among married workers, 24.3% produce 500-600 beedis per day, and 23.5% fall in the 600-700 range (see Figure 5.11 below). The added responsibilities of marriage and household duties limit the time available for work, as one worker noted,

“I cannot do that many beedis. I need to take care of my husband and two children. I do a maximum of 800, and beedis get rejected—so we must count that— so on average that is what I do.”

— (Nirmala, 35, Thandriyal, BC).

In contrast, unmarried workers with fewer obligations show higher productivity. 37.5% of unmarried workers fall in the 700-800 beedi category, which suggests that workers with fewer familial responsibilities can focus more on their work.

Figure 5.11: Beedis rolled per day by Marital status



Source: Fieldwork Survey

5.3.2 Challenges with Raw Material and Quality Control

The beedi production process is heavily shaped by raw materials and quality control, which are influenced by a hierarchical supply chain that diminishes workers’ autonomy. The availability

and quality of tendu leaves are central to production output, with the supply controlled by the Forest Department and distributed through contractors and subcontractors. This system places significant power in the hands of subcontractors, limiting the control workers have over their materials and making their daily output subject to external, often unpredictable, factors.

Only 15% of respondents reported having any control over the quantity of leaves they receive, highlighting the lack of agency workers face. This dependence on subcontractors creates uncertainty in daily production and leads to fluctuating work demands (Gopal, 2018). As one worker explained,

“Most of the time, we don’t get the quantity of leaves we ask for. The subcontractor decides how much leaf we get and how much we are expected to roll. We face volatility in employment, and the work burden changes day by day.”

— (Amani, 35, BC)

The volatility of raw material availability is further intensified by supply chain disruptions. Over the past five years, 75.6% of workers have experienced shortages of tendu leaves and tobacco, deepening their financial instability. The COVID-19 pandemic notably intensified this unpredictability, though shortages are reported to be more moderate (Pande, 2022). One worker noted,

“We always need to adjust based on the availability of leaves. Sometimes we are told there are no leaves available, and during COVID, this lack of work was a big issue. Currently, the ups and downs are not that high—it is okay, but we don’t know when the shortage will happen again. I do not really know how much I will make per month; it just depends”

— (Hanmakka, 50, SC)

Meeting the daily target of 1,000 beedis is especially difficult due to poor leaf quality. 50.3% of workers report that the quality of tendu leaves hampers their ability to meet this target. While occasional tobacco shortages are an issue, the more pressing concern is the insufficient and substandard quality of leaves. When workers fail to meet targets, subcontractors often impose wage cuts, a practice accepted by 34.1% of respondents, reflecting the precariousness of their financial situation.

To offset material shortages, workers purchase additional leaves from contractors or buy cheaper leaves from tribal communities (ST), either within their village or from sellers walking the streets, often coming from other villages. 35.9% of workers prefer buying from these tribal communities rather than contractors. This strategy, common in Telangana, helps workers manage shortages but comes at an additional cost. Specifically, 52.2% of workers spend ₹100200 per month on extra leaves to compensate for rejected beedis. As one worker explained:

“I buy a stock of leaves when sellers come to the village, keeping it as backup to compensate for rejected beedis. We all do that and store them well to save money. Buying in bulk from these tribal sellers is cheaper than purchasing from the contractor every time we need to compensate.”

— (Latha, 52, SC)

Despite limited control over their raw materials, workers actively adapt to shortages, demonstrating resilience and agency within an exploitative framework. By purchasing cheaper leaves and planning ahead, they reduce financial losses, but the unpredictable nature of material availability means workers cannot consistently roll the same number of beedis each day, leading to further unpredictability in both work hours and wages.

Quality control is another major challenge in the beedi industry. Middlemen possess significant control over the rejection of beedis based on arbitrary quality standards such as size, tail type, tobacco content, and thread tying. These seemingly minor details are critical for ensuring market acceptance and maintaining brand identity. However, for workers, these arbitrary rejections can have severe financial consequences. Nearly 48.4% of workers report that between 5-10% of their beedis are rejected per workday, cutting into already meagre earnings. As one worker noted,

“Sometimes they reject for silly reasons—only to sell them elsewhere while making me pay from my own pocket to compensate for the rejection.”

— (Kanaka, 45, BC)

The impact of these rejections is compounded by the practice of the *wardhi* system, where rejected beedis are resold elsewhere, and workers receive no compensation for the labour invested in these rejected products. As one worker explained,

“For the rejected beedis they keep, we get nothing. They declare them bad, take them, and we are forced to bear the cost. No commission or labour payment is given—just loss.”

— (Sushila, 41, SC).

To mitigate financial losses, workers anticipate rejections by rolling extra beedis, absorbing both material costs and unpaid labour. This leads to double exploitation, where workers bear the financial burden of rejected beedis. The lack of control over the supply chain intensifies the precariousness of home-based beedi work, as workers adapt to structural constraints while shouldering the financial risks imposed by subcontractors.

In the beedi industry, workers are paid through a piece-rate system, earning wages based on the number of beedis they roll rather than a fixed hourly rate. Beedi rolling, a repetitive task considered low skill with minimal differences in output among workers, leads employers to set wages based on a standard output expectation. While this system seems to reward higher production, wages remain low due to broader labour market dynamics.

In practice, productivity alone does not determine wages; labour market conditions play a significant role. Contractors, acting as intermediaries, often exercise monopsony-like power—setting terms and wages with little regard for workers’ welfare. Despite high output, workers receive suppressed wages due to an abundant labour supply and limited alternative job opportunities, forcing them to accept unfair pay (Hossain, 1984; Gupta, 2011).⁴³ Although the piece-rate system appears to incentivise productivity, it ultimately shifts risks—such as price fluctuations and rejected beedis—onto the workers, increasing their vulnerability rather than guaranteeing fair compensation. Subcontractors control wages, working conditions, and material allocation, creating a marked imbalance in the labour market that disadvantages workers.

In response, workers adopt strategies like sourcing cheaper materials or rolling extra beedis to offset losses, demonstrating resilience within this flawed and unstable system. Building on these labour market dynamics, the next section explores the role of caste in exploitation within the beedi industry.

⁴³ These monopsony dynamics have been observed in other rural industries and Indian cotton mills, where wages are suppressed despite high productivity

5.3.3 Caste dynamics and their role in exploitation

The caste-based exploitation in the beedi industry is deeply intertwined with the dominance of upper-caste subcontractors, who control the supply chain and determine production quality. *Desai Brothers Ltd.*, a dominant player since 1953, controls 63% of the beedi market share in Sirikonda and Thandriyal (Chauhan, 2001). Other companies, including *Telephone*, *CC Patel*, and *30 Number*, hold smaller market shares, while unregistered brands such as *Mayuri* operate informally. This market is shaped by a subcontracting network exclusively controlled by BC and OC groups, with no SC subcontractors involved in the process. 60% of subcontractors in Sirikonda and Thandriyal hail from local BC sub-castes, while 10% are from OC groups. The remaining 30% consists of upper-caste settlers from Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, many of whom maintain subcontracting ties across states. This reflects the capital flight from other regions to Telangana during the colonial and post-colonial eras, as mentioned in Chapter 2. This absence of SC representation at the subcontracting level has profound implications for workplace discrimination, access to raw materials, and rejection rates (Painoli & Nagar, 2012).

Caste-based bias is apparent in the raw material distribution (Naveen & Shirisha, 2018). SSIs with SC workers reveal that they consistently receive lower quality tendu leaves compared to their BC and OC counterparts. As Rukku (36) from Thandriyal's SC colony explained,

“There are no subcontractors from our caste, so nothing is in our favour... we are expected to be grateful just to get work”.

— (Rukku, 36, SC)

This unequal treatment results in higher rejection rates for SC workers, as poor-quality leaves naturally lead to more defective beedis. This bias disproportionately affects SC women, who tend to work part-time and face additional challenges in securing work compared to BC and OC women.

Discrimination extends beyond raw material allocation; SC workers also face open hostility from subcontractors and fellow workers. Banu (34) from Sirikonda described the experience: “We endure it silently to keep our jobs.”

— (Banu, 34, SC)

There is a clear demarcation of colonies based on caste, with communities spatially segregated in most places across India (Shah et al., 2024). In the beedi industry, caste-based segregation is evident in the workplace, where SC workers are most likely required to walk (within a 15–20-minute distance) to BC and OC colonies to submit beedis and collect materials (more on spatial segregation’s implications is discussed in Chapter 7). As many as 10 out of 20 SC women reported being made to wait longer than upper-caste workers for raw materials. The most humiliating part of this process is the public rejection of beedis, where SC workers are berated in front of others. These rejections, often unexplained and unpredictable, reduce their earnings and contribute to ongoing financial volatility. Rena (48), from Sirikonda, noted,

“We avoid going early because we don’t want to be humiliated in front of upper-caste workers. Anyway, we are always made to wait for raw materials.”

— (Rena, 48, SC)

The lack of SC representation at the subcontracting level leaves SC workers without the ability to negotiate or build trust with subcontractors, further entrenching their vulnerability. As Janani (47) from Sirikonda stated,

“BC and OC workers can build trust with subcontractors. We (SC) cannot.”

— (Janani, 47, SC)

This lack of agency results in SC workers being subject to lower wages, fewer opportunities, and poorer working conditions. Without a presence at the subcontracting level, SC workers remain excluded from the decision-making processes that may dictate their economic outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings highlight how caste dynamics shape labour relations and economic outcomes in the beedi industry. The absence of SC subcontractors perpetuates discriminatory practices and entrenches exploitation at all levels of the supply chain. The rejection system and unequal material distribution serve as tools to maintain a system of caste-based exclusion, making upward mobility within the industry nearly impossible for SC workers. This systemic inequality underscores the economic precarity of SC workers, where caste, exploitation, and financial vulnerability intersect in the beedi industry.

5.4 Access to Fair Wages: Short-term Outcome Three

Building on the previous section's analysis of exploitation in the beedi industry—starting with the piece-rate system where beedis rolled per day are shaped by factors such as demographics, raw material access, quality control, and caste-based discrimination—this section examines how these dynamics intersect to influence access to fair wages for beedi workers. The systemic inequities within the industry complicate the definition and attainment of fair wages, as workers face multiple layers of exploitation. By evaluating the application of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, in the beedi sector, the impact of these intersecting forces on access to fair wages is assessed.

The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 is one of India's oldest labour laws, designed to ensure that workers receive wages sufficient to support a family of four (two adults and two children = three consumption units). Key provisions include a five-year review of minimum wages [Section 3(2)(b)] and the invalidation of contracts that pay less than the statutory minimum wage (Section 25) (Subrahmanya and Singh, 1996; Raghunath, 2001). The Act also mandates adjustments to wages based on the cost-of-living index to account for inflation, ensuring that real wages remain stable.

However, enforcement of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, is often lax, particularly in informal labour sectors like beedi manufacturing. Minimum wages are typically set as time, daily, or monthly rates. The BCA, 1966, introduced piece-rate minimum wages for beedi workers, with states setting varying rates. Although the BCA, 1966, does not directly address minimum wages, state notifications have extended the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, to include the beedi industry (Sen & Patel, 2014).

However, employers often manage to bypass the Act, largely due to the absence of enforcement by state labour departments, which are sometimes complicit. The beedi industry is a notable example of this circumvention of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. (Vats, 2018). One of the major challenges in ensuring fair wages for beedi workers stems from the contract system, where manufacturers supply raw materials like tobacco and tendu leaves to home-based workers through contractors. The workers then roll the beedis at piece rates, and contractors collect the finished products and return them to manufacturers. This arrangement allows manufacturers to distance themselves from direct employment relationships, thus avoiding obligations under labour laws, including fair wages (as detailed in Chapter 2).

As Bhumeshwar, a leader at the IFTU, explains,

“This system puts a big gap between the workers and those who control their wages. It means workers have less say in how much they get paid because contractors decide.” —
(Bhumeshwar, IFTU)

This model perpetuates a regulatory evasion (Agarwal, 2020), where the decentralised nature of production allows manufacturers to sidestep statutory labour obligations. By fostering indirect employment relationships, the system reduces the bargaining power of workers and complicates enforcement of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, by shifting the responsibility for setting wages to the contractors. Manufacturers’ lobbying efforts have played a crucial role in promoting small-scale, decentralised production, which further undermines efforts to enforce fair wage laws.

The variability in wage rates across states and districts is stark. Manufacturers, in search of lower labour costs, often relocate to areas with weaker labour protections, contributing to a race to the bottom in wage standards (Nandi et al., 2015). This movement undermines union efforts to secure fair wages for beedi workers. As Ramulu, IFTU union vice-president, states,

“As unions, we must unite and advocate for higher wages, as they consistently remain low and minimum wage rules are not consistently enforced. Bilateral agreements between unions and beedi contractors aim to prevent establishments from relocating to regions with lower wage standards.....They don’t have formal contracts, no holidays, no holiday pay, no annual leave or annual leave wages. We fight for all these so that we can increase the wage by a little bit... It’s a tough industry for women. This job is hard, and we’re doing everything we can to fight for their rights and better pay.....We, unions, fight a lot!”

— (Ramulu, IFTU)

There is a significant disparity between the statutory minimum wage and the actual wages received by home-based beedi workers in Telangana, particularly in villages like Sirikonda and Thandriyal. According to a notification from the Labour, Employment, Training, and Factories Department of the Telangana government, the revised minimum wage for rolling 1000 beedis in 2024 is set at ₹333 (see Table 5.4). Although beedi work is technically piece-rated, workers are expected to roll 1000 beedis per day, making ₹333 a de facto daily wage. In reality, however,

reports from the IFTU union reveal that workers are currently (2024) paid only ₹221.21 per 1000 beedis—a rate that has remained unchanged since June 21, 2022. Despite state-level wage revisions in 2023 (₹310) and 2024 (₹333), the actual payment remains 33.6% below the legal minimum.

Table 5.4: Comparison of statutory minimum wages and ground reality wages in Telangana

Beedi making manufactory including Gharkata (Home-based) for rolling 1000 beedis	Date	Statutory Minimum Wage (Rs) (Basic wage for 1000 beedis + Variable Dearness allowance (VDA))	Cost of living allowance per point increase (Rs)	Actual wage paid (Rs) - Ground Reality per 1000 beedis
	As of 31.03.2023	310.00	0.21	221. 21
	As of 30.01.2024	333.00	0.19	221. 21

Sources: The Telangana Gazette, (January 30, 2024) and IFTU (2023) Documentation of union struggle and wage declaration, fieldwork

This widespread underpayment is not unique to Telangana: rather, it reflects a systemic failure in wage enforcement across multiple Indian states. In regions like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Maharashtra, beedi workers routinely earn 30–40% less than the mandated minimum wage, with some cases of workers receiving as little as half of the legal wage (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2003; Mazumdar, 2018; Mallick and Satpathy, 2021). These figures expose persistent lapses in the implementation of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, despite periodic revisions to wage notifications.

The statutory minimum wage itself—₹333 for rolling 1,000 beedis—is inadequate for sustaining a household. The Expert Committee, led by Anoop Satpathy of the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNI), recommended a national minimum wage of ₹ 375 per day, or ₹ 9,750 per month, for a family of 3.6 consumption units, regardless of sector, skill, occupation, or location. The committee recommended a region-specific minimum wage of ₹380 per day for Telangana (Satpathy et al., 2021). Yet in 2024, workers continue to be paid ₹221.21 for 1,000 beedis, which is not only below the statutory minimum, but also far below what is needed to meet basic subsistence levels. The disconnect between policy and practice reflects both a

regulatory vacuum and deeper structural issues tied to the piece-rate payment model prevalent in the beedi industry (discussed further in Section 5.5).

Evidence from fieldwork, as discussed in Section 5.4.1, confirms that the union-reported rate of ₹221.21 per 1,000 beedis accurately reflects what most workers in registered companies receive under bilateral agreements with contractors. However, logbook data show small variations: some workers receive slightly less than ₹221.21 (e.g., ₹216–₹221), reflecting minor adjustments by companies that cumulatively increase profits. In unregistered companies, payments are generally lower, ranging from ₹210–220 per 1,000 beedis. These examples illustrate that while the union-negotiated rate serves as a reference, actual wages vary depending on company registration and local practices. Figures 5.12–5.14 present logbooks from registered and unregistered companies, providing concrete evidence of these variations.

Furthermore, there are significant wage disparities between beedi rollers and other categories of workers in the industry, as per the notification by the Government of Telangana (2024) (see Annexure III for detail). Beedi rollers are supposed to earn Rs. 333.00 for rolling 1000 beedis. In practice, however, home-based beedi rollers often receive only ₹221.21 per 1000 beedis—30% to 50% less than the wages earned by piece-rated and time-rated beedi packers. Compared to roles such as tobacco distributors, beedi sorters, tray fillers, clerks, furnacemen, and managers—positions predominantly held by men—the disparity exceeds 50%. This stark contrast underscores how beedi rolling, primarily performed by women, is undervalued and underpaid relative to other roles within the industry’s vertical hierarchical structure, where men dominate powerful positions (Pande, 2022). These wage differentials are both stark and evident (Arora et al., 2020).

Income stagnation is shaped by caste dynamics, household earnings, supply chain disruptions, and poor raw material quality (as discussed in section 5.3). Additionally, 45% of workers report working only 15-20 days per month, while 41.1% work 20-29 days—often due to health issues and inconsistent material supply. SSIs reveal that 20 out of 60 workers stretch two days’ worth of materials over one day’s work, further indicating irregular employment patterns. Underreporting of income is also common, driven by social status concerns and expectations of financial aid (Angel et al., 2019). These factors create a persistent disconnect between beedis produced and wages earned, reinforcing systemic wage suppression in the beedi industry (Arora et al., 2020; Pande, 2022). Ultimately, structural barriers and exploitative labour conditions keep wages low, irrespective of workers’ output.

To estimate the average earnings of a beedi worker, this analysis utilises available data on beedis rolled per day, assuming a consistent 26-day work month. By calculating an average within each production category, a predictive model is developed to approximate actual wages earned. Given the multiple factors influencing income, this approach provides a structured estimation while also highlighting the industry's wage distribution practices.

5.4.1 Expected Wage Calculation: A Model

Table 5.5 below presents a model for estimating expected monthly earnings of home-based beedi workers based on current piece rates and average daily production levels. Column 1 categorises workers by daily beedi output, while Column 2 presents the percentage of workers within each range. Column 3 calculates monthly production using the formula:

$$\text{Average Monthly Production} = 26 \times \frac{(\text{min} + \text{max})}{2}$$

For instance, the 300-400 category is calculated as $(300+400)/2$. Column 4 determines monthly earnings by multiplying Column 3 by ₹221.21, the standard piece rate per 1,000 beedis. However, contractors deduct a share per 1,000 beedis, with some workers experiencing deductions for 1,500-2,000 beedis. Column 5 incorporates these deductions, adjusting net earnings accordingly. Notably, there is no employer contribution to PF, as confirmed by field data and wage distribution records from IFTU's bilateral agreements with contractors. However, an 8.33% employee share is deducted, which is reflected in Column 6.

This model offers a structured way to estimate expected earnings under current conditions, based on output levels and known deductions. It highlights how, even without underreporting, the current payment structure yields extremely low net earnings for the majority of workers.

Table 5.5: Modelled monthly earnings of beedi workers based on daily output and deductions

Beedis Rolled per Day	% of workers	Average Monthly Production (26*average daily beedis (min + max/2))	Calculated Monthly Earnings (Rs) (1000 beedis = 221.21) No of beedis*221.21 Rs	Calculated Monthly Earnings after Contractor's Share Deduction (1000 beedis = 221.21Rs)	Calculated Monthly Earnings after Employee PF Deduction (8.33%)	Percentage decrease after deductions
300-400	0.94	9100	2012.192	1791.072	1641.8	18.41%
400-500	7.5	11700	2587.104	2365.984	2168.9	16.15%
500-600	21.56	14300	3162.016	2940.896	2695.9	14.75%
600-700	24.06	16900	3736.928	3515.808	3222.9	13.75%
700-800	21.25	19500	4311.84	4090.72	3749.9	13.03%
800-900	12.5	22100	4886.752	4665.63	4276.9	12.48%
900-1000	7.19	24700	5461.664	5240.544	4804.01	12.05%
>1000	5	27300	6036.576	5815.45	5331.03	11.68%
Total	100					

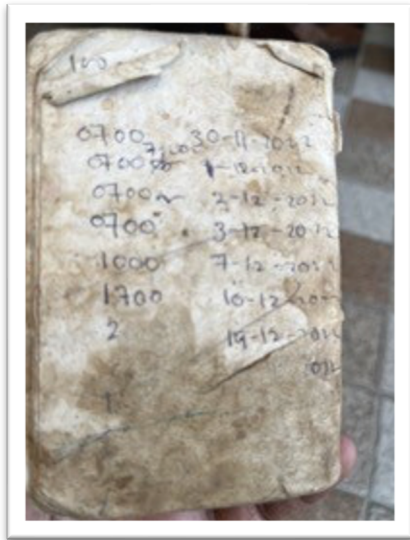
Source: Author's creation based on Fieldwork survey

Given that a majority of workers (66.9%) roll between 500 and 800 beedis per day, their expected monthly earnings—after accounting for contractor deductions and PF contributions—range from approximately ₹2,695.90 to ₹3,749.90. These earnings, while modelled on actual production data, remain low and should be interpreted cautiously due to assumptions within the model, including uniform work availability, consistent piece rates, and standard deduction patterns. Deductions for contractor shares and employee PF contributions reduce gross earnings by 12–18%, significantly eroding already low wages. Since ₹221.21 per 1,000 beedis is below the statutory minimum wage of ₹333, these reductions only deepen the income shortfall and exacerbate financial precarity for home-based workers. Beyond low wages, workers often face irregular payment schedules, inflated contractor deductions, and PF-related malpractice, further undermining their ability to receive even the modest calculated earnings. These systemic issues contribute to a fragmented wage environment where formal protections rarely translate into real income security.

For unregistered beedi workers, wage disparities are even more pronounced. Without identity cards, logbooks, or any formal documentation, they operate entirely outside the regulatory framework, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation (see Figure 5.12). In contrast, registered workers—who receive logbooks and ID cards from manufacturers—are theoretically entitled to standardised wages and a measure of accountability (see Figure 5.13). Yet even within this group, inconsistencies persist.

Sunitha, a worker from Thandriyal's BC Colony employed by *Desai Beedi*, earns ₹221 per 1,000 beedis but was unaware that the company's declared rate is ₹221.21. Meanwhile, Kavitha from the OC Colony in Thandriyal, who works for *Telephone Beedi*, earns slightly less, at ₹219 per 1,000 beedis. Rannakka, from Sirikonda's SC Colony, has been receiving ₹216 per 1,000 beedis for the past two years, despite working for a registered company.

Figure 5.12: Logbook of a worker who works with an unregistered company



Source: Fieldwork

Figure 5.13: Logbook of a worker who works with a registered company.

Month & Year	Present Days	Total Bids	Wages Earned	5% LW Wages	Total
Balance CF					
March			670.00		
April			670.00		
May			670.00		
June			670.00		
July			670.00		
August			670.00		
Sept.			670.00		
			1000.00		
			1700.00		
			670.00		
07			670.00		
			670.00		
			670.00		

Source: Fieldwork

For workers in unregistered companies, the conditions are even worse. These workers report wages as low as ₹210–₹220 per 1,000 beedis. Many unregistered employers underpay workers while still collecting full production output, profiting from small but systematic wage theft. The absence of formal records makes it nearly impossible for workers to challenge these practices. Lalitha, a 36-year-old worker from the SC Colony employed by *Mayuri* Beedi, recalled that her wages remained at ₹210 until February 2023 before increasing to ₹220. A

closer examination of her logbook confirmed these figures, illustrating the systemic wage suppression in unregistered firms, where the absence of formal documentation enables unchecked exploitation (see Figure 5.14)

Figure 5.14: Logbook of a worker from unregistered company working with Mayuri beedi.



Source: Fieldwork

In conclusion, wage suppression in the beedi industry cannot be separated from structural inequalities, including geographic marginalisation, gendered patterns of home-based work, and entrenched labour market frictions. These dynamics not only maintain low earnings but actively prevent workers from securing their rightful dues.

The next section examines access to social security entitlements—particularly the PF—to further unpack how institutional loopholes and informalisation perpetuate economic insecurity.

5.5 Access to Social Security Benefits: Short-term Outcome Four

Although most beedi workers possess Employee PF cards, which are intended to provide social security benefits, access to these benefits is undermined by contractor exploitation and systemic irregularities. As noted earlier, 77.2% of workers in both villages hold PF cards, but merely possessing these cards does not guarantee the promised benefits. The reality of PF contributions is complex, inconsistent, and often manipulated in ways that disadvantage workers.

Table 5.6 (based on Figure 5.15 below) presents a breakdown of the current wage structure that has been in place since June 21, 2022. Despite union efforts to push for improvements, the wages remain substantially below the statutory minimum. The inclusion of nominal benefits

such as bonuses, annual leave wages, and festival pay appears to be more of a symbolic gesture than an actual form of financial relief. Workers continue to earn below the legally mandated wage, making any additional benefits seem more like an attempt to placate than to provide meaningful support.

Table 5.6: Breakdown of Minimum Wage Achieved by Union Struggles

Component	In Rupees
Basic wage for 1000 beedis	114.60
Variable Dearness allowance	77.20
Total	191.80
8.33 Bonus	15.98
5% Annual leave wages	9.59
2 % National and festival pay	3.84
Total wage	221.21

Source: Based on Figure 5.15 (IFTU, 2024)

Figure 5.15: IFTU wage declaration in Telugu

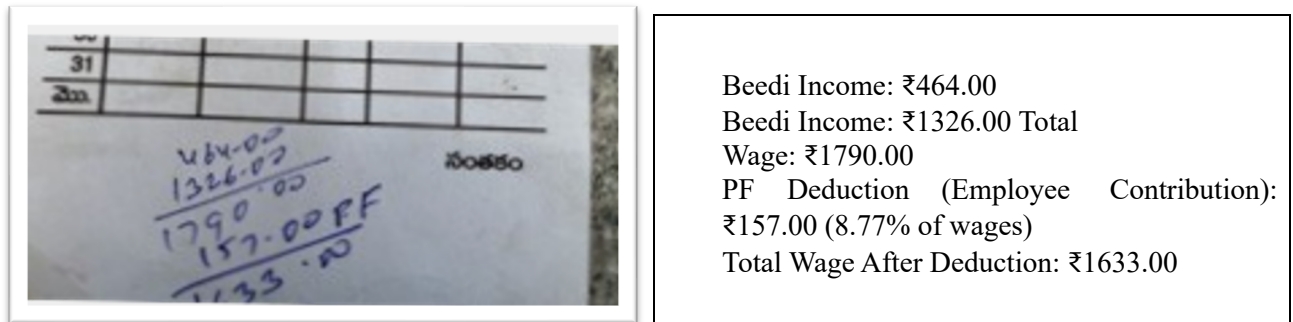
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Total wage	221.21

Source: IFTU Documentation of union struggle and wage declaration, Fieldwork

One of the most glaring issues is the absence of employer contributions to the PF, despite deductions being made from workers' wages (as mentioned in Table 5.5). A wage calculation of a beedi worker illustrates this issue starkly. In this case, while the worker's income for rolling beedis amounted to ₹1,790, a deduction of ₹157 was made towards her PF contribution, which is 8.77% of her wages. However, the employer's matching contribution—an essential part of

the PF system—was entirely absent (see Figure 5.16 below). This omission fundamentally weakens the purpose of the PF, which is meant to be a joint contribution between employer and employee, ensuring long-term financial security. Without the employer’s share, the PF system becomes an additional burden on the worker rather than a form of social security.

Figure 5.16: Monthly wage calculation of a beedi worker



Source: Fieldwork

Employers and contractors actively avoid PF contributions through various tactics. Some small contractors deliberately underpay workers to avoid contributing to PF, offering ₹200 plus ₹5 extra as a strategy to reduce their financial obligations. Even when unions successfully negotiate wage increases, only some registered companies comply, while unregistered firms continue to pay below agreed rates. Deductions for the contractor’s share vary significantly, with some companies deducting the equivalent of 1,000 beedis per month, while others deduct for 1,500 to 2,000 beedis, as mentioned earlier. Additionally, discrepancies often occur between the amounts deducted for the PF and the amounts actually credited. Anupama, a worker from Sirikonda, discovered that only half of her deducted PF amount appeared in her mobile banking notifications. Given that 56.56% of workers in the industry are unable to read or write, many may remain unaware of such irregularities.

Workers also face immense pressure to contribute personally to maintain their PF accounts. Those who do not meet production targets risk having their PF accounts cancelled. Vasudha from Thandriyal explained that whenever she fell short of rolling enough beedis, she was warned that her PF account would be closed unless she paid money to keep it active. Even when workers manage to maintain their accounts, access to PF savings remains uncertain. Based on my fieldwork, at least ten such cases were documented where workers were unable to withdraw their accumulated PF savings when needed. Indira, from Sirikonda, spoke about

this uncertainty, explaining that while the idea of receiving a lump sum at the end of employment was reassuring, there was no guarantee that she would actually receive it.

Women workers face additional challenges in accessing PF benefits due to the control subcontractors exert over enrolment. Among those without PF, 76.7% are married women, particularly those aged 19–34. Subcontractors tend to prioritise ‘stable’ workers, assuming that newly married women will move away and unmarried women may not remain in the workforce long-term. As a result, many women lose their PF access after marriage, as relocation disrupts their ability to remain enrolled in the system. Pravalika, a 36-year-old worker, shared her frustration over this issue, explaining that she had fought for years to get PF registration in her mother’s village, only to lose it again after moving post-marriage. Unable to demand PF again in her new location, she found the process humiliating and exhausting.

Even workers who attempt to navigate the system face difficulties, as PF registration remains in the hands of subcontractors rather than the workers themselves. Anil, who runs a MeeSeva⁴⁴ centre, confirmed that beedi workers often approach him for help with their PF issues, but ultimately, registration decisions lie with subcontractors. These middlemen, he explained, decide who gets enrolled and who does not, and newly married or unmarried women are often deprioritised.

Ultimately, the PF system, rather than acting as a safeguard for workers’ financial security, has become a tool of control for employers and subcontractors. Workers, especially women, find themselves at the mercy of opaque bureaucratic processes and exploitative practices that deny them access to their own savings. The lack of employer contributions, wage manipulation, and selective PF enrolment further erodes the already fragile social security protections for beedi workers, leaving them financially vulnerable and without meaningful recourse.

⁴⁴ MeeSeva centers in Telangana are government service delivery points that provide citizens with easy access to various public services, including issuing certificates, applying for government schemes, and paying utility bills. ‘MeeSeva’ in Telugu means ‘At Your Service,’ reflecting the initiative’s focus on serving citizens. This good governance initiative aligns with the National e-Governance Plan’s vision of ‘Public Services Closer to Home’ and facilitates a single-entry portal for the entire range of G2C (Government to Citizen) and G2B (Government to Business) services.

5.6 Conclusion

Referring to the ToC as outlined in Figure 5.1, the first short-term outcome, regulated work hours, remains largely unrealised in the beedi industry, particularly for home-based workers. While legal provisions exist to limit excessive working hours, their enforcement is weak, and the flexibility of home-based work blurs the distinction between labour and personal time. Workers, especially women, are compelled to work beyond legal limits due to financial necessity, and the piece-rate payment system further exacerbates this issue by incentivising long, irregular hours. Caste and gender also play a crucial role in shaping work-hour dynamics, with SC women facing the “triple burden” of paid labour, unpaid domestic work, and agricultural labour, while BC women remain confined to home-based work due to social norms. The lack of effective regulation ensures that work-hour exploitation remains a persistent challenge.

The second short-term outcome, reduced exploitation, is also far from being achieved. The beedi industry’s decentralised structure allows contractors and employers to evade labour protections, resulting in inconsistent raw material supply and unfair rejection rates. SC workers, in particular, face systemic discrimination in material allocation and wage determination, reinforcing caste-based economic marginalisation. Subcontractors, primarily from dominant caste groups, monopolise control over work distribution and maintain exploitative practices, making it difficult for workers—especially the most vulnerable—to negotiate better conditions. These intersecting forms of exploitation highlight the structural inequalities embedded in the industry.

The third short-term outcome, access to fair wages, remains highly contested. Despite legal provisions under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and the BCA, 1966, workers continue to earn significantly below statutory wage levels. Wage disparities exist not only across different states but also along caste and gender lines, with home-based women workers being the most underpaid. Unions have emerged as a crucial force in challenging these exploitative wage structures. Through sustained collective action, they have successfully negotiated wage increases in certain areas, demonstrating the power of worker organising. However, these gains remain limited in scope and scale. The unions’ struggles to improve wage outcomes have not been wholly successful, constrained by widespread contractor evasion, inconsistent employer compliance, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Their efforts nevertheless underscore the necessity of building collective “capabilities in securing decent work and stable employment,”

as theorised in Chapter 3. The absence of clear regulations gives substantial control to middlemen, perpetuating exploitation—particularly among unregistered workers, who lack formal documentation or access to union protections. In such contexts, without organised resistance, the structural injustices surrounding wage allocation and employment conditions go entirely unchallenged.

Finally, the fourth short-term outcome, access to social security benefits, particularly the PF, is severely undermined by systemic irregularities and contractor exploitation. Although a significant percentage of workers possess PF cards, many are unable to access their savings due to employer non-contributions, wage manipulation, and bureaucratic exclusion. Women, particularly married workers, face additional barriers, as subcontractors often control enrolment and deny them PF access, assuming that they will leave the workforce after marriage. Thus, the PF system, instead of functioning as a financial safeguard, has become a tool of control that further entrenches workers' financial precarity.

The BCA, 1996, was the first to acknowledge home-based workers, defining them as 'any labour who is given raw materials by an employer or contractor for beedi or cigar production at home' (Section 2). However, this recognition was not designed to protect them, as the Act primarily focuses on factory workers' conditions, with limited relevance for home-based workers (Madhavi, 2006). The lack of written contracts and the flexible nature of home-based labour mean that these provisions are not enforced. Consequently, the law remains theoretical and offers little protection, failing to address the specific needs of growing numbers of homebased workers, particularly women.

Beedi workers' ability to secure decent work and improve their livelihoods is influenced by a complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors, rather than being solely shaped by legal frameworks. While unions play a critical role in fostering collective capabilities, they cannot dismantle the entrenched exploitative structures on their own. Their efforts, though valuable, remain insufficient to fully enhance workers' ability to attain dignified employment. Structural issues such as caste-based discrimination, unregulated wages, and manipulation of social security benefits, continue to undermine the potential for stable and secure work.

These challenges mirror the broader patterns of marginalisation seen in other home-based sectors like papad (flatbread)-making, cashew processing, handloom weaving, and garment production—where women's labour is indispensable but persistently undervalued. As this

research shows, the intersection of caste, gender, and informal labour market structures makes these dynamics especially acute for beedi workers.

Strengthening legal enforcement, comprehensive reforms, and policy interventions are essential to expanding workers' capabilities. Without these systemic changes, beedi workers will continue to face significant barriers in achieving the full capability of decent work. Ultimately, overcoming these challenges necessitates a fundamental shift in labour governance—one that places worker agency at the forefront and ensures robust protections against the exploitative practices ingrained in the industry. This shift is essential to enabling workers to achieve the state of “being securely employed,” where stable, dignified, and protected work becomes a reality for all.

6. Being Educated

6.1 Introduction

Building on the analysis of “*being securely employed*” in Chapter 5, which examined the working conditions of beedi workers, this chapter shifts the focus to the dimension of “*being educated*.” It specifically explores the scholarships provided to the children of beedi workers under the BWWF, 1976 (see Annexure II). The 1969 Report of the Committee on Labour Welfare recognised the potential of such scholarships to enhance both children’s education and, indirectly, the welfare of their families (Government of India, 1969). This chapter attempts to evaluate the first stage of this initiative, assessing how far these scholarships have supported the educational development of beedi workers’ children, with the broader aim of contributing to their families’ well-being.

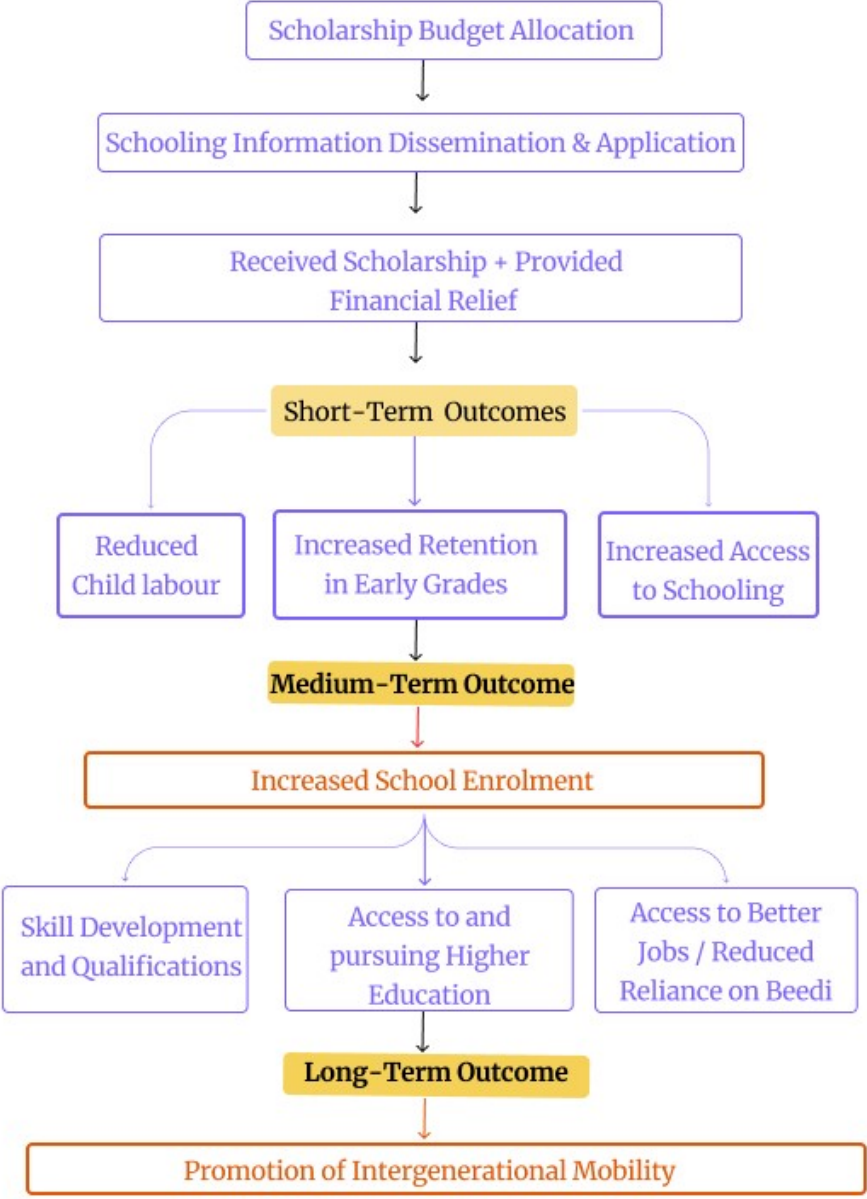
Given the historical prevalence of child labour in the beedi industry, the scholarship programme administered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment seeks to promote education and employment opportunities for beedi workers’ children. By targeting the reduction of child labour and promoting intergenerational mobility, these scholarships aim to break the cycle of dependence on hazardous, low-income beedi work, thereby improving the overall welfare of these families (Jhabvala, 2001; Chauhan, 2001; Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2023).

While there is no explicit, predefined theory of change for the scholarship programme under the BWWF, key objectives and the intended functioning of the initiative were pieced together through the analysis of the 1976 legislation, historical archives, union records, and Ministry of Labour and Employment reports. This analysis helped develop a coherent theory of change that outlines the roles of stakeholders, expected inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, while also accounting for potential risks, unintended consequences, and supporting factors at each stage.

Following Chapters 1 and 4, this chapter presents a focused theory of change specific to the scholarship benefit, while remaining linked to the broader framework that captures the interconnected dimensions of labour welfare.

This theory evolves over time, incorporating recent changes like the shift to a digital application system in 2015. For clarity, Figure 6.1 below provides a simplified, high-level view of the theory of change, illustrating how the scholarship programme is designed to function in practice.

Figure 6.1: Simplified high-level theory of change for the beedi scholarship programme



Source: Author’s creation

The scholarship programme for beedi workers’ children tackles interconnected challenges: reducing child labour, alleviating financial burdens, increasing school enrolment, and promoting intergenerational mobility. These outcomes are mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated. The programme is grounded in the understanding that financial strain is a significant

contributor to child labour in India, alongside factors such as poverty, illiteracy, large household sizes, and cultural norms that prioritise familial responsibilities (Ahmad, 2011). By easing this financial pressure, families may feel less compelled to have their children work, thereby increasing school attendance.

However, while this scholarship initiative addresses the critical issue of financial strain, it is essential to recognise that scholarships represent just one piece of a larger puzzle. As Weiner (1991) and Kabeer (2001) point out, child labour in India is driven by factors beyond poverty, including broader cultural, social, and bureaucratic barriers that impede progress. Ota and Moffatt's (2007) research in rural Andhra Pradesh, for example, highlights that intra-household dynamics, such as sibling competition and gender biases, often prioritise boys over girls in educational opportunities, emphasising that the issue extends beyond economic factors.

Additionally, the relationship between child labour and education in India is complex, influenced by various socio-economic and cultural factors. This complexity makes it difficult to ascertain whether children are out of school because they work or work because they are out of school. Nevertheless, research indicates a stronger correlation between the two than it may initially seem, underscoring education's role as a vital strategy against child labour (Rolly, 2019; Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2024). Education is central to the CA, as it expands freedoms and enhances essential capabilities, such as critical thinking, skill development, political participation, and the ability to pursue a fulfilling life (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2003; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). For beedi worker children, scholarships under the BWWF, 1976, enhance their capability to be educated, offering opportunities for improved life choices and long-term well-being. Ensuring children stay in school is vital for completing their education, pursuing higher learning or vocational training, and ultimately securing better job prospects. This pathway fosters intergenerational mobility, with education playing a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty.

This chapter explores to *what* extent and *how* scholarships introduced under the BWWF Act, 1976, contribute to the welfare of beedi worker children. The focus is on evaluating the impact of these scholarships on two key pathways outlined in the scholarship programme's theory of change⁴⁵, as shown in Figure 6.1: (1) *increased school enrolment* as a medium-term outcome by easing financial constraints on families, thus enabling children to enrol and continue their

⁴⁵ See also (Sanderson 2000; Stame, 2004; Roy et al., 2023) for evaluation in complex settings

education, which is critical to enhancing their capabilities, and (2) *promotion of intergenerational mobility* as a long-term outcome by assessing whether the education funded through these scholarships leads to ‘healthy’ (i.e., stable, non-hazardous, and sustainable) employment opportunities and a reduced reliance on beedi work (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2016). These pathways are integral to improving the *capabilities* of beedi worker children, fostering a shift from survival-based work to broader, more sustainable opportunities that can enhance their overall well-being and future prospects.

In terms of data, this chapter draws on both primary and secondary data. For the quantitative aspect, a survey of 80 single women aged 18-24, specifically daughters of beedi workers, was conducted, with 40 participants from each of Sirikonda and Thandriyal villages. Additionally, qualitative data is drawn from SSIs with 60 beedi workers, and KIIs with various stakeholders, including school principals, beedi contractors and subcontractors, MeeSeva centre employees, and the Mandal Beedi Medical Officer. Secondary data from sources such as the Digital Indian Labour Archives and government records, primarily from the Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Ministry of Education, are also used⁴⁶ (see section 4.5.1).

Section 6.1.1 provides an overview of the beedi scholarship programme and its mechanisms. Section 6.1.2 presents key demographic insights. Section 6.2 explores the medium-term impact pathway focused on school enrolment, while Section 6.3 examines the long-term impact pathway related to intergenerational mobility. Finally, Section 6.4 concludes by synthesising the findings on the role of scholarships as an intervention, assessing their impact on the observed welfare outcomes for beedi worker children. It connects the empirical analysis to the theoretical framework in Chapter 3, where “capability to be educated” and “being educated” were discussed in relation to the educational opportunities for children, emphasising the importance of enhancing capabilities for future well-being. Ultimately, this section underscores the impact of legislation on scholarships for beedi worker children, focusing on how the scholarships contribute to their capability to be educated and improve their long-term welfare.

⁴⁶ Key search terms like “*beedi*,” “*bidi*,” “*tobacco*,” “*manufacturing*,” “*scholarships*,” “*education*,” “*children*,” “*financial assistance*,” “*labour*,” “*labour*,” “*labour welfare*,” “*labour welfare*,” “*welfare*,” “*labour welfare fund*,” and “*beneficiaries*” were used to retrieve relevant information on the education and welfare schemes aimed at beedi workers and their families.

6.1.1 Overview of the Beedi Workers' Children Scholarship Scheme

The scholarship schemes under the BWWF, 1976, have evolved significantly to better support the education of beedi workers' children. Initially, the programme offered four distinct components: (i) financial assistance for school supplies for students in Classes I to IV, (ii) broader educational support for those in Class V and above, (iii) *attendance incentives* specifically aimed at encouraging school participation among girls, and (iv) *percentage incentives*, which were merit-based awards for academic performance from Class X onwards. In 2002–2003, these initiatives were consolidated by merging the attendance and percentage incentives into a unified structure (Rehman, 2007; Chauhan et al., 2014; John, 2015). The revised scheme continued to provide financial support for books and uniforms in the early grades (Classes I to IV) while expanding assistance for students from Class V through professional courses.

In 2015, the scholarship applications were moved online through the National Scholarship Portal (NSP), which incorporated the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system using Aadhaar Based Payment (ABP). The scholarships are now categorised into two main groups: Pre-Matric (Classes I to X) and Post-Matric (Class X through professional courses). This includes support for higher secondary education, vocational training (ITI and polytechnic), undergraduate degrees (including specialised programmes like B.Sc. Agriculture), and professional courses such as BE, MBBS, and MBA⁴⁷ (See Annexure-IV for an overview of the education system in Telangana). Scholarships are awarded annually under the programme titled “Financial Assistance for Education of the Wards of Beedi/Cine/IOMC/LSDM⁴⁸ Workers,” known in Telugu as *Prothsahaka Upakara Vethanam*, meaning “financial incentive to encourage the education” of beedi workers' children.

⁴⁷ ITI: *Industrial Training Institute*, BE: *Bachelor of Engineering*, MBBS: *Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery*, MBA: *Master of Business Administration*.

⁴⁸ IOMC: *Iron Ore Mines, Manganese Ore & Chrome Ore Mines*; LSDM: *Limestone and Dolomite Mines*.

The Labour Welfare Organisation (LWO), under the Director General of Labour Welfare, manages the scholarship scheme through 18 regional offices across India, supervised by Welfare Commissioners (See Annexure-IV for more detail). These offices implement welfare initiatives for marginalised workers in industries such as beedi, cinema, limestone, dolomite, iron ore, manganese ore, and chrome ore mining. Initially funded by cess collections under the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act of 1976, welfare provisions for beedi workers ceased to be governed by this Act following the abolition of the cess and the introduction of the GST⁴⁹ in 2017. Since 2018, the Ministry of Labour and Employment has overseen a consolidated labour welfare fund that includes benefits for beedi workers alongside other groups of mine and cine workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019).

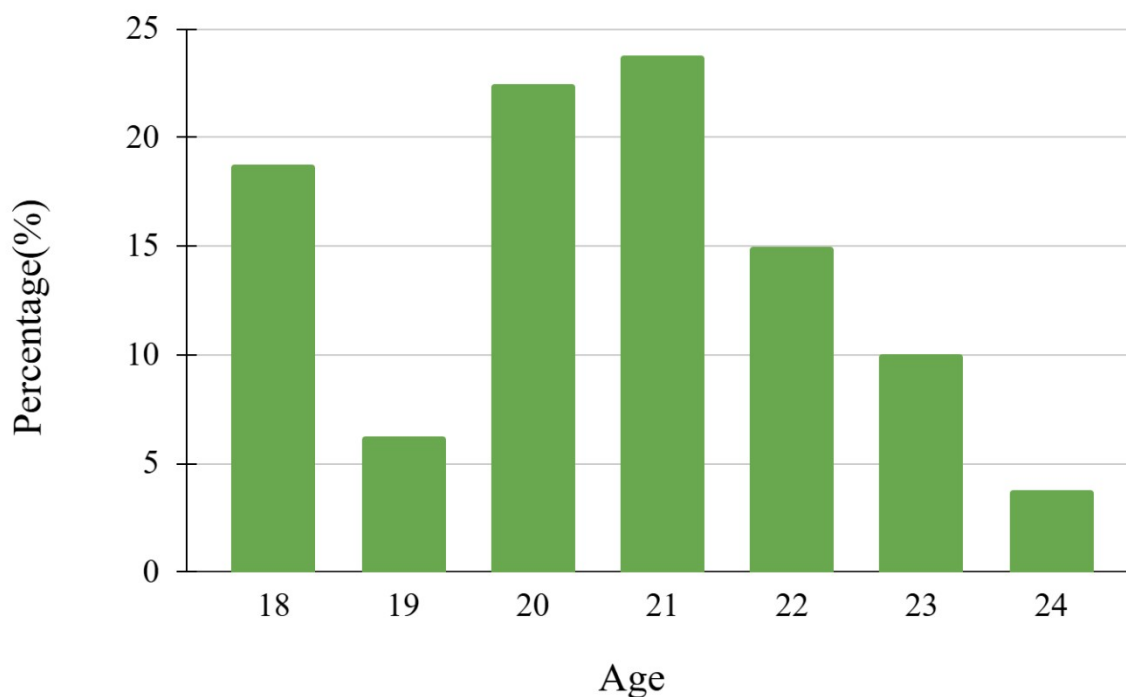
Eligibility criteria for the scholarships are that at least one parent must have been a beedi worker for a minimum of six months, and the family's total monthly income must not exceed ₹10,000. The student must have passed their last qualifying examination on the first attempt and be enrolled in a recognised educational institution in India, pursuing either general or technical education. Scholarships are not available to students repeating the same educational stage or receiving scholarships from other sources. Scholarships may also be cancelled if the student discontinues their studies or if the parent ceases to be a beedi worker (NSP, 2015).

6.1.2 Quick Demographics

The sample consists of n=80 unmarried Hindu women, all daughters of beedi workers, aged 18-24. Participants are evenly distributed between the villages of Sirikonda and Thandriyal, with 40 from each village. As Figure 6.2 below shows, the average age of participants is 20.55 years, with a strong concentration in the early twenties, particularly at ages 20 and 21. In terms of caste distribution, 50% belong to the BC, 37.5% to the SC, and 12.5% to the OC.

⁴⁹ This shift has sparked considerable debate where discussions have centered on the implications of higher GST on beedis, exacerbating unemployment, and concerns about the dilution of welfare benefits for beedi workers when their benefits are merged with those of other worker groups (Rajya Sabha 2018;2023) in Unstarred Questions No. 376 and No. 1508. Additionally, questions have arisen regarding the reach and effectiveness of these benefits, especially in the context of the newly passed but not yet implemented labour codes, which propose to replace 44 existing labour laws with four new codes. This legislative overhaul has further intensified the debate surrounding labour welfare.

Figure 6.2: Age distribution of beedi workers' daughters (n=80)

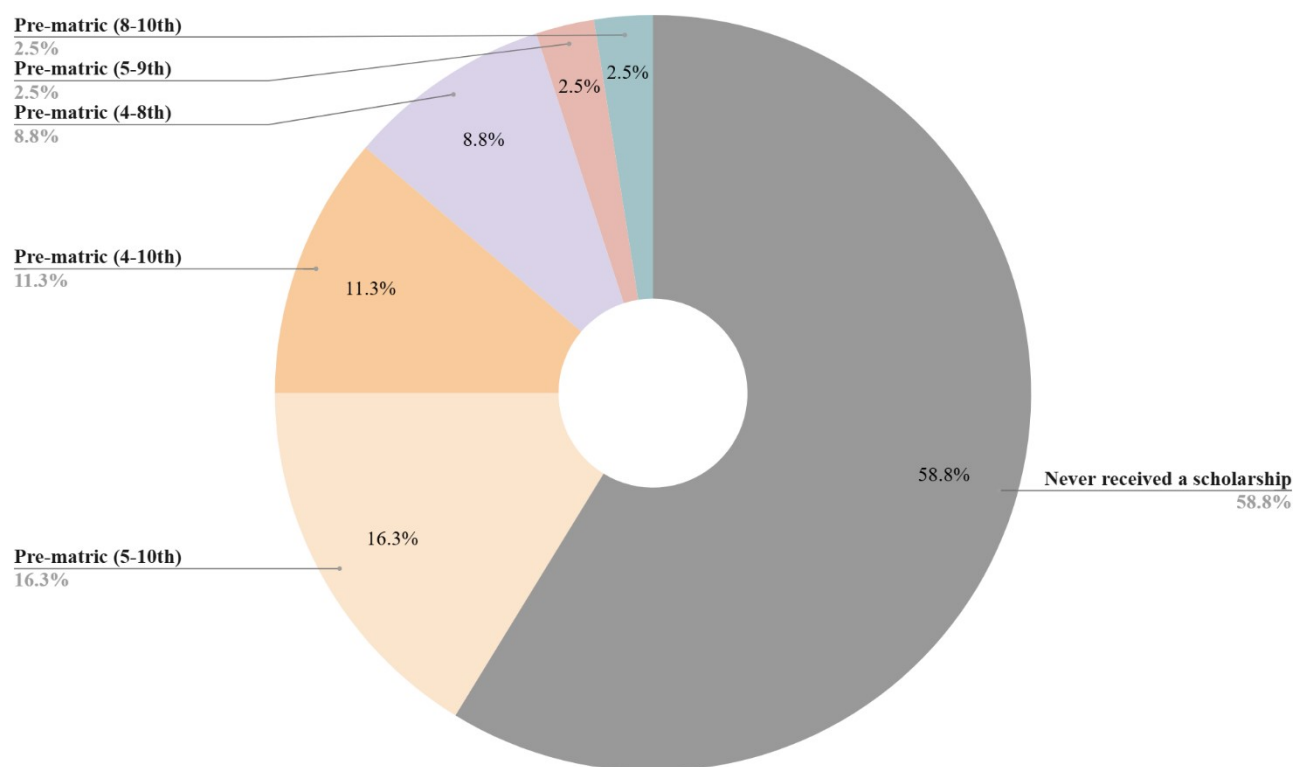


Source: Fieldwork survey

All participants began school at age five, with birth years ranging from 1999 to 2005 and school enrolment between 2004 and 2010. Regarding school type, 48.3% attended private schools, while 51.3% attended government schools. Importantly, only the pre-matric scholarships were functioning effectively during their school years, with the post-matric scholarships largely dysfunctional.

As Figure 6.3 below shows, 58.8% of the 80 students surveyed never received a scholarship, while 41.3% did. Among recipients, most benefited from support spanning 4th to 10th grade, with variations in the duration and coverage of scholarships.

Figure 6.3: Scholarship status (n=80)



Source: Fieldwork Survey

6.2 School enrolment: Medium-term Outcome

This section evaluates the medium-term outcome of school enrolment, as outlined in Figure 6.1 of the theory of change. Child labour has long been a pressing issue in India, particularly in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, which, according to the 1991 Census of India, recorded the highest incidence of child labour in the country at 10%. By 2010, this figure had drastically fallen to 4.7%, reflecting the success of various child labour reduction initiatives (Census of India, 1991, 2001, 2011; NSSO, 2010). Historically, Andhra Pradesh had consistently ranked among the top five states for child labour prevalence between the 1950s and 1990s (MoSPI, 2012), with entrenched child labour across sectors. NSSO data from 2004–2005 shows that 71% of child labourers were engaged in agriculture—particularly in cotton picking⁵⁰, weeding, and harvesting (MoSPI, 2005; Ramamurthy, 2011). Around 10% worked in manufacturing,

⁵⁰ Gadwal, Adilabad, Warangal (rural), and Nagar Kurnool in Telangana are identified as key areas where children under 14 are employed in cotton farming (Government of Telangana, 2019)

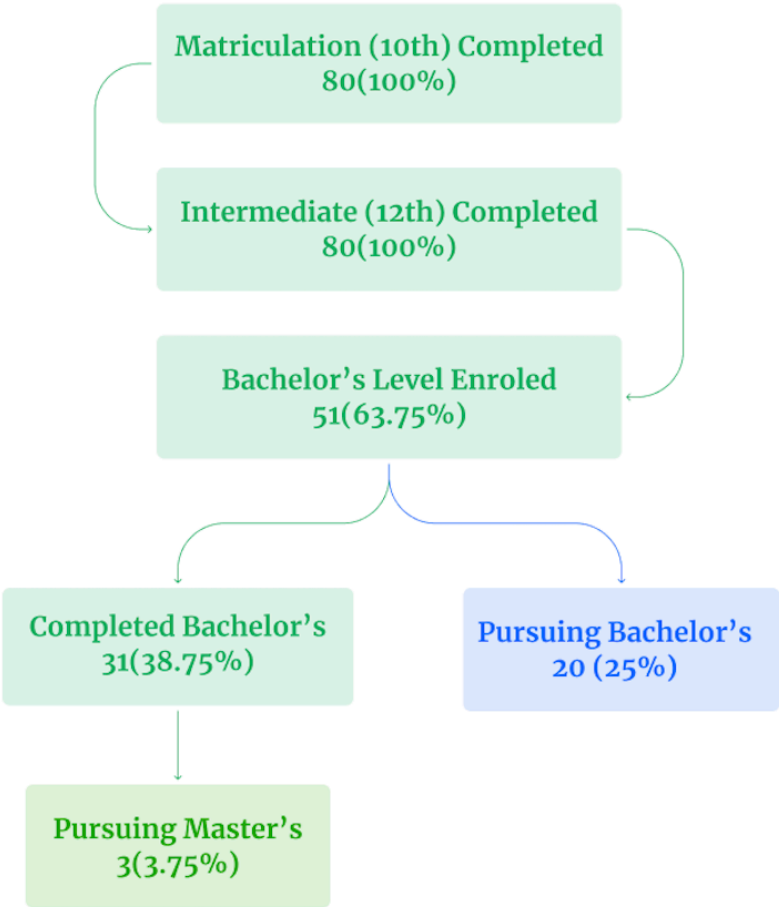
including in beedi production, which reflects the state's long-standing status as a major beedi producing region (Human Rights Watch, 1996), while 4% were involved commerce and social services (Krutikova, 2009). The decline in child labour during this period thus represents a notable shift, given the scale and persistence of the problem (Guarcello et al., 2010; Saharia, 2013).

During this period, Andhra Pradesh experienced a notable rise in literacy rates, with overall literacy increasing from 44% in 1991 to 67.7% in 2011 (Census of India, 1991; 2011). Male literacy rose from 55.1% to 74.9%, while female literacy increased from 32.7% to 59.1%, significantly narrowing the gender gap in education. This period of educational growth coincides with when individuals in the sample from Sirikonda and Thandiryal villages—then part of Andhra Pradesh—began attending school (2004-2010). The connection between this sample and the broader state trends, prompts an exploration of the extent to which beedi scholarships contributed to these advancements, alongside larger efforts to reduce child labour and improve educational access.

Among the 80 girls surveyed in these two villages, all had completed matriculation (10th grade) and intermediate education (12th grade), and nearly two-thirds pursued higher education. Specifically, 38.75% had completed their bachelor's degree, 25% were currently enrolled, and 3.75% had gone on to master's studies (Figure 6.4).

These educational outcomes reflect broader regional trends, with Telangana, outperforms the national average in educational attainment. As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017–18, 44% of Telangana's adult population has completed secondary education or higher, compared to 36.1% nationally. Additionally, 15% of adults in the state hold a bachelor's or postgraduate degree, well above the national average of 11.5% (MoSPI, 2018). Active college enrolment in the 18–23 age group is also higher, at 46%.

Figure 6.4: Education level (n=80)

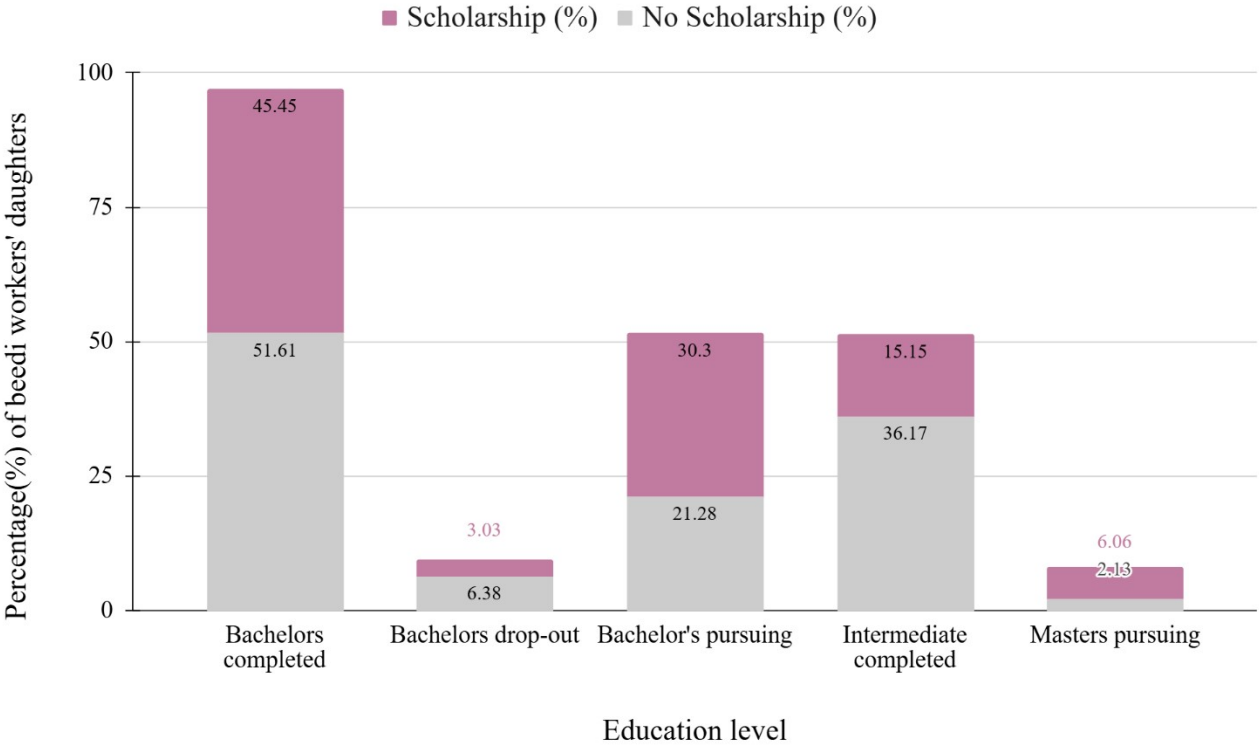


Source: Fieldwork survey (Author’s creation)

A cross-tabulation of scholarship status and education level reveals that all 80 girls surveyed completed their matriculation and higher secondary education, regardless of scholarship status.

Of these, 58.8% did not receive scholarships, while 41.3 % did. Among those without scholarships, just over half have completed or are pursuing a bachelor’s degree, compared to a higher percentage of scholarship recipients who have reached or are pursuing the same level of education (see Figure 6.5 below).

Figure 6.5: Education level by scholarship status (n=80)



Source: Fieldwork survey

The analysis reveals a weak positive correlation (0.26) between education level and receiving a scholarship. Although scholarship recipients tend to have slightly higher educational attainment, the relationship is not statistically significant at the 5% level, with a chi-square statistic of 5.6 and a p-value of 0.06. This suggests that scholarships may not be the primary driver of educational success among respondents.

Despite historically playing a significant role in improving educational access for the children of beedi workers, recent trends indicate a decline in the effectiveness of these scholarships. This shift underscores the need to examine both their historical impact and the factors contributing to their diminishing efficacy.

6.2.1 Historical Impact of Scholarships on School enrolment

Beedi scholarships historically played a pivotal role in reducing child labour and fostering intergenerational mobility among children of beedi workers. Early initiatives demonstrated significant improvements in school enrolment and attendance, particularly when supplemented

by support such as free uniforms. For instance, SEWA's report from Ahmedabad highlighted the near elimination of child labour in areas with robust scholarship implementation (Chauhan, 2001). Anecdotal success stories further illustrate the impact—one SEWA activist observed, “In our area, a number of girls are getting scholarships... some children, after having availed the BWWF benefits, have become pharmacists and even engineers” (Chauhan, 2001, p.83). By 1999-2000, the Beedi Welfare Fund had disbursed Rs. 92 million in scholarships and Rs. 3.6 million in incentive schemes, contributing to reduced dropout rates and improved educational outcomes (Chauhan, 2001).

However, these benefits were limited in scale, reaching only a fraction of the estimated 44–75 lakh beedi worker population. Disparities in access arose from factors such as low awareness and weak union presence in certain regions. Areas like Ahmedabad and Gudiyattam, with strong union networks, saw greater success in reducing child labour through scholarships, while regions with weaker networks struggled to access these programmes effectively. Despite seemingly substantial financial allocations, the per-family benefit averaged only Rs. 21 annually in 1999-2000 (Chauhan, 2001), highlighting the limited transformative potential for individual households.

As discussed earlier (see Section 6.1.1), the scholarship scheme under the BWWF originally included both *attendance incentives*—aimed at improving school participation, particularly among girls—and *percentage incentives*, which rewarded academic performance. During the period from 1995–96 to 1999–2000, these components demonstrated considerable growth at the national level. Beneficiaries increased steadily from 217,800 to 320,501, reflecting a strong initial push to improve educational access. *Attendance incentives*, in particular, surged dramatically—from just 1,123 beneficiaries in 1995-96 to 105,351 in 1999-2000—indicating a focused effort to enhance school retention rates. *Percentage incentives* also peaked in 1998/99 at 13,965 beneficiaries, showcasing the programme's broad outreach (Das, 2001). However, by the end of this period, growth in uniform and textbook distribution stagnated, and the momentum of certain incentive programmes began to wane, hinting at challenges in sustaining the initial enthusiasm and impact.

Field studies have consistently highlighted the inadequacy of the beedi scholarship programme in meeting the actual educational expenses of workers' children. As early as 2001, Jhabvala (2001) documented that women beedi workers found the annual scholarship amount of Rs. 250 per child to be severely insufficient—actual costs, they noted, were four to five times higher.

In response, they advocated for an increase to Rs. 1,000 per child per year, a figure they believed would more realistically cover schooling expenses at the time.

Rajasekhar and Anantha (2006), analysing data from 876 beedi workers across Karnataka, report that between 1999–2000 and 2003–04 the average scholarship amount increased from Rs. 402 to Rs. 958. While this increase brought the scholarship close to the Rs. 1,000 per child that workers and activists had identified as necessary in 2001, education expenses had continued to rise by the early 2000s. As a result, even after this adjustment, the scholarship remained insufficient to cover the actual costs of schooling for beedi worker households. Similar shortcomings were highlighted by Chauhan et al. (2014), whose study of 325 workers and stakeholders in Hyderabad and Bangalore identified limited outreach, structural inefficiencies, and insufficient funding as persistent barriers undermining the programme’s overall effectiveness and impact.

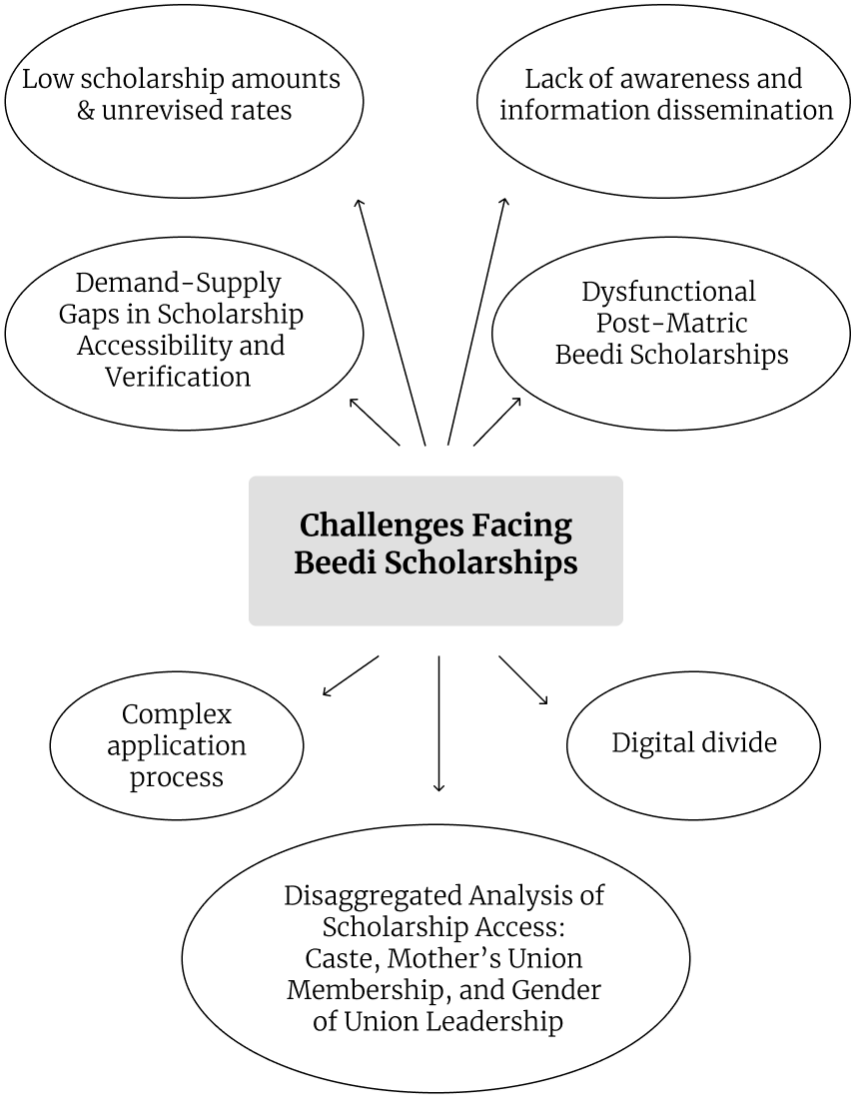
The merging of targeted incentive schemes into a single scholarship programme after 2002-03 further diluted the programme’s effectiveness. *Attendance* and *percentage incentives*, which had previously addressed specific needs, were streamlined into one generalised scheme, reducing their ability to tackle diverse challenges. Over time, economic pressures, stagnant funding, and evolving socio-economic conditions compounded these issues, leading to a decline in the long-term impact of these scholarships.

Despite these setbacks, the historical significance of the programme cannot be understated. In its early years, the scholarship scheme marked a crucial turning point for marginalised communities, reducing child labour and opening pathways to higher education and professional careers for children of beedi workers. Its success, although diminished in later years, remains a testament to the transformative potential of targeted educational interventions.

6.2.2 Declining Effectiveness: What Has Been Limiting the Impact of Beedi Scholarships on School Enrolment Over Time?

The following section examines the Beedi Workers’ Scholarship programme, which, despite its intention to provide financial relief to the children of beedi workers, has not significantly improved school enrolment. Several issues undermine its effectiveness, as examined below (Figure 6.6).

Figure 6.6: Challenges facing beedi scholarships



Source: Author’s creation based on Fieldwork data

6.2.2.1 Low Scholarship Amounts and Unrevised Rates

One major obstacle to the effectiveness of beedi scholarships is the insufficient financial support, which has failed to keep up with rising living and educational costs. A review of Ministry of Labour and Employment annual reports on labour welfare for beedi workers reveal that scholarship rates remained stagnant for over 15 years (2002-03 to 2021-22), and even the recent revision in 2022-23 (Table 6.1) has failed to adequately cover rising educational expenses. Consequently, families often feel discouraged from participating, perceiving the

small scholarship amounts as not worth the effort required for the application, as noted in a study conducted in Karnataka and Bangalore (Chauhan et al., 2014). While addressing the challenges faced by SC/ST beedi workers, the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (2013; 2019) has consistently raised concerns about the inadequacy of scholarship amounts and has proposed various recommendations to increase these rates, emphasising the need for greater support for these marginalised communities.

In our sample, 75% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the scholarship rates, highlighting the urgent need for revision. Ongoing complaints from parents, students, schools, and unions further highlight the necessity for adjustments (Saravanan, 2002; Chauhan et al., 2014; Sharma & Singh, 2020).

Historically, girls received higher scholarship amounts than boys (see Annexure-IV) to address their disproportionate involvement in beedi rolling—data from the NSSO (2004-2005) indicate that there were four girls for every boy engaged in this activity (MoSPI, 2005). This policy aimed to promote school enrolment and combat child labour. However, as of 2022, scholarship amounts have been equalised for both genders. The rates used by our study sample reflect the amounts prior to this change.

Table 6.1 below presents the old scholarship rates (2002-2022), inflation-adjusted rates (calculated by the author⁵²) (2022), and the new revised rates for 2022-23, focusing exclusively on female students. An inflation-adjusted analysis reveals a significant gap between current and adequate rates. For instance, the inflation-adjusted rate for degree courses scholarships stands at ₹10,976.28, while the revised 2022-23 rate is only ₹6,000. This stagnation underscores the pressing need to revise scholarship amounts to align with inflation and effectively support students. Data on inflation was sourced from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

⁵² The inflation-adjusted rate is calculated using the formula: Adjusted Rate = Earlier Rate × (1 + Inflation Rate)^{Years}. In this example, the earlier rate of ₹250, with an annual inflation rate of 6.7% (as provided by the MoSPI), is adjusted over 20 years (from 2002 to 2022). The calculation involves adding the inflation rate to 1 (i.e., 1 + 0.067 = 1.067) and then raising it to the power of 20, yielding approximately 3.659. This factor is then multiplied by the earlier rate (₹250 × 3.659), resulting in an inflation-adjusted rate of approximately ₹914.75.

Table 6.1: Old, inflation-adjusted and new scholarship amounts

Category	Earlier Scholarship Rates (2002-2022) (Rates Availed by Sample) Girls	Inflation-Adjusted Rates (2022) (<i>What the Rates Should Have Been</i>) Girls	New Scholarship Rates (2022-2023) (Revised Official Rates) Girls and Boys
I to IV (Dress/Books)	₹250	₹914.75	₹1,000
V to VIII	₹940	₹3,435.34	₹1,500
IX	₹1,140	₹4,748.62	₹2,000
X	₹1,840	₹7,831.28	₹2,000
XI to XII	₹2,440	₹8,927.66	₹3,000
ITI ⁵¹	₹10,000	₹36,587.65	₹6,000
Polytechnic	NA	NA	₹6,000
Degree Courses (incl. B.Sc. Agri)	₹3,000	₹10,976.28	₹6,000
Professional Courses (BE/MBBS/MBA)	₹15,000	₹54,881.39	₹25,000

Source: Ministry of Labour and Employment, Annual report 2022-2023

⁵¹ In the earlier scholarship structure (2002–2022), ITI (Industrial Training Institute) courses were treated as a separate category with a higher scholarship amount of ₹10,000. However, under the revised scheme, ITI has been clubbed with degree courses and now receives ₹6,000—the same as other undergraduate programmes—reflecting a decline in support for vocational training students.

6.2.2.2 Lack of Awareness and Information Dissemination

The annual announcement of scholarships via the NSP is crucial, but it is not enough to ensure that information reaches those who need it. Effective dissemination requires the active involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, including schools, principals, teachers, beedi employers, contractors, LWOs, and unions.

The field survey indicates that only 40% of students are aware of available scholarships, while 90% are unaware of the entire application process. This lack of awareness is a longstanding issue in India; significant gaps in knowledge regarding scholarship schemes in rural areas have been documented (Mehra et al., 2014; Chauhan et al., 2014; Biswas, 2018; Samsujjaman, 2018; Babu, 2021; Qasim & Daniel, 2021; Rahmatullah et al., 2022; Barman & Sarkar, 2022; Patra et al., 2023).

Interviews with subcontractors, principals, and unions reveal a growing disconnect in accessing scholarships following the shift to an online application process. In Sirikonda and Thandriyal, subcontractors admitted to being uninformed, with one from Thandriyal remarking,

“Since the application process went online, we are not informed about it. The scholarships have decreased, and no one wants to deal with the paperwork.”

— (Subcontractor, Thandriyal)

Similarly, schools, while aware of the scholarships, no longer assist in spreading awareness or facilitating applications, as a principal from Sirikonda noted:

“Now that it is online, we do not spread awareness or help anymore, as it does not go through our school anymore” (More in next section 6.2.2.3).

— (Government School Principal, Sirikonda)

The lack of engagement from local authorities, including government officials and LWOs, has further compounded the issue. With no awareness campaigns, many families remain unaware of scholarship deadlines and requirements, leading to missed opportunities for students.

Unions, however, have stepped in to address this gap. Unions in both Sirikonda and Thandriyal emphasised their role in raising awareness:

“We are aware, and we make sure to spread awareness whenever and however we can.”

— (Union leaders, Sirikonda and Thandriyal)

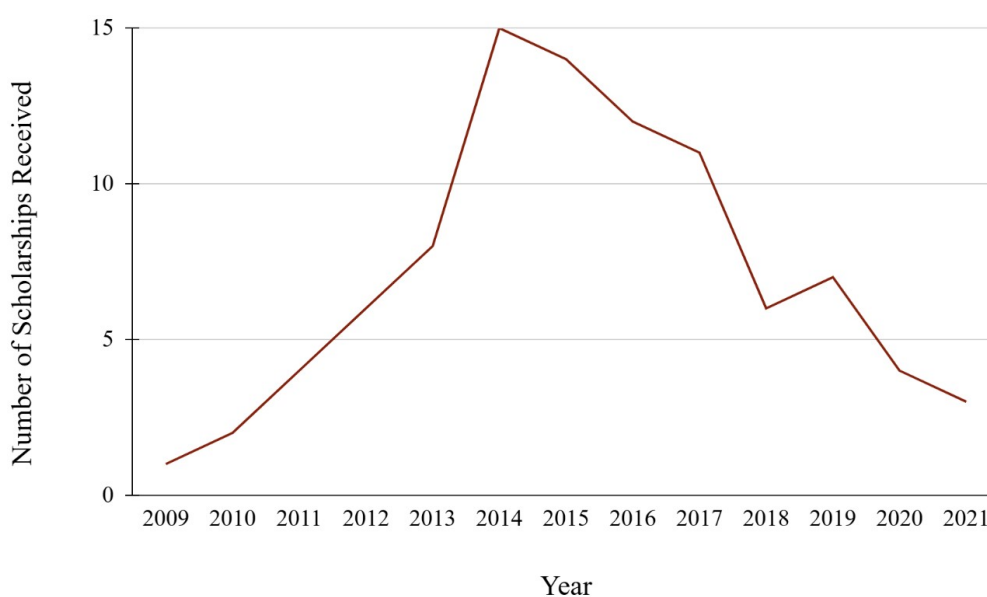
Literature has long demonstrated the importance of collective action in securing welfare benefits (Chauhan, 2001; Hensman, 2001b; Rajashekhar & Anantha, 2006; Sen, 2012). For example, the Karnataka State Beedi Workers Federation’s protests against government attempts to reduce scholarships underscore that these funds represent both financial support and recognition of beedi workers’ contributions (AIBWF, 2016). Likewise, organisations like SEWA demonstrate how collective efforts can effectively advocate for essential welfare benefits (Chauhan, 2001). (for more on role of unions, see section 6.2.2.7).

6.2.2.3 Digital Divide

The NSP, launched in 2015, sought to streamline financial aid by transferring scholarships directly into beneficiaries’ bank accounts, aiming to minimise intermediaries, reduce corruption, and cut down administrative burdens (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2019).

Data from Sirikonda and Thandriyal show that among the sampled daughters of beedi workers ($n = 33$), the number of scholarships received increased steadily up to 2014, before declining sharply thereafter (see Figure 6.7). This distribution reflects the timing of scholarship access among the respondents and should be interpreted with caution, as it is shaped by the age and educational stage of the sampled daughters rather than representing a population-level trend. Nonetheless, when read alongside field evidence, this pattern is indicative of the challenges that emerged following the shift to digital application processes under the National Scholarship Portal in 2015, particularly for rural households with limited digital literacy and access. These difficulties were further compounded by disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021.

Figure 6.7: Trend of scholarships received over the years ($n = 33$)



Source: Fieldwork

Transitioning the scholarship application process online has imposed significant barriers for rural families, who often lack digital literacy and reliable internet access. In Sirikonda and Thandriyal, many parents found the new system challenging, leading to fewer applications.

A local principal shared,

“We used to manage scholarships directly. The online system was intended to prevent misuse, but it has excluded many due to digital barriers, placing new burdens on families. Without on-site staff, families must use Mee Seva centres to apply as we lack both computers and computer-trained staff.”

— (School Principal, Sirikonda)

Although the digital system has enhanced transparency and tracking to prevent duplicate claims, it has also introduced new access and accountability challenges. A local health officer for beedi workers noted,

“Previously, scholarship processing was a matter of honour, involving principals and teachers deeply. Now, with everything online, that engagement has faded. Students must go to Mee Seva centres, which only adds to the difficulty.”

— (Mandal Beedi Medical Officer, Korutla)

Cases of corruption in scholarship programmes, such as those in Himachal Pradesh and Bihar (Bodh, 2022; Indo Patra et al., 2023), drove the push for a digital platform, yet this reliance has also widened the digital divide, resulting in the exclusion of already marginalised rural populations.

6.2.2.4 Complex Application Process

The application process for beedi worker scholarships remains complex, time-consuming, and costly, creating barriers for potential applicants. Students must compile numerous documents, make multiple photocopies, and submit them at Mee Seva centres where staff assist with the online application. At ₹3 per page, copying costs can range from ₹30 to ₹60. Adding in travel expenses and lost work time, the total cost of applying can reach ₹150–₹300. Typically, a family member must make between six and eight trips to schools, government offices, and photocopy shops, adding to the financial and logistical strain. Annexure-IV outlines the required documents, their sources, steps involved, associated costs, and the number of visits necessary to complete the process. These complexities are especially burdensome for parents with limited education or literacy, who often need outside assistance, further increasing costs (Ramanujam & Rawal, 2010).

One beedi worker expressed her frustrations:

“Schools no longer raise awareness or help with scholarships. We’re left to manage on our own, struggling with paperwork, costs, and travel.”

— (Sravanthi, 38, BC, Sirikonda)

Such exclusionary trends linked to documentation challenges, reflect findings from other studies on the NSP (Bose and Sharma, 2023). For instance, Goswami et al. (2022) report that many students were excluded from Assam’s Ishan Uday Scholarship Scheme due to difficulties in obtaining income or caste certificates. These challenges were further compounded by high costs and bureaucratic delays, particularly for marginalised communities. Notably, the process of securing documentation—especially income certificates—often proved prohibitive, with the cost in some cases exceeding the value of the scholarship itself.

As one student explained,

“We paid ₹1,000 for my income and caste certificates. But my scholarship amount was only ₹940. What’s the point?”

— (Keerthi, 25, SC, Sirikonda)

These high costs deter many families from applying, further reducing scholarship access. In interviews, 60% of respondents expressed frustration over the documentation demands, and nearly all described the process as arduous and discouraging. This indicates how the decline in school support for scholarships has left families to navigate the requirements on their own.

6.2.2.5 Dysfunctional Post-Matric Beedi Scholarships

Furthermore, post-matric Beedi scholarships have become largely dysfunctional, especially in states like Telangana, where state-funded caste-based scholarships available through the Telangana e-pass portal, offer far greater financial support. For example, state scholarships cover full tuition (ranging from ₹850 for intermediate courses to ₹6.90 lakhs for medical studies) and provide monthly stipends (₹500 to ₹1,500), whereas post-matric beedi scholarships offer only a modest annual sum of ₹6,000 for bachelor’s students and do not cover tuition. Consequently, 65% of bachelor’s students in our study reported receiving caste-based state scholarships, which were automatically awarded upon college admission.

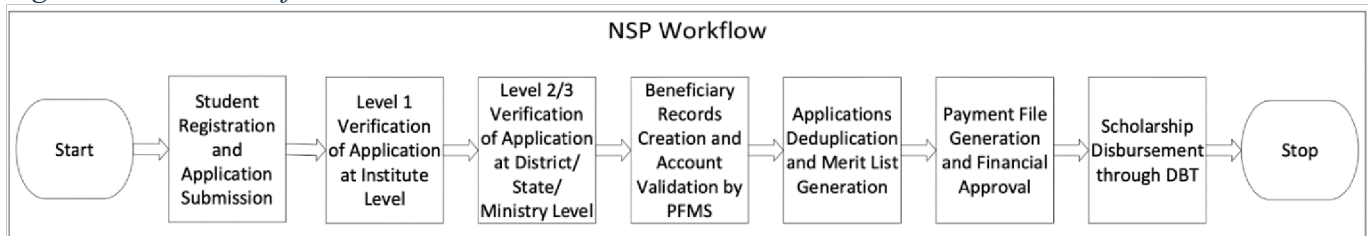
This disparity in financial support has contributed to a steady decline in post-matric beedi scholarship usage as students increasingly turn to state-funded programmes that more fully cover tuition and living costs. Data shows that while uptake of pre-matric beedi scholarships in Telangana rose from 80.8% in 2018 to 83.5% in 2023, post-matric scholarship usage dropped from 19.2% to 16.6%, indicating a shift toward state-sponsored programmes after the 10th grade. Notably, these figures reflect applications received; how many reach verified status is a separate concern.

As mentioned earlier in Section 6.1.2, pre-matric beedi scholarships play a crucial role up to the 10th grade. For many students, they are the only available support during early schooling. However, their relevance declines at the post-secondary level. Caste-based state scholarship systems are more inclusive and offer better financial assistance. Nonetheless, the beedi scholarship remains essential for students in the pre-matric stage.

6.2.2.6 Demand-Supply Gaps in Scholarship Accessibility and Verification

The NSP was launched to centralise and streamline scholarship management, supporting the Digital India initiative by implementing a (SMART) system—Simplified, Mission-Oriented, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent—to enhance DBT of scholarships. In theory, this reduces fund leakage and speeds up disbursement by verifying student applications through a multi-step process from registration to disbursement, overseen by multiple layers of verification (see Figure 6.8). Applications are deduplicated, checked, and then approved through the Public Financial Management System (PFMS), enabling direct transfer to students’ bank accounts. However, a significant gap remains between scholarship demand and the actual disbursement due to systemic issues, particularly during the verification process.

Figure 6.8: NSP workflow



Source: National scholarship portal (Available here: [NSP](#))

Data from Telangana highlights this discrepancy, showing a drastic reduction in verified applications for beedi scholarships despite stable or increasing application numbers. Field data from Sirikonda and Thandriyal, for instance, reveal a high rejection rate despite students meeting all eligibility requirements. In a sample of 80 students, 40 applied for scholarships, yet only 33 (82.5%) received them, while 7 students (17.5%) were rejected solely due to issues in the verification stage managed by schools. Schools must log in with a school code to verify applications by a strict deadline. When schools fail to meet these deadlines, applications are automatically rejected, blocking further district or state-level verification. Consequently, 17.5% of students missed out on scholarships despite full eligibility, illustrating how procedural failures directly impact students.

At the national level, NSP data reveals that since 2014, between 20-35% of scholarship applications remain unverified each year, resulting in rejections. More recently, this gap has worsened, with rejection rates reaching 45-50% due to verification issues. Sharma and Singh (2020) highlight these rising discrepancies, which reveal how verification challenges

disproportionately affect eligible students and illustrate the inefficiencies between allocated budgets and actual fund utilisation.

This complex and inconsistent process is therefore demotivating for students and families who invest time and resources, only to face rejections caused by verification delays or oversight. Multi-stage verifications and limited digital access in rural areas exacerbate these issues, often discouraging families from completing applications. The time and costs required for resubmissions and additional verifications further strain family resources, contributing to applicant dropout and a growing lack of trust in the process.

This trend of decreasing verification rates has had a measurable impact on scholarship accessibility. In Telangana, verified applications for beedi scholarships dropped from 50% to 25% between 2018 and 2023. Specifically, pre-matric scholarships in Telangana fell in verification from 76.2% to 16.9% over this period, even as applications rose. In Jagityal district, applications surged by 90.9% from 2018 to 2023, but verification rates fell by 28.5 percentage points. This trend indicates that while application numbers increase, more families struggle with verification, likely due to bureaucratic barriers, technical issues, or the system's overall complexity.

Research on other scholarships managed under the NSP, reveals persistent challenges in the verification process. Studies have shown that despite the digitalisation of transactions, verification rates remain low—only about 40% of applicants are successfully verified. These shortcomings are compounded by verification lapses, technical glitches, instances of fraud, and inefficient fund allocation, all of which reflect deeper bureaucratic and structural issues (Umapathi & Venkataramana, 2015; Bose & Sharma, 2023).

Budget utilisation presents another challenge. Despite consistent budget allocations under the labour welfare fund from 2009-2024, actual spending remains low, with utilisation rates often below 70% (Satapathy et al., 2022). While ample funds are allocated for education and welfare for beedi workers, administrative delays, insufficient staffing, and bureaucratic hurdles have led to underutilisation and therefore, failure to fully benefit target populations (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2019; Bose et al., 2020). This gap between budget allocations and effective implementation further highlights structural inefficiencies within the system.

A lack of accessible grievance redressal mechanisms compounds these challenges. NSP lacks transparency, and the absence of school-level involvement in disbursement has made the

process impersonal and remote, leaving students and families without a straightforward means to address application issues. Previously, schools played an integral role in the process, providing guidance and support that ensured accountability. Now, the digital system, though designed for transparency, fails to provide adequate local support, often leading to increased exclusion and inefficiency.

A study by Patra et al. (2021) reveals that most students (66%) depend on official websites for information, yet few are familiar with their institution's nodal officer, while less than 4% have engaged with them. For their part, nodal officers report feeling undertrained and overwhelmed, underscoring the lack of effective support for students.

In summary, faults in the programme's design, an absence of equitable access, and centralised decision-making with limited rural insight, exacerbate these issues, underscoring the need to address the knowledge gaps and financial burden that disproportionately impact rural and marginalised families.

6.2.2.7 Disaggregated Analysis of Scholarship Access: Caste, Mother's Union Membership, and Gender of Union Leadership

A more disaggregated analysis reveals that access to scholarships is shaped by intersecting structural and social factors—including caste, a mother's union membership, and the gender of local union leadership. While unions play a key role in spreading awareness (as discussed in section 6.2.2.2), these additional layers of influence produce significant disparities in who actually receives scholarships.

Students from upper caste groups (OC and BC) are more likely to receive scholarships than those from SC communities. While the direct relationship between caste and scholarship receipt appears weak—with a correlation coefficient of 0.23 and a p-value of 0.09, indicating no statistically significant association at the 5% level—caste still matters. It is linked to other structural advantages that improve access to scholarships, such as union membership and village-level support.

These interconnections are summarised in Table 6.2, which presents the correlation and Chi-square analysis of caste, union membership, and scholarship access.

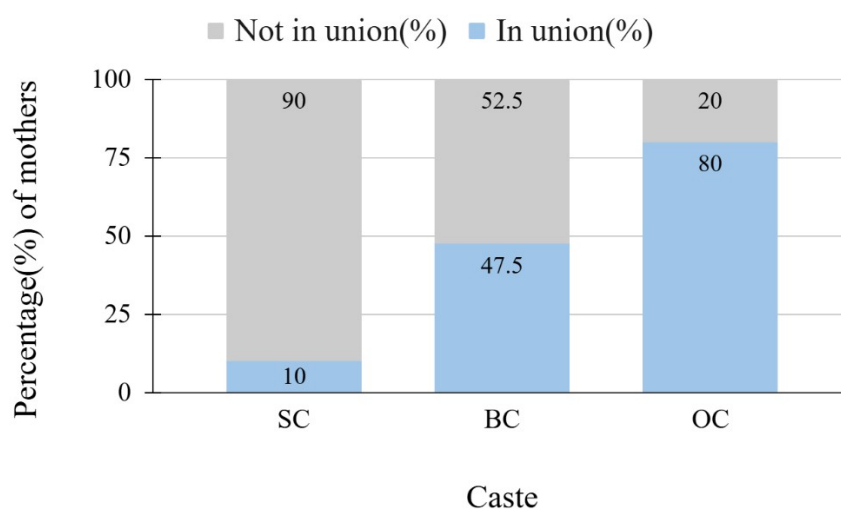
Table 6.2: Chi-Square and Correlation Analysis of Caste, Union Membership, and Scholarship Receipt

Variables Cross-tabulated	Correlation Coefficient	Chisquare (χ^2) Value	Significance
Caste \times Scholarship Receipt	0.23	4.73	Not significant (p-value = 0.09), no significant association at 5% level.
Caste \times Mother's Union Membership	0.488	19.09	Significant (p-value = 0.000), strongly associated at 5% significance level.
Mother's Union Membership \times Scholarship	0.45	16.37	Significant (p-value = 0.000), strongly associated at 5% significance level.
Village \times Scholarship Receipt	0.33	8.71	Significant (p-value = 0.003), associated at 5% significance level.

Source: Fieldwork Survey

An examination of mother's union membership shows that upper caste groups are more likely to have mothers who are active union members. The moderate correlation of 0.488 and highly significant Chi-square test result of $p = 0.000$ reflect this trend. Union membership is considerably more common among OC (80%) and BC (47.5%) mothers, whereas only 10% of SC mothers are union members (see Figure 6.9. below).

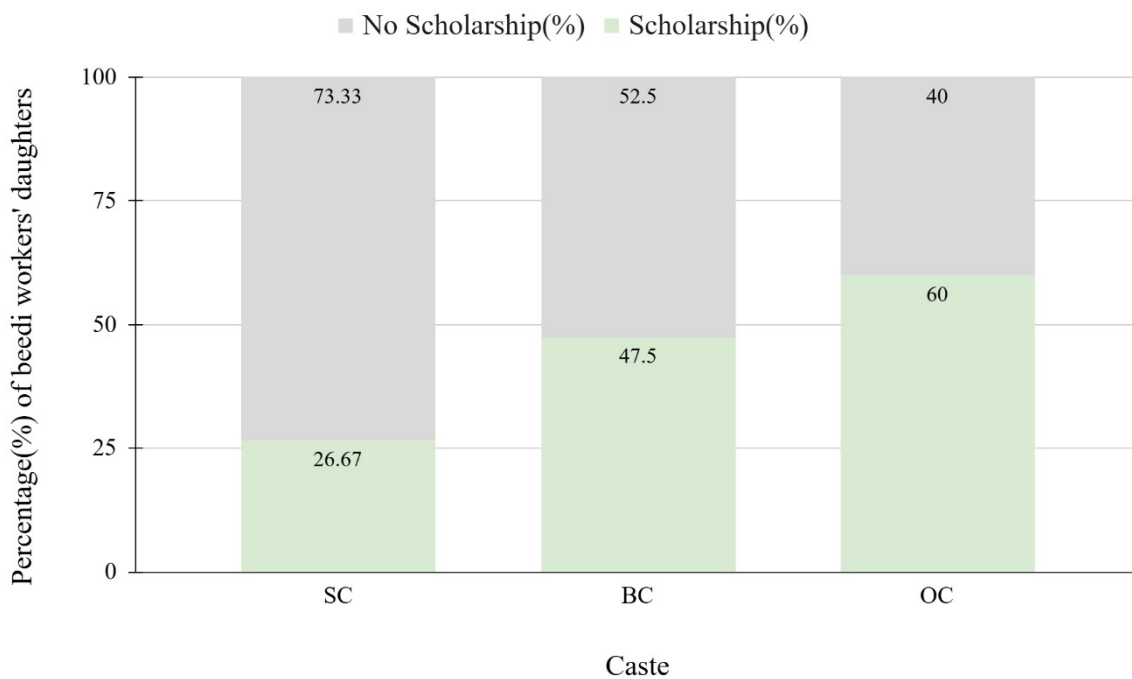
Figure 6.9: Mother's Union Membership Status by Caste



Source: Fieldwork Survey

This disparity contributes to unequal scholarship access, with 60% of OC children and 47.5% of BC children receiving scholarships, compared to just 26.7% of SC children (see Figure 6.10 below). This suggests that mothers from upper caste backgrounds not only have better access to unionised employment but may also benefit from resources and networks that facilitate educational support for their children, including information about scholarships and financial stability.

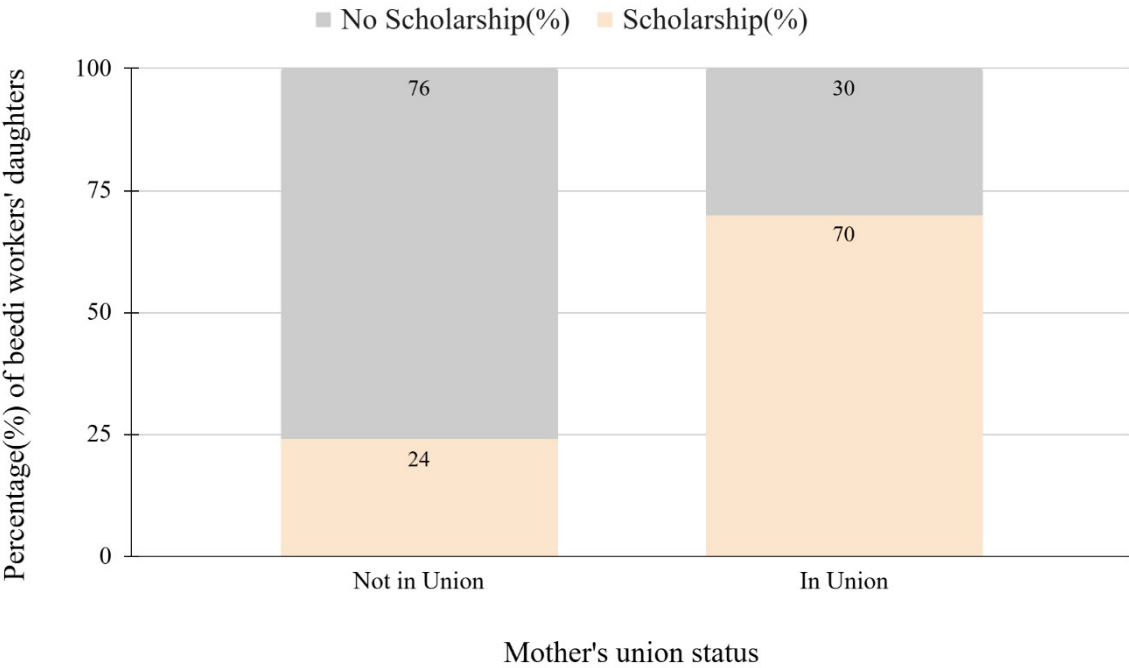
Figure 6.10: Scholarship status by caste



Source: Fieldwork Survey

The data further indicates a strong association between mother’s union membership and scholarship access: students with union-member mothers are far more likely to receive scholarships, with 70% of these students’ receiving scholarships compared to only 24% of students whose mothers are not affiliated to a union (see Figure 6.11 below). This correlation of 0.45 and highly significant Chi-square result of $p = 0.000$ underscore the key role of mother’s union involvement in scholarship status, likely through increased awareness of educational resources or advocacy for educational support within the family. The contrasting underrepresentation of SC mothers in unions implies that barriers may hinder SC mothers from joining unions, thereby limiting their children’s access to scholarships due to restricted access to critical information.

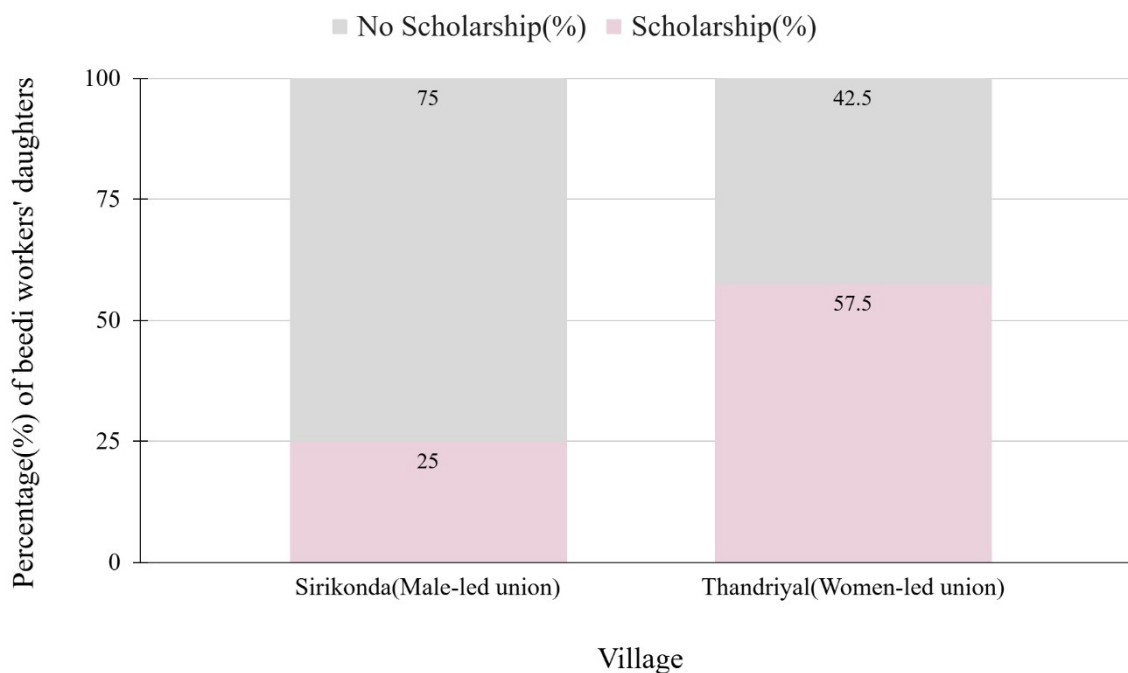
Figure 6.11: Scholarship distribution by Mother's Union membership



Source: Fieldwork Survey

Unions are also the primary organisations raising awareness about scholarships, with the gender of the union leader significantly impacting scholarship outcomes. Students from Thandriyal, which has a women-led union, are notably more likely to receive scholarships compared to those from Sirikonda, which has a male-led union. This is evidenced by a moderately positive correlation of 0.33 and a significant Chi-square result of $p = 0.003$. Additionally, Thandriyal has a higher overall union membership rate (42.5%) compared to Sirikonda (32.5%), suggesting that proactive, women-led leadership enhances the dissemination of information and support for scholarship applications. The scholarship receipt rate is also higher in Thandriyal (57.5%) compared to Sirikonda (25%) (see Figure 6.12 below).

Figure 6.12: Scholarship distribution by village



Source: Fieldwork survey

In this regard, a female leader from Thandriyal emphasised,

“We facilitate the application process by assisting with Mee Seva applications and document submissions... Many children miss out on opportunities due to a lack of local support.”

— (Woman Union leader, Thandriyal)

In contrast, the male union leader in Sirikonda noted significant challenges, stating,

“People miss deadlines because they don’t have the required documents ready... The process is cumbersome and prone to delays.”

— (Male Union leader, Sirikonda)

These accounts highlight the idea that proactive, women-led unions may be more effective at enabling access to scholarships.

Qualitative data reinforce the statistical patterns discussed above, highlighting how collective action and leadership dynamics shape scholarship access. In Thandriyal, the union is led by a

female beedi worker embedded in the community, whose shared experiences and proximity foster trust and enable hands-on support, particularly with the online application process. By contrast, the male union leader in Sirikonda, who lives outside the village and lacks regular contact with workers, struggles to mobilise support. Delays and missed deadlines further undermine his effectiveness. This contrast highlights the strengths of women-led, communityrooted leadership.

Leadership differences intersect with broader structural factors. As shown in Table 6.2 and Figures 6.9–6.12, students from OC and BC backgrounds—especially those whose mothers are union members and live in Thandriyal—are more likely to receive scholarships. These students benefit from intersecting advantages: caste privilege, union support, and active local leadership. In contrast, SC students—particularly in Sirikonda or with non-unionised mothers—face cumulative barriers: limited access to information, weak institutional support, and exclusion from enabling networks.

Mother’s union membership is a strong predictor of access. Unionised mothers are typically from OC or BC backgrounds and based in Thandriyal, reinforcing patterns of unequal reach. SC mothers are underrepresented in unions, limiting both awareness and practical assistance—further entrenching educational inequality. These dynamics echo findings from Biswas (2018) and Samsujjaman (2018), who note that SC and ST students in West Bengal are often unaware of government scholarships, especially at higher education levels.

In conclusion, the beedi workers’ scholarship programme is designed to promote educational inclusion by providing crucial financial relief to disadvantaged students. This intention is mapped out in the programme’s ToC in Figure 6.1, where such financial support is expected to lead, in the medium term, to increased school enrolment. However, the empirical findings reveal that this intended outcome remains unevenly realised. Structural exclusions tied to caste, gender, and leadership styles continue to constrain access. Instead of enhancing capabilities, these factors often reinforce capability traps. To fulfil its role in alleviating financial barriers and improving access, the programme requires both procedural reforms and targeted, community-based engagement—particularly to reach the most marginalised students who currently remain underserved.

6.2.3 The Dual Impact of Beedi Scholarships: Financial Limitations and Psychological Benefits

Scholarships are primarily designed to provide financial assistance to students, alleviating the barriers to education. However, their benefits extend well beyond financial support. Mutevere et al. (2024) emphasise that while scholarships can have limited financial impact, they also underscore the necessity for comprehensive support that addresses learning resources, health, and gender-specific challenges, to achieve academic success.

Extensive research has highlighted the significance of scholarships in influencing various psychosocial factors. For instance, Campbell and Neff (2020) reviewed 105 research articles on international higher education scholarships in the Global South, identifying six key outcomes: building human capital; fostering social change; promoting sustainable development; internationalising institutions; strengthening diplomatic ties; and increasing access to education.

Beyond alleviating financial burdens, scholarships significantly enhance students' psychological well-being and academic motivation. By providing necessary financial support, scholarships enable students to focus more on their studies, creating a more conducive learning environment. Research indicates that scholarship recipients typically demonstrate higher motivation, better attendance rates, and improved academic performance compared to their peers who lack such support (Upton, 2016; Reed & Hurd, 2016; Ramadhianti & Soegoto, 2024).

Moreover, scholarships are essential for promoting equitable access to quality education. They create opportunities for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, thereby significantly impacting a country's socio-economic progress and overall quality of life (Kosasih et al., 2023). Programmes like the Excellence Scholarships increase access to higher education and reduce financial and social disparities, offering support for marginalised students to succeed (Sari and Taurusta, 2023; Anachuna and Ilechukwu, 2024). While financial support remains critical, scholarships also improve the quality of human resources, empowering students to pursue specialised training, promote equity, and increase participation (Hasan et al., 2018). Economically and socially, scholarships boost employability, stimulate growth, and contribute to poverty reduction (Gufon et al., 2022).

The impact of beedi scholarships can be analysed through both financial and psychological perspectives. Although financial limitations may restrict their effectiveness, the psychological benefits are substantial. Even a modest scholarship can foster motivation and affirm the importance of education, encouraging students to pursue higher educational opportunities despite existing barriers. Singh & Vennam (2016) conducted a study using data from the Young Lives study in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, exploring factors influencing girls' paths to higher education or early marriage by age 19. The study found that scholarships had a positive psychological impact, boosting self-esteem and aspirations for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Exploring the influence of early access to scholarships, particularly pre-matric support, is vital. SSIs reveal how such scholarships impact students' aspirations and sense of achievement, with 55% of the recipients' expressing feelings of recognition and validation, leading to increased self-confidence and ambition.

One student commented,

“Before I received the scholarship, I didn't think I could go to school. Now I believe I can become a teacher and help others.”

— (Preethi, 19, BC, Thandriyal)

These sentiments highlight the significant role scholarships play in shaping the identities and aspirations of young learners. Although financial barriers persist, beedi scholarships instil a valuable sense of possibility, motivating students to pursue education and envision a brighter future. This shared hope is reflected in both students and parents, who view scholarships as attainable educational opportunities. Thus, the motivation to continue education stems not only from financial aid but also from the validation that scholarships provide. Students increasingly perceive education as a pathway out of poverty and the beedi industry, potentially breaking the cycle of child labour.

One mother stated,

“When my child received the scholarship, it felt like a blessing. It shows that education is possible for us.”

— (Lithika, 39, BC, Thandriyal)

Mangamma, a beedi worker from Sirikonda, reflects this sentiment when she says,

“Beedi scholarships are a great way to know that the government cares and that we actually have a way out for our children to enter the education system.”

— (Mangamma, 43, BC, Sirikonda)

Such reflections illustrate the broader societal impact of these initiatives, fostering a culture in which education is prioritised. Recent data also highlight shifting societal attitudes toward education. The 2021-22 All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) reports that enrolment in higher education has reached 43.3 million, with female enrolment increasing by 600,000 in just one year, achieving a Gender Parity Index of 1.01. Telangana ranks among the top five states for female enrolment, and the sample from this study shows that 67.5% of beedi workers’ daughters have completed or are pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

As girls’ educational attainment increases, the average age of marriage also rises. This study indicates that beedi workers’ daughters have an average age of 20.55 years, with many completing their bachelor’s degrees around 21—coinciding with the current average marriage age in the village. This marks a shift from earlier decades, when NFHS-3 (2005–06) reported much lower averages—16.38 years in Telangana and 16.6 years in Andhra Pradesh—due largely to poverty and high dropout rates among girls (Kannabiran et al., 2017). NFHS-5 (2019–21) shows continued progress: the median age at first marriage among women aged 25–29 in Telangana is 19.3 years, and the share of women aged 20–24 married before 18 has declined slightly from 26% in NFHS-4 (2015-2016) to 24%. These shifts suggest that improved educational outcomes—particularly among higher-income families—are playing a critical role in delaying marriage. As Gouri (2017) argues, women’s education is central to both empowerment and broader societal development.

Similar initiatives, such as the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme (FSSP) in Bangladesh, have demonstrated success in extending girls’ education and delaying marriage (Raynor et al., 2006; Hove, 2007; Amin & Huq, 2008). This study’s findings suggest a parallel shift in parental attitudes, with many now believing that education enhances self-reliance and improves job prospects. Participants have linked education to increased respect and better marriage prospects, further illustrating the transformative power of educational opportunities.

In summary, while the financial support provided by beedi scholarships may be limited, their psychological benefits are substantial. These scholarships not only ignite aspirations and build confidence but also encourage students to pursue higher education, fostering a mindset that values academic achievement. This increased educational ambition can directly or indirectly contribute to delaying marriage, as students prioritise their studies and future prospects over early family commitments. By cultivating hope and ambition, the beedi scholarship programme empowers girls from beedi worker families to envision a brighter future, ultimately helping to break the cycle of poverty and child labour.

6.2.4 What other factors have contributed to increased school enrolment?

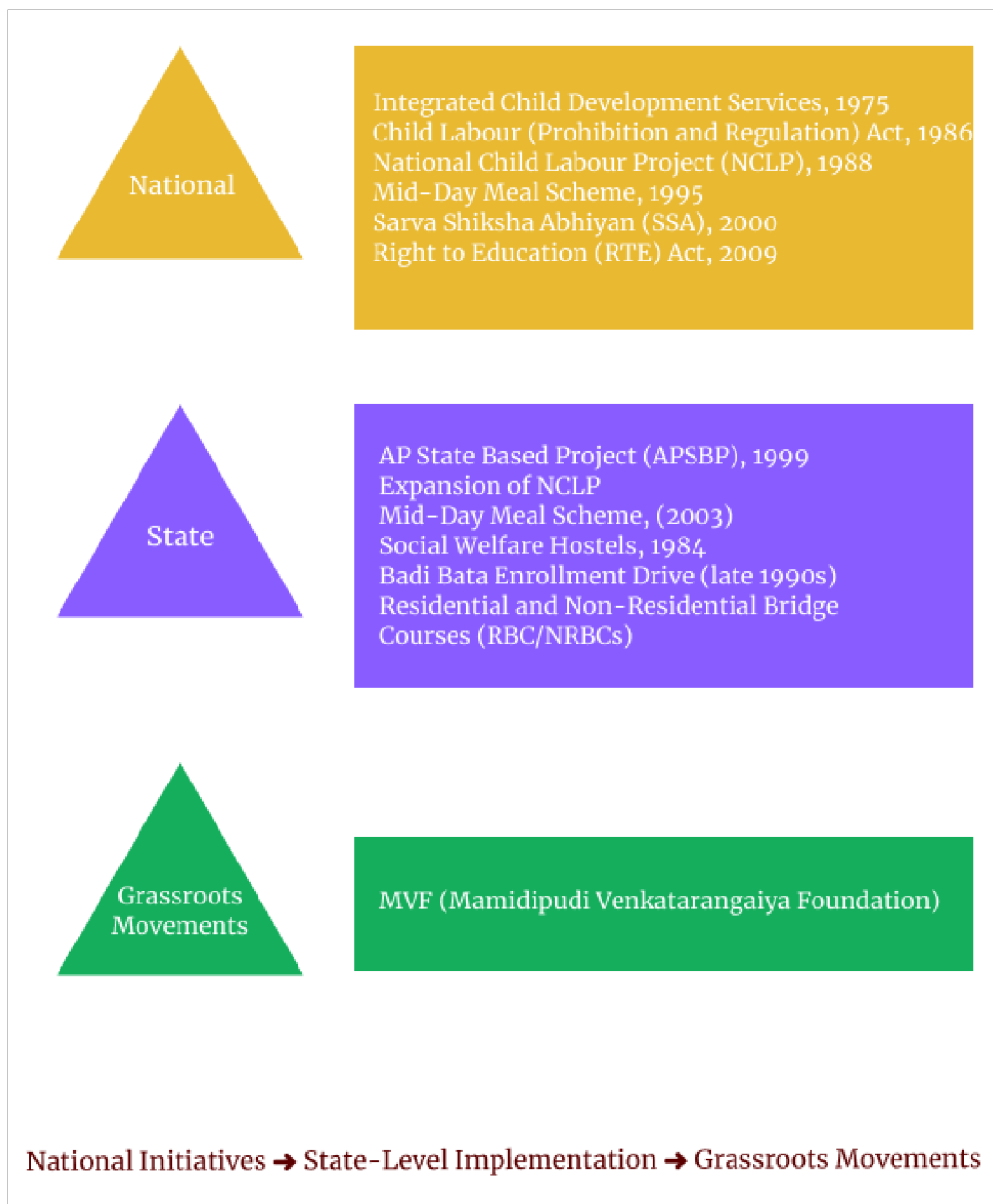
While beedi scholarships may have limited financial impact on school enrolment, they seem to have a significant psychological effect on students. However, to better understand the increase in school enrolment in this study's sample, other contributing factors should be considered. Initiatives focused on reducing child labour and improving access to education likely played a more critical role in encouraging enrolment and advancing students to higher education. To fully understand the educational outcomes observed during fieldwork, it is essential to examine the various policies and initiatives implemented between 1991 and 2010, particularly those affecting enrolment from 2004 to 2010.

6.2.4.1 Reduction of Child Labour and Rise in Literacy Rate in India (1991-2011)

Between 1991 and 2011, India made significant strides in reducing child labour and improving educational access through a combination of national policies, state initiatives, and grassroots movements (see Figure 6.13 below). The global child labour rate decreased from 246 million in 2000 to 152 million in 2016, with a slight uptick to 160 million in 2020 due to the COVID19 pandemic (ILO & UNICEF, 2020). In India, the 2011 Census reported that 10.1 million (3.9%) of 259.6 million children aged 5-14 were engaged in work, down from 12.7 million (5.5%) in 2001.

Figure 6.13 illustrates the different initiatives addressing child labour and education at the national, state, and grassroots levels. A more detailed impact of each initiative is outlined in Annexure-IV.

Figure 6.13: Overview of national, state, and grassroots movements



Source: Author's creation

India's push for universal education has deep historical roots, beginning with pre-independence advocacy for compulsory education. Post-independence, critical policies and programmes emerged, such as the Kothari Commission (1964-66) and National Education Policies of 1968, 1986, and 2020, which laid the groundwork for Universal Elementary Education (UEE). Key initiatives include the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975), the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) (1988), the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDM) (1995), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) launched in 2000, and the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009). These

reforms aimed to improve school infrastructure, enhance enrolment, and provide free education for children aged 6-14 (Singh et al., 2014; Ministry of Education, 2022).

In Andhra Pradesh⁵², the AP State Based Project initiated in 1999 focused on expanding the NCLP, making it a key state for child labour reduction efforts. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 played a vital role in facilitating the rehabilitation of child labourers, while programmes like the Non-Formal Education (NFE) scheme (1974) and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) (1994) focused on increasing access and improving educational outcomes. As a result of these combined efforts, literacy rates surged from 44% in 1991 to 67.7% in 2011, with female literacy rising from 32.7% to 59.1% and male literacy from 55.1% to 74.9%, as noted in Section 6.2 (Government of AP, 2008; Chandrasekhar and Motkuri, 2021).

Support initiatives, such as Social Welfare Hostels, provided accommodation and financial aid, significantly reducing dropout rates from 70.7% in 1971-72 to 24.7% in 2005-06 (Guracello et al., 2010). Additionally, residential, and non-residential bridge courses were introduced, along with initiatives like the Badi Bata enrolment drive, which identified and re-engaged dropouts in the late 1990s (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Grassroots movements have also been instrumental in driving educational reforms. The Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) helped transition over a million children into formal education through community participation and bridge courses, mobilising local communities to combat child labour and influence state policies aimed at promoting universal education (Dev, 2001; Burra, 2001; Murphy 2005; Saharia, 2013). Parental attitudes have also shifted dramatically, driven by grassroots movements and community engagement in Telangana (Deepika et al., 2022).

Many mothers in this sample emphasised that the combined impact of initiatives like the MDM and local school availability was crucial in their decisions to enrol their children. This evidence supports the idea that a holistic approach, integrating multiple initiatives, has significantly contributed to the educational transformation observed during this period.

Sentiments from the mothers included:

⁵² With education listed in the Concurrent List of the Constitution (1986), both central and state governments collaborate in shaping education policies, allowing for tailored approaches to regional needs.

65% expressed a desire for their children to have educational opportunities they lacked, with one stating,

“I never went to school, so I want my child to.”

— (Annapurna, 45, BC, Thandiryral)

90% acknowledged the convenience of nearby government schools, with one remarking,

“Our village has a school, making it easy to send them. It’s a blessing that it’s free.”

— (Bhavani, 38, SC, Sirikonda)

95% highlighted the importance of free meals at school, with a mother noting,

“They provide free food, which is very good for our children”.

— (Kavitha, 39, SC, Thandiryral)

Positive shifts in attitudes toward girls’ education, nutrition and accessibility have transformed educational opportunities. Government initiatives like SSA have expanded educational infrastructure and improved quality, underscoring the importance of education in families’ lives (Bhattacharya, 2021). Moreover, the emphasis on gender equality has narrowed literacy gaps, with increased female enrolment reflecting changing societal norms. Parents recognise that these programmes address barriers related to location and gender while highlighting the importance of school meals. Making free schools accessible has proven to be an effective strategy for boosting attendance and enrolment in low and middle-income countries (See et al., 2023). Supportive measures like the MDM alleviate financial burdens on families, making it easier for them to enrol their children in school (Singh et al., 2014; Ghara et al., 2018; Paltasingh & Bhue, 2022; Bhaskar, 2022; Nellutla, 2024).

In conclusion, notable advancements in reducing child labour and increasing school enrolment in Andhra Pradesh from 1991 to 2011 are the result of a combination of factors that go beyond the influence of beedi scholarships alone. While beedi scholarships are indeed a valuable resource for families of beedi workers, the broader educational landscape shaped by various government and grassroots initiatives has been instrumental in combating child labour and promoting school enrolment. This interconnectedness emphasises the importance of

comprehensive strategies that address socio-economic barriers, raise awareness, and improve educational access to sustain progress in the fight against child labour.

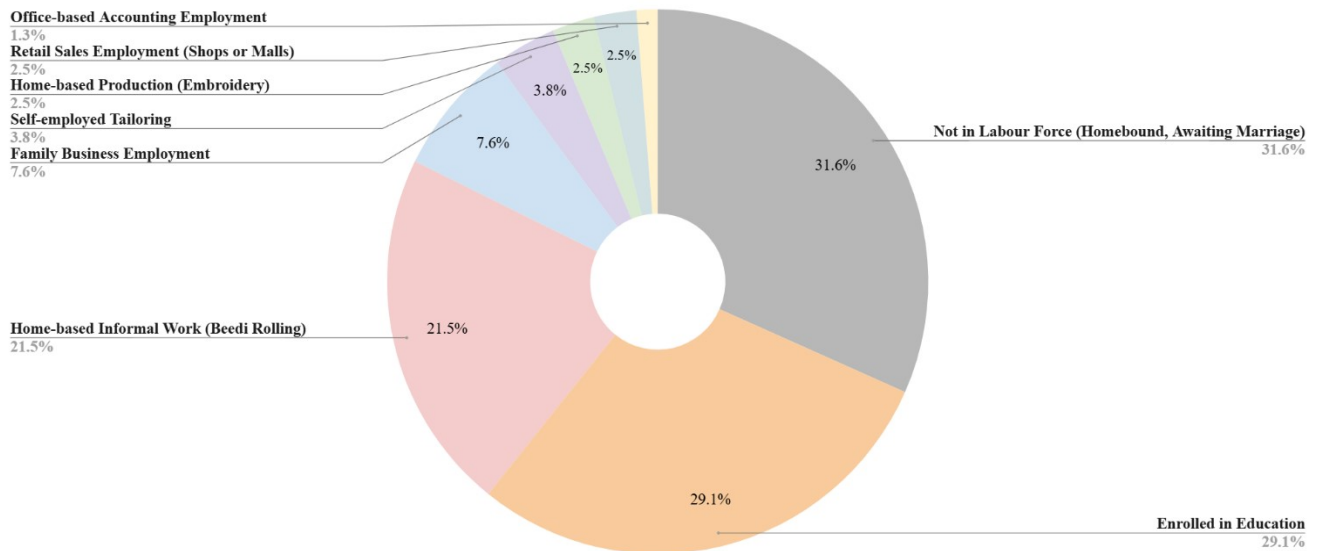
6.3 Intergenerational mobility: Long term Outcome

This section explores the long-term outcome of intergenerational mobility (see Figure 6.1). While beedi scholarships may not have directly increased school enrolment financially, interviews suggest that they have had a positive psychological impact, boosting students' confidence. This confidence-building effect is promising and raises the question of whether these scholarships have indirectly supported intergenerational mobility. The pre-matric assistance may have laid a foundation, inspiring some students to envision opportunities outside the beedi industry, thus fostering cross-generational advancement.

The analysis examines the relationship between employment status and scholarship receipt. The correlation is very weak (0.0806), and a chi-square test confirms no statistically significant association ($p=0.241$). This suggests that receiving a scholarship does not meaningfully impact one's employment status.

Figure 6.14 shows that the largest categories are "not in labour force" (31.6%) and "enrolled in education" (29.1%), indicating that a significant portion is either inactive in the labour market or pursuing education. In contrast, 21.25% engage in home-based informal work (Beedi Rolling), reflecting substantial informal employment. Smaller segments are found in family business employment (7.5%), self-employed tailoring (3.75%), retail sales employment (shops or malls) (3.75%), home-based production (embroidery) (2.5%), and office-based accounting (1.25%).

Figure 6.14: Employment status of the sample (n=80)



Source: Fieldwork survey

These findings prompt further examination in two areas:

1. With 31.6% of women out of the labour force, what factors contribute to such high inactivity, and how do supply and demand constraints relate to India's broader trends of jobless growth and low female labour force participation? Additionally, for the 17.5% of women employed in alternative sectors like tailoring, embroidery, retail, and family businesses, what skills have enabled this shift, and how could enhanced education and vocational training support further transitions away from low-wage work, such as beedi?
2. Although educational progress is evident, 21.25% of women remain engaged in beedi work—what drives this continued reliance? Are limited alternative opportunities, economic pressures, or cultural expectations responsible?

6.3.1 Supply Constraints

Women increasingly prioritise education over immediate employment, leading to temporary exits from the labour market (Masood & Ahmad, 2009; Neff et al., 2012; Mehrotra & Parida, 2017). According to MoSPI (2022), as mentioned in PLFS (2021-22) shows that 33.6% of women outside the labour force cite education as the reason (education effect), consistent with this study's sample, where 29.1% of women are still enrolled. Scholarship status affects labour

market engagement, with 60% of non-recipients not in the labour force, compared to 40% of recipients (refer to Figure 6.15 below).

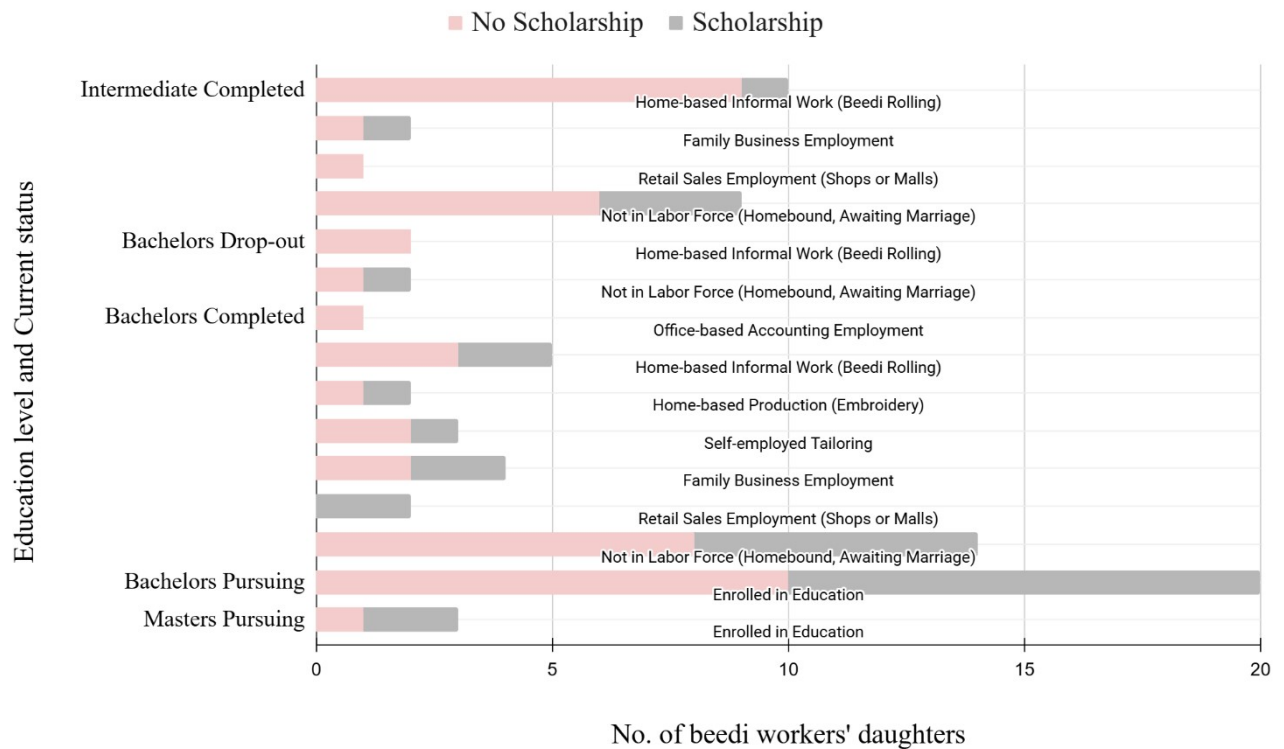
Figure 6.15: Distribution of Scholarship Receipt Across Employment Status Categories



Source: Fieldwork survey

Among those who completed their bachelor’s degree, 50% without scholarships and 40% with scholarships are not seeking employment. For those with intermediate-level education, 35% without scholarships and 60% with scholarships are similarly not in the labour force (see Figure 6.16 below). This suggests that while scholarships may support educational attainment, they do not automatically translate into labour market entry. Many women, especially in rural contexts, delay or forego employment due to entrenched socio-cultural norms and structural constraints. These include marriage pressures, safety concerns, limited job opportunities, and the framing of women’s roles around domesticity.

Figure 6.16: Employment Status and Scholarship receipt by Education Level



Source: Fieldwork survey

Societal norms around life-cycle events such as marriage and childbearing create significant barriers for women’s workforce participation (Olsen and Mehta, 2006). Data from the PLFS 2021-2022 across India reveals that 44.5% of women cite childcare and household responsibilities as major obstacles. In this sample, 74% of women report being at home due to family expectations, with marriage prospects often influencing career decisions. Women pursue higher education primarily for enhancing marriage prospects, with men educated for the labour market. Concerns about marriage prospects significantly influence women’s decisions to remain at home, as suitors often prefer women who do not work and especially work outside the home.

Jalota & Ho (2024) conducted a study in Mumbai with 3,200 married women and found that marriage responsibilities reinforce women’s domestic roles, as husbands typically prefer their wives to refrain from outside work. Furthermore, Munshi and Singh (2024) assert that patriarchal norms and caste dynamics worsen female labour force non-participation in India, as families withdraw women from work to signal higher social status within their caste,

reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations related to marriage and domestic responsibilities.

Parental influence significantly impacts women's education and employment decisions. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (Al-Zu'abi and Jagdish, 2008; Krutikova, 2009; Singh and Khan, 2016), studies indicate that 94.5% of parents prioritise marriage over education for daughters (Pande, 2022). In this study's sample, 85% of participants reported their parents expect them to focus on marriage, leading many to disengage from formal employment. These cultural expectations often prevent young women from fully translating their educational achievements into labour market participation.

Employment, when it occurs, is often shaped by considerations of accessibility and safety. Rural women in this study commonly pursue home-based occupations such as tailoring, embroidery, and assisting in family businesses. These are not merely preferred alternatives but frequently the only feasible options, shaped by the constraints of geography, infrastructure, and social norms. In this sample, 17.5% of women reported working in such roles. As Debnath (2015) notes, safety—both real and perceived—is a key factor in women's employment decisions. Even when women “work,” the nature and visibility of that work are tightly controlled by broader structural conditions.

Importantly, the discussion of home-based work here refers to employment within the domestic space—work that is income-generating but enables women to remain within the home due to societal expectations or safety risks. While this form of work offers flexibility, it also reflects a limited set of choices available to women under restrictive socio-economic conditions.

Beyond cultural and safety-related issues, limited digital skills and vocational training also restrict rural women's access to employment. Only 8% of rural Telangana residents possess basic computer literacy (MoSPI, 2023), limiting participation in digital job platforms. Government initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), aim to address skill gaps, but uptake remains low in areas like Sirikonda and Thandriyal due to poor programme quality and intense competition.

Lastly, infrastructural barriers—such as poor transportation and limited digital connectivity—further isolate rural women from better-paying or urban employment. The absence of safe, affordable public transport often confines women to their immediate surroundings, reinforcing dependence on low-paid or home-based options. These structural limitations restrict not only

current employment opportunities but also participation in skill-building programmes, contributing to continued female labour market exclusion (Das & Biswas, 2021; Rao & Dubey, 2022).

6.3.2 Demand Constraints

Despite periods of rapid GDP growth, India continues to face a persistent jobs crisis, with unemployment remaining above 7% since 2021—disproportionately affecting educated women (Kannan, 2024). Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) declined from 42.7% in 2005 to 24.5% in 2019, before rising to 37.0% by 2022–23, according to PLFS data. However, this modest recovery is largely distress-driven. Basole et al. (2023) attribute much of the increase to self-employment born of necessity, particularly in rural areas, where over 50 million women have returned to agriculture since the mid-2010s (Waghmare, 2025).

Rural FLFP, which fell from 32.7% in 2004–05 to 24% in 2019–20, has recently risen due to a shift towards subsidiary work—often unpaid or seasonal (Pandey, 2023; Waghmare, 2025). In contrast, urban FLFP, though lower at 16.8% in 2019–20, has seen modest gains through more stable service-sector roles. This divergence reflects regional differences in job availability and quality.

Young women, especially in rural areas, face significant employment challenges. Post-COVID19, 58% of young rural women and 64% of young urban women reported no job recovery, compared to 33% and 52% of older women, respectively (Sahai et al., 2023). This generational disparity reflects the scarcity of formal employment pathways for young women, despite their growing educational qualifications (Deshpande and Singh, 2021). The broader transition away from agriculture has not yielded adequate alternatives for low-skilled rural women. Employment elasticity dropped to nearly zero by 2017, indicating economic growth without proportional job creation (Aggarwal & Goldar, 2024). In Telangana, this disconnect is visible in the field sample, where many educated women are turning to informal roles such as tailoring, petty retail, or family-based businesses—choices shaped more by constraint than preference.

Moreover, the transition away from agriculture and the informalisation of manufacturing jobs have failed to generate adequate alternatives for low-skilled women, with studies noting that technological change and sectoral restructuring have contributed to declining female labour

demand in areas like textiles and food processing (Tejani & Kucera, 2021; Aggarwal & Goldar, 2024).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, women remain overrepresented in India's informal sector, which employs over 90% of the workforce and offers limited security. Only 9% of women hold formal jobs with social benefits (Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010; Deshpande & Singh, 2021; Kapoor, 2023). Young rural women in particular are pushed into low-paying, insecure work due to a combination of economic necessity and caste-based exclusions (Bhalla & Kaur, 2011; Gupta, 2023). Gender disparities are stark: women aged 22 are 59% less likely to secure regular salaried work than men (Singh & Mukherjee, 2022), and earn just 55% of male wages, with 15% of this gap unexplained by productivity differences (Bhalla, 2011; Bapat et al., 2022). This earnings gap is even wider in rural areas—up to 76% by 2022–23—where service-sector growth has failed to reach (Abraham, Ameen & Basole, 2024).

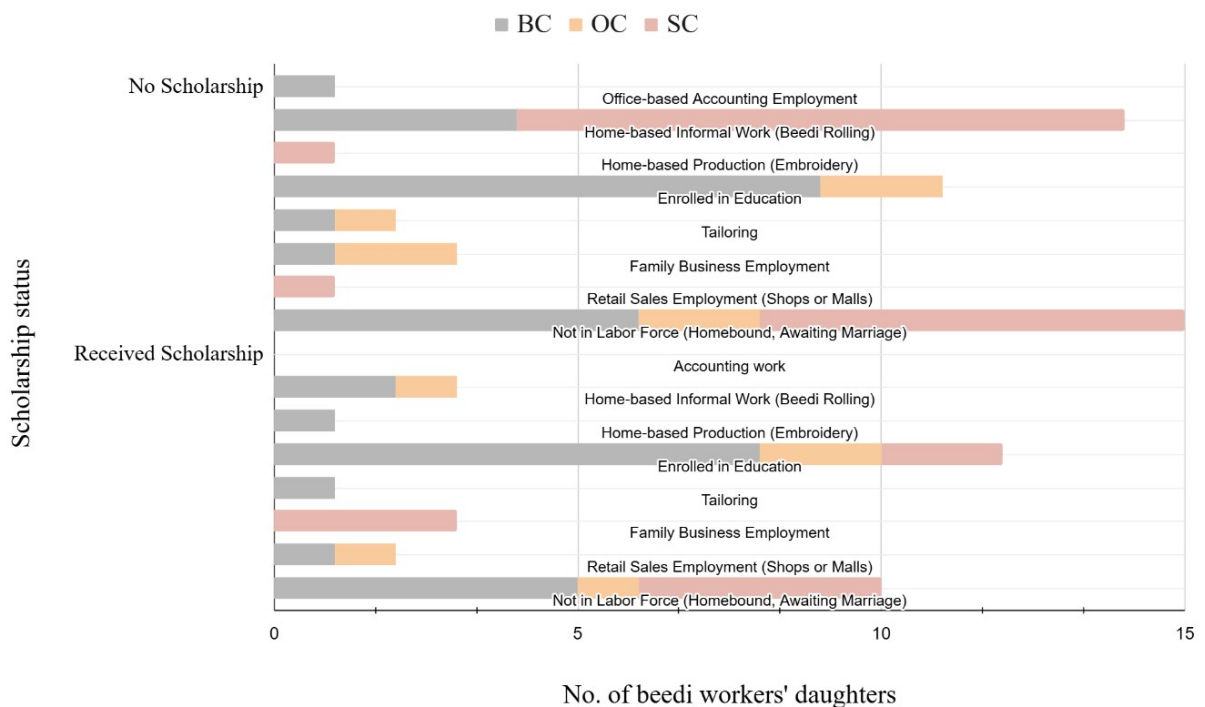
As noted in Section 6.3.1, beyond cultural and mobility-related constraints, limited digital skills and vocational training restrict rural women's ability to engage with emerging employment opportunities. These supply-side limitations also intersect with demand-side issues. While Telangana reports a 98% school enrolment rate (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2021), this figure masks persistent challenges: irregular attendance, unreliable dropout data, and poor education quality—particularly in rural areas where infrastructure is prioritised over learning outcomes (Sinha, 2015; Dey, 2016; Kalpana, 2021; Rao & Dubey, 2022). Telangana ranks 23rd nationally in governance and learning outcomes (Performance Grading Index 2019–20), and access to digital tools and qualified instruction remains weak, particularly for young women (Das & Biswas, 2021; Chattopadhyay, 2023).

Parents increasingly value vocational and computer skills over general degrees, hoping these will secure better employment prospects for their daughters (Singh & Mukherjee, 2022). However, such programmes are often inaccessible, low in quality, or poorly aligned with local labour market needs (Satapathy et al., 2022). As seen in villages like Sirikonda and Thandriyal, uptake of government skilling schemes remains limited due to poor implementation and competitive access (MoSPI, 2023). Thus, while education symbolises social mobility, its potential is undermined by a lack of local, relevant, and remunerative job opportunities, and by systemic constraints on young women's ability to act on their aspirations (Jakimov, 2016).

Caste plays a critical role in shaping these demand-side constraints. SC and ST women often show higher participation rates, driven by necessity, but remain vulnerable to low-quality work

(Datta et al., 2020; Chattopadhyay, 2023). Scholarship access data from this study reveals significant disparities: only 26.7% of SC women received scholarships, compared to 60% of upper-caste peers. Among non-scholarship recipients in the sample, 29.8% were engaged in beedi work (refer to Figure 6.17 below), with SC women disproportionately represented—highlighting how caste, education, and employment are intertwined (Bhalla & Kaur, 2011; Gupta, 2023). A 2019 Government of Telangana survey across 18 districts found that 51% of children engaged in labour belonged to SC and ST communities, underscoring the intergenerational impact of caste on economic vulnerability.

Figure 6.17: Employment status by scholarship receipt and caste



Source: Fieldwork survey

Despite these constraints, some educated women in the sample are shifting towards self-directed, non-beedi employment—such as tailoring and small-scale retail. Among intermediate and bachelor’s degree holders, 50% of non-scholarship and 60% of scholarship recipients reported such transitions. This shift represents an important step away from legacy informal work, enabled by education and familial support. Yet these options remain informal, poorly paid, and shaped by persistent caste, gender, and regional inequalities.

India's low and uneven FLFP reflects the interplay of both supply- and demand-side barriers. Even when education expands and aspirations rise, the labour market remains unable to absorb young rural women into dignified, well-paying jobs. Addressing this requires targeted policies that go beyond education alone focusing on workplace safety, formalisation, sectoral diversification, and rural job creation.

6.3.3 Continued but Reduced Reliance on Beedi Work

Figure 6.16, as mentioned earlier, illustrates the persistence of beedi work, especially among individuals with lower educational attainment. In the “intermediate completed” group, 52.94% of non-scholarship recipients and 20% of scholarship recipients are engaged in this labour. Among “bachelors drop-outs,” 66.67% (two out of three) of non-recipients continue in beedi production, likely due to limited job options and financial pressures leading to educational dropouts. For those who have completed a bachelor's degree, 18.75% of non-recipients and 13.3% of recipients still rely on beedi work. While higher education decreases dependence on low-wage, informal employment, it does not fully eliminate economic vulnerability, particularly for those without scholarships. Financial necessity, familiarity with beedi rolling, and limited alternative job options drive this continued reliance.

Educational attainment significantly impacts employment choices, with individuals holding only intermediate qualifications—especially those without scholarships—more likely to remain in beedi work than those with bachelor's degrees and scholarship support.

Barriers to higher education help explain this trend. Among those with intermediate education, 32.5% reported facing one or more obstacles—economic constraints (70%), safety concerns (40%), and commuting difficulties (60%)—that prevented them from pursuing a bachelor's degree. These challenges often overlap, creating significant hurdles. This aligns with Kannabiran et al., (2017), who noted high dropout rates among schoolgirls in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh due to economic and infrastructure limitations. Additionally, this study found that 85% of parents of daughters with intermediate education prefer their children to stay home, learn beedi skills, manage household duties, and prepare for marriage. This is consistent with NSSO 71st Round (2015) data, which highlights marriage-related dropouts in key areas like Warangal, Hyderabad, and Karimnagar.

Research by Jalota and Ho (2024) indicates that without changes to domestic norms, homebased jobs may remain the most accessible option for increasing female labour force

participation in India. This aligns with my findings: beedi work, as a home-based activity, offers women the flexibility to earn income while fulfilling domestic roles, making it socially acceptable and supportive of marriage prospects. The belief that learning to roll beedis enhances a woman's marriageability (Ramulu, 1982; Anand, 2016; Bandyopadhyay, 2024) perpetuates reliance on this work. This reinforces traditional roles, with many families viewing beedi work as a practical choice for daughters.

In my sample, 21.25% of women continue to engage in beedi rolling, a practice often passed down through generations. Parents frequently involve their children in this labour (Abdullah et al., 2022), as most home-based working households in India live below the poverty line, limiting upward mobility (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2002; Boeri, 2021; Sekar, 2022). Cultural norms often channel girls into beedi work, as families perceive outside employment resulting from education as a barrier to marriage.⁵³

This belief perpetuates the transmission of beedi-rolling skills from mothers to daughters, constraining aspirations and reinforcing labour cycles, ultimately deepening intergenerational vulnerability. Studies across various states confirm this pattern of generational dependence on informal and home-based work, particularly among marginalised groups (Iversen & Ghorpade, 2011; Singh et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021).⁵⁴

A recent study by Gosikonda and Gundemeda (2024) conducted in Telangana, underscores this generational reliance: 77.9% of second-generation and 31.9% of third-generation members in these communities had taken up beedi rolling, establishing it as a fallback occupation for former weaving families. Notably, 51.9% of women in their Telangana sample remained engaged in beedi rolling, underscoring the persistence of this work as a primary livelihood option.

Children frequently assist with tasks such as cutting tendu leaves and folding beedis, even while attending school (Anand, 2016). About 28% of child labour in India occurs in household industries, with beedi production being a significant contributor (Census of India, 2011;

⁵³ For a different regional context where economic precarity intersects with labour dependence and marriage norms, see Subramanian (2024) on early marriages in Marathwada's sugarcane industry. While not directly comparable, the example highlights how survival strategies can reinforce intergenerational gendered labour patterns.

⁵⁴ Iversen and Ghorpade (2011) studied the long-term impacts of migration on 90 child labourers in Karnataka between 1935–2005, noting uneven transformative effects. Kumar et al. (2021) observed similar vulnerabilities in Udupi, Karnataka, based on interviews with 381 respondents. Rao et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study of 560 beedi workers in Telangana. Singh et al. (2017) documented how reliance on child beedi labour among 118 children in Solapur, Maharashtra entrenched generational dependence on such work.

Kondamudi, 2024). Poverty drives families to involve their children for additional income, reinforced by the perception of “nimble fingers” for delicate tasks, which perpetuates a culture of child labour (Mishra, 2014). Despite improvements in school enrolment, many children continue to assist their families.

In my sample from Thandiryal and Sirikonda, 90% of beedi workers’ daughters assisted with beedi work before turning 14, which decreased to 65% as more began attending school regularly. However, many continued to work after school for extra income. Furthermore, 80% of children are expected to balance household chores and beedi work with their school responsibilities, resulting in a significant double burden (Kabeer, 2001). Weiner (1991) states that child labour persists in systems where the family, rather than the individual, is the primary economic unit, leading to a situation where children are expected to contribute financially, often at the expense of their education.

Child labour in the beedi industry persists despite laws like the Employment of Children Act (1938) and the BCA, 1966. These regulations have pushed child labour into home-based production, complicating enforcement (Burra, 1995; Apperloo et al., 2022; Population Council, UK Aid, & UNICEF, 2024). A 1999 CBS News exposé led to a U.S. ban on beedi imports, causing exports to plummet from \$9.113 million in 1998 to nearly zero (Raghunath, 2001). Although official child labour rates have declined, many children now work informally at home (Mitra, 2020).

A 1995 Labour Bureau survey reported that only 1% of beedi workers were children; however, legal loopholes exclude many involved in family labour. According to MoSPI (1995), as mentioned in the NSSO’s 51st round survey (July 1994 - June 1995) reported 330 hired child workers, 669 paid household workers, and 209 unpaid household workers per 1,000 child workers in the beedi-making sector. All household child workers were girls, with the feminisation of labour evident as girls outnumbered boys among unpaid household workers by four to one. UNICEF (2012) study estimated 1.7 million child labourers in beedi production across India. More recent data from (Pande, 2022) indicates Andhra Pradesh accounts for 13% of India’s child labour, with Nizamabad district in Telangana reporting 4.3%, where over 90% of beedi production workers are children, predominantly girls, as boys often regard it as “women’s work”.

In addition, many children contribute to beedi rolling for short durations alongside school. Although this does not always meet the legal threshold for child labour, the health implications

of tobacco exposure remain concerning⁵⁵. This informal child involvement, while often brief, poses serious health risks due to tobacco exposure; even minimal contact with tobacco dust can have long-term consequences.⁵⁶ Official classifications often underreport such contributions. The Census and NSSO definitions exclude much of this unpaid, home-based work, especially by girls, limiting the visibility of child labour in national data.⁵⁷

This illustrates the interplay of economic, cultural, and domestic responsibilities, alongside a lack of alternative employment opportunities, which perpetuates a cyclical relationship across generations. Moreover, this culture of child labour, particularly in beedi work, significantly hinders intergenerational mobility (Emerson & Souza, 2002; Kim et al., 2020; Mitra, 2020).

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, while the beedi workers' scholarship programme historically provided some support, its effectiveness has diminished over time due to several factors. Examining the medium-term impact on school enrolment reveals that low scholarship amounts, lack of awareness, poor information dissemination, and complex application processes have significantly limited the programme's effectiveness. Implementation failures have led to capability traps rather than capability enhancement (Pritchett et al., 2010).

Although the financial impact of the scholarship has been limited, it has offered psychological benefits by boosting aspirations among beedi workers' children. However, experiences vary across caste groups, with SC women's children benefiting the least; additionally, most SC mothers are not part of the union (see Chapter 7). Despite these challenges, women-led unions have played a vital role in mutual support and community engagement. To some extent, these

⁵⁵ According to the ILO, child labour refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally harmful to children and interferes with their education. In contrast, child work includes a variety of economic activities performed by children aged 5-17, such as household chores, agricultural tasks, or paid work outside the home. While child labour specifically involves work that threatens a child's health, safety, or education, child work generally refers to non-hazardous tasks (Population Council, UK Aid, and UNICEF, 2024).

⁵⁶ In our study, children assist their mothers with beedi rolling for about 1–2 hours daily, in addition to attending school. Although the duration of work is limited, even brief contact with tobacco dust and chemicals can pose significant health risks to children. A study in Solapur, Maharashtra, involving 116 child beedi workers, reported symptoms like headaches, body pain, dizziness, cough, nausea, and long-term respiratory issues due to tobacco exposure (Arora et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2020).

⁵⁷ In India, the Census and NSSO classify child workers as “main” or “marginal” based on the number of working days, often excluding unpaid domestic labour. This classification system underreports child labour— particularly among girls—as it overlooks household chores and family-based tasks like beedi rolling.

women-led collectives have demonstrated the power of collective action in enabling access to education and enhancing “collective capabilities” and the “capacity to be educated.”

Moreover, child labour reduction and education access initiatives between 1991 and 2010, particularly from 2004 to 2010, have played a significant role in driving increased school enrolment than the scholarships alone. Government programmes aimed at reducing child labour, improving school infrastructure, and raising awareness have been key contributory factors in this achievement.

Examining the long-term outcome on intergenerational mobility reveals critical constraints on FLFP, driven by both supply-side and demand-side factors. On the supply side, cultural expectations, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities restrict women’s full participation in the labour market, while on the demand side, limited job creation, skill mismatches, and reduced demand for female labour in traditional sectors, contribute to low employment opportunities. Despite higher education levels, many women remain reliant on beedi work due to these persistent barriers.

The findings suggest a shift toward alternative occupations among educated scholarship beneficiaries, reflecting reduced dependency on beedi work, though intergenerational mobility remains limited. While beedi scholarships have sparked academic ambition, sustained progress will require strategies that address both educational and labour market barriers. “Being educated” is intended to open the door to better job opportunities and career paths. However, education alone is not sufficient; it must be paired with access to stable employment and pathways for advancement. Only by bridging this gap can we possibly ensure that educational achievements lead to meaningful improvements in FLFP and intergenerational mobility, fostering broader socio-economic change.

Building on this, the next empirical Chapter 7 examines the role of women-led collective action in shaping labour law implementation and advocating for workers’ welfare.

7. Being Affiliated: Capabilities for All

7.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 examined how legislation shapes beedi workers' access to secure employment and scholarships for their children—through employer enforcement under the BCA (1966) and state responsibility under the BWWF (1976)—highlighting that *collective capabilities* are central to securing welfare benefits. Building on these insights, this chapter revisits the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 3. As outlined in Chapter 1, the ILO's Decent Work agenda identifies social dialogue as one of its four central pillars. This chapter aligns with that understanding, arguing that collective action, particularly women-led organising, is essential not only as a means to improve welfare access, but also as an end in itself. Drawing on an intersectional feminist perspective, it emphasises how collective capabilities serve both as a demand-side driver for the effective implementation of welfare legislation and as a vital dimension of welfare in their own right—specifically through the capability of “*being affiliated*”. The concept of ‘*capabilities for all*’ remains central to this discussion, foregrounding how gender, caste, and class intersect to shape who is able to organise, be heard, and ultimately, access the benefits of welfare. Inclusive and equitable collective approaches are therefore not just instrumental, but integral to advancing decent work.

Drawing from Sen's (1999) CA, this chapter extends the framework by foregrounding the concept of group or collective capabilities (Stewart, 2005; Ibrahim, 2006). In the beedi industry, where women workers are disproportionately affected by low wages, precarious employment, and limited access to welfare benefits, collective action emerges as a crucial mechanism for addressing these structural inequities. Apart from being a key element of the Decent Work Agenda, collective action is also central to expanding individual and group capabilities.

The dimension of “*being affiliated*”—operationalised through union membership and participation in collective networks (Erikson, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000b; Robeyns, 2003)—is shown to play a dual role. It not only facilitates workers' access to welfare benefits but also influences the strategies they employ to assert their rights and entitlements. By examining the impact of women-led leadership and collective action, this chapter demonstrates how *collective capabilities* act as both an enabler of and a pathway toward welfare and justice for marginalised workers in the informal economy.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the beedi industry in India provides a compelling case for analysing the intersection of labour, gender, and informality, given its long history of labour movements and the significant structural shifts it has undergone. In the 1930s, formal trade unions, predominantly led by literate and formally employed men—who made up 98% of union membership by 1960 (Government of India, 1960)—led militant struggles that secured significant labour protections. These efforts ultimately resulted in the enactment of the BCA in 1966 (Isaac et al., 1998). In response, industry owners increasingly decentralised production and adopted subcontracting strategies that shifted work away from factories into informal, home-based settings. This process of defactorisation enabled employers to exploit regulatory gaps, evade inspections, and limit accountability under labour laws. As home-based production expanded, women became increasingly concentrated in forms of work that were less visible, weakly regulated, and more difficult to organise collectively, thereby reinforcing their marginal position within the labour system. According to the 1991 Census of India, women comprised 69% of the beedi workforce, rising to 90% by 2001, underscoring the deepening feminisation of informal labour within the industry (Chauhan, 2001).

Wielenga (2020) highlights how patriarchal and capitalist state policies institutionalised informality within the beedi industry by excluding women from protections under key labour laws, such as the Factories Act (1948) and the Madras Beedi Industrial Premises Act (1958) in South India. Legislators resisted extending protections to women working from home, citing fears of harming industries and causing unemployment (Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, 1957, Vol. VII, p.591). By the 1980s, this outsourcing entrenched precarious working conditions and gendered vulnerabilities, effectively denying women access to full labour protections in the informal economy (Agarwala, 2013).

As Agarwala (2006) highlights, the transformation of the beedi industry led unions to shift their focus from traditional workplace demands, such as higher wages and formal recognition, to welfare-oriented strategies targeting the state under the BWWF of 1976. As employers relocated operations to evade jurisdiction, unions adapted their strategies to address workers' welfare needs while striving to retain jobs, recognising that pressuring employers too heavily could result in capital flight. Employers, relying on the labour-intensive nature of beedi production, required workers just as much as workers needed jobs—though the oversupply of cheap labour, particularly women in remote areas, tilted the balance of power. Welfare boards, funded through tripartite contributions, became important in providing benefits like healthcare, housing, and education. This strategic pivot marked a broader transformation in labour

movements, where informal workers increasingly framed their demands as citizenship rights rather than traditional labour rights. Within this framework, women workers—confronting compounded vulnerabilities of gender, caste, and informality—emerged as central actors in reshaping these movements.

Despite these shifts, the role of women in shaping union strategies and influencing welfare oriented policies, has often been overlooked. Traditional unions, which were predominantly male led, were slow to recognise the distinct challenges faced by women workers, especially in informal sectors like beedi. Their organising efforts typically prioritised formalising employment and addressing universal workplace demands, often neglecting the gendered aspects of informality. The emergence of women-focused organisations like the SEWA, AMM, and WWF in the 1970s and 1980s, along with newer trade unions from this period (Patel, 1989), highlighted the need for gender-sensitive approaches to address the specific vulnerabilities of women workers. In response, traditional unions began to adapt. For example, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) formed the women’s wing, All-India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICCCWW) in 1979, reflecting a broader recognition of gender in labour organising. However, the contributions of women within traditional mixed-gender unions remain underexplored, limiting a full understanding of their role in reshaping labour movements (Mazumdar, 2018).

This chapter addresses these gaps by examining the impact of women-led collective action within traditional mixed-gender unions (which hold significant influence in Telangana) on policy implementation and welfare outcomes, in line with the sub-research question outlined below. Through a comparative study of Sirikonda (male-led union) and Thandriyal (women led union), it explores how gendered leadership influences strategies, mechanisms, and challenges in achieving these outcomes. Sirikonda, led by a male leader since 2016, and Thandriyal, led by a female leader since 2017, were selected due to their comparable founding timelines. Both collectives have similar access to local government and leadership training, ensuring a fair comparison.

What role does women-led collective action and leadership play in shaping the implementation of labour laws to ensure the welfare of beedi workers in the selected villages?

The chapter also presents the mixed-methods approach, triangulating primary and secondary data for a comprehensive analysis. Primary data comprises the survey, along with two focus

group discussions: one in Sirikonda, led by a male leader with five union members, and one in Thandiryal, led by a female leader with five union members. These discussions included union leaders and members of the IFTU. Additionally, 60 SSIs with both unionised and non-unionised women workers along with interviews at the mandal, district, and state levels with leaders from IFTU (3), CITU (2), and AITUC⁵⁸ (2), the three major unions in these villages. While unions such as BMS, HMS, and INTUC are active in Telangana, their minimal presence in the study villages establishes IFTU⁵⁹ as the focal point of this investigation. Secondary data encompasses historical and archival materials provided by IFTU and AITUC leaders, including union records, photographs and newspaper articles. Policy documents and government records further contextualise the analysis.

Section 7.2 provides an overview of union membership and participation in India, with a focus on the field sites. Section 7.3 examines the mechanisms and strategies unions use to achieve three key short-term outcomes: (i) improved access to state welfare benefits, (ii) representation and voice – inclusion in decision making, and (iii) intersectionality – stronger solidarity networks as contextualised in the ToC diagram in Figure 7.1 below. These outcomes reflect the interrelated dimensions of Kabeer’s (2021) “three faces of agency in feminist economics”: improved access to welfare corresponds to the expansion of *resources and capabilities*; inclusion in decision-making speaks to *agency and empowerment*; and intersectional solidarity networks contribute to *citizenship* by fostering recognition, belonging, and collective political identity. This analysis builds on the broader ToC presented in Chapter 4, which frames the interconnected dimensions of labour welfare, and is aligned with the more focused theory outlined here for union participation. The framework also draws on literature on women-led collective action and foregrounds the concept of collective capabilities. Section 7.4 explores the ongoing debate on union strength, analysing the supply and demand constraints that limit women’s participation and leadership. These challenges, identified as a recurring theme in field

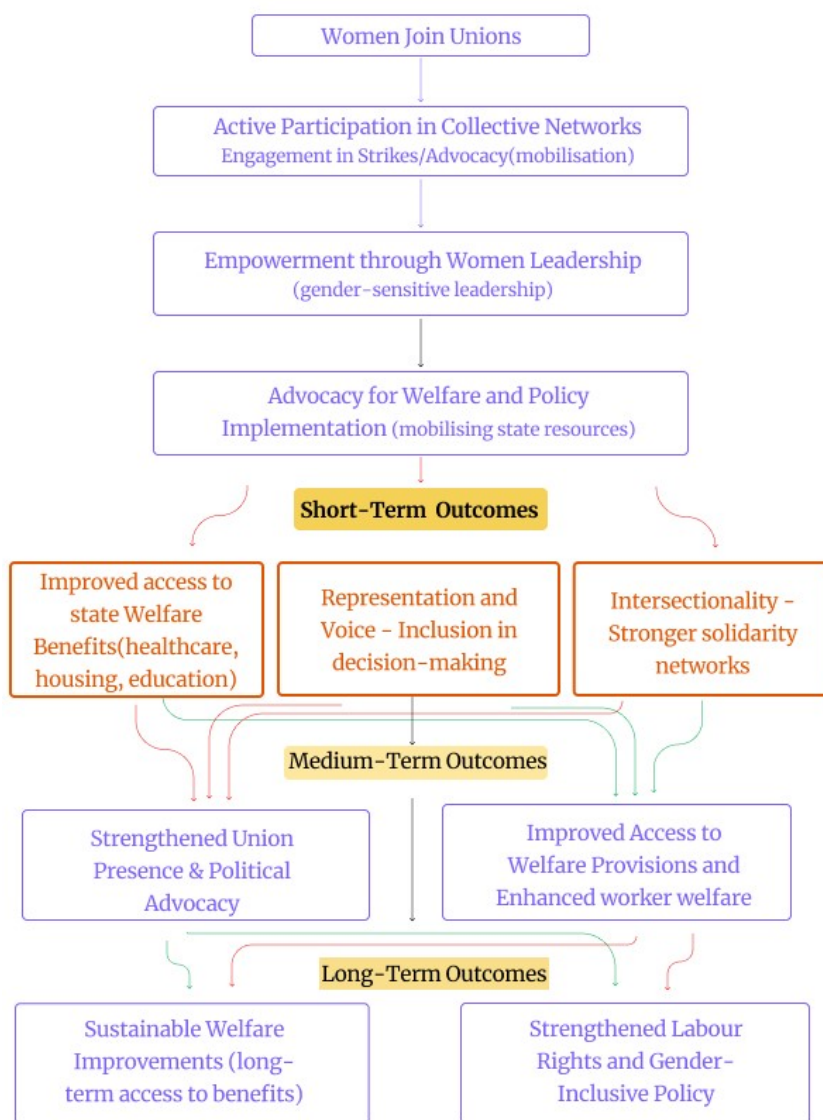
⁵⁸ By 1966, following the enactment of the BCA, Act, four major central trade unions had been established in India: the AITUC, founded in 1920 and affiliated with the CPI; the INTUC, established in 1947 and aligned with the Indian National Congress (INC); the HMS, formed in 1948; and the BMS, founded in 1955 and aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). CITU, established in 1970, emerged after a split within AITUC and is affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. IFTU, representing the labour wing of CPI(ML) New Democracy, was founded in 1988 as a breakaway faction from the original CPI(ML).

⁵⁹ Other unions within the beedi industry, such as those for packers and sorters, also exist but are not included in this analysis, which focuses solely on beedi rollers’ unions.

semi-structured interviews, highlight barriers that, if addressed, could empower women and strengthen the labour movement.

Finally, section 7.5 concludes by linking these findings to both the specific ToC for this chapter and the broader framework outlined in Chapter 4, offering wider insights into how women-led collective action can address systemic gender inequalities and drive transformative change in the beedi industry.

Figure 7.1: Simplified high-level theory of change for women-led union leadership and collective action



Source: Author’s creation

7.2 Union Membership and Participation in India: A Focus on the Field Sites

In India, union membership is viewed as a gateway to collective empowerment and labour rights, as unions provide access to bargaining power, legal support, and welfare benefits. Governed by the Trade Unions Act of 1926, unions require formal enrolment, adherence to union rules, and the payment of monthly fees. However, membership alone does not equate to active participation, particularly in informal sectors where marginalised groups, including women, face substantial barriers (Pratap, 2011). Gender biases, informal labour arrangements, and limited awareness of union benefits, often hinder women's involvement in union activities (Ledwith et al., 2012) (more in Section 7.4). Despite these challenges, membership remains a critical tool for representation in negotiations, strikes, and leadership roles.

Union density in India illustrates a clear divide between the formal and informal sectors. The formal sector boasts a higher unionisation rate at 26.9%, while the informal sector—dominated by informal, unregulated jobs—has a much lower rate of just 3% (Government of India, 2008). Informal workers face significant obstacles to unionisation, including a lack of stable employer-employee relationships and weak regulatory frameworks. The gender disparity is also stark, with only 4.9% of female workers unionised, many of whom work in informal sectors where organising is especially difficult (Pratap & Bose, 2015). In the manufacturing sector, which comprises 36.1% of the workforce, industries like beedi-making have a unionisation rate of only 12.7% (Datt, 2008).

Union membership of the Central Trade Union Organisations (CTUOs) grew from 5.6 million in 1996 to 7.8 million in 2007, despite fluctuations resulting from industrial restructuring, privatisation, and the informalisation of the workforce (NCEUS, 2007). This growth, particularly in informal sectors, was driven by policies such as the MGNREGA, welfare boards for construction workers, and the significant role of SEWA in organising women in these sectors (Pratap & Bose, 2015). However, challenges persist, including inflated membership numbers⁶⁰ due to competition among CTUOs for recognition, and a lack of accurate reporting.

⁶⁰ While 13 CTUOs claimed a combined membership of 41.2 million in 2002, verified figures stood at 24.88 million, highlighting discrepancies. Additionally, 88.5% of registered unions fail to submit annual returns, leaving gaps in accurate membership data (Government of India, 2008).

The field sites of Sirikonda and Thandiryral reveal additional complexities in union membership. In these villages, union membership is often ambiguous, with subcontractors deducting ₹ 50-75 from workers' wages each month without their knowledge, forwarding the amounts to union leaders. This practice raises concerns about the transparency of union affiliation and leadership.

62.5% of the workers reported being unaware of the membership fee deduction with one worker in semi-structured interview stating:

“I didn't know they were taking the money. It's not shown in the final calculation, so I'm losing 50 rupees without even knowing?”.

— (Susheela, 42, SC, Sirikonda)

Since all workers at the field sites pay union fees, some of which are deducted by subcontractors without their knowledge, it was necessary to develop a framework for assessing union membership based on three criteria derived from field observations: self-recognition (awareness of the fee deduction and union affiliation), participation in strikes, and general awareness of the union.

This approach ensures that workers meeting at least one of these criteria are considered members, reflecting the realities of informal labour where fee payments don't always equate to active engagement or full awareness. It also accounts for barriers, such as social or familial constraints, that may prevent full participation despite being union members in practice.

Union density varies between the two villages in this study. In Sirikonda, where the union is male led, union density is 13.8%. In contrast, Thandiryral, with a women-led union, has a higher union density of 23.8%. Additionally, active participation in unions is higher in Thandiryral, with 20.6% of workers actively engaged, compared to 10% in Sirikonda. This highlights the gap between union membership and active participation.

Maini's (2018) study, which involved interviews with 55 women trade unionists from CITU, found that despite the growing presence of women in the labour force, their participation in trade unions remained disproportionately low. Dash (2019) examines the limited participation of women in trade unions in India, despite growing membership, focusing on a contract workers' union affiliated with INTUC in Eastern India. In-depth interviews with 11

participants, including nine women (four committee members), and follow-up interviews with five women, found that masculine leadership, gender dynamics, and family responsibilities hinder women's full engagement in union activities and decision-making.

Building on this overview of union membership and participation in India and the field sites, the next section examines the three short-term outcomes outlined in the ToC (Figure 7.1).

7.3 Investigating Short-term Outcomes: Men-led vs. Women-led Unions.

Leadership is a complex and multifaceted concept, shaped by attributes and characteristics that vary across contexts (Northouse, 2018; Carroll et al., 2019). The literature identifies distinct leadership styles, often influenced by gendered connotations. Leadership styles traditionally associated with men emphasise transactional, autocratic, and task-oriented approaches, which align with “agentic” traits such as dominance and decisiveness (Ford, 2010; Carroll et al., 2019). In contrast, leadership styles commonly linked to women emphasise communal, participative, and relational approaches, reflecting “communal” traits like empathy and collaboration (Oshagbemi & Gill, 2003; Fletcher, 2004). These gendered distinctions, reinforced by societal stereotypes that portray men as “taking charge” and women as “taking care” (Prime et al., 2009), can shape the value placed on leadership styles. Notably, communal leadership styles are often less recognised or valued, especially when demonstrated by women leaders.

Leadership styles inevitably shape strategies, mechanisms, and priorities, which in turn influence the functioning and outcomes of collective organisations. This relationship can be observed in the leadership dynamics of the villages studied. The differences in how male and female leaders engage with their communities highlight varying approaches to advocacy and mobilisation. In Thandriyal, the female leader's communal leadership style is evident in her close integration within the community. As a beedi worker and resident, her leadership reflects a grounded understanding of the workers' daily realities. By contrast, the male leader in Sirikonda employs a more traditional, top-down, hierarchical leadership style. As a non-local without direct involvement in the beedi industry, his approach reflects a more distant engagement with the workers' day-to-day challenges. While he maintains regular contact with the community, his outsider status may limit his ability to fully address the nuanced and gender specific issues faced by women workers. These observations indicate that leadership styles,

influenced by both context and gender, significantly affect how leaders interact with their communities and the strategies they prioritise for mobilisation and support.

7.3.1 Access to Welfare Benefits: Short-term Outcome One

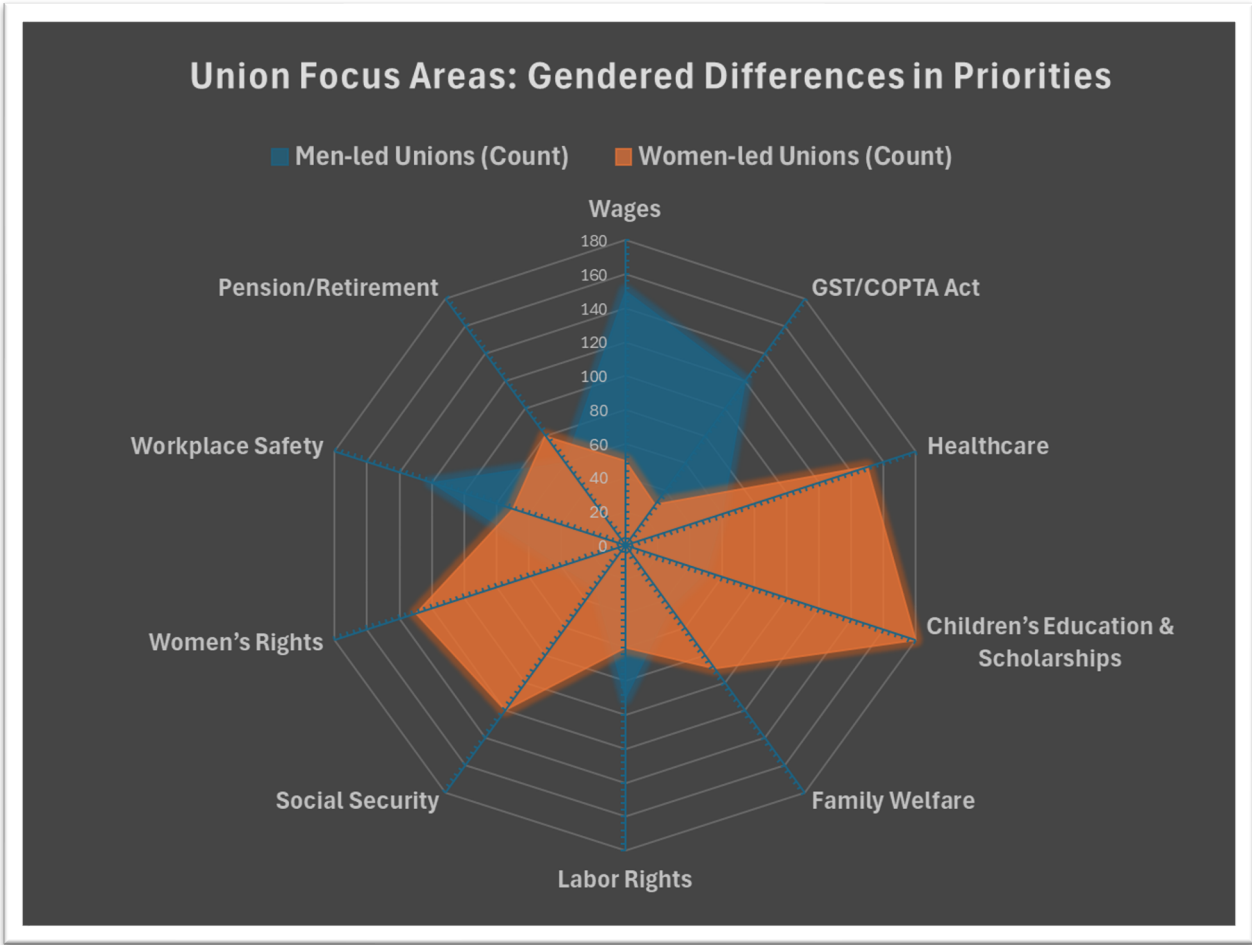
This section examines how gendered leadership influences union priorities, particularly in ensuring workers' access to welfare benefits. A key tool for this analysis is the radar chart (Figure 7.2 below), which provides a comparative visualisation of thematic priorities between men-led and women-led unions. The chart was constructed using the mixed-methods approach adopted in this research, integrating qualitative insights from SSIs and FGDs with quantitative survey data. Recurring themes—such as wages, healthcare, and children's education—were identified through qualitative data analysis and validated through a survey of 320 women beedi workers. The chart quantifies the frequency with which these issues were prioritised, reflecting both the number of mentions in qualitative discussions and priority rankings in the survey⁶³.

By combining these data sources, Figure 7.2 presents a nuanced understanding of how union leadership shapes priorities. While men-led unions predominantly focus on economic concerns—such as wage negotiations, job security, and regulatory frameworks (e.g., the COPTA, 2003 and GST, 2017)—women-led unions place greater emphasis on long-term welfare, particularly healthcare and children's education. The radar chart, therefore, provides a structured, evidence-based comparison of these gendered differences in union priorities.

⁶³ For example, the count for “Children's Education & Scholarships” in women-led unions (182) was calculated by summing the frequency of mentions from qualitative data (SSIs + FGDs) and the survey responses. Specifically, if this theme was mentioned 80 times across SSIs and FGDs and was prioritised by 102 survey respondents, the total count is derived as: 80 (qualitative mentions) + 102 (survey responses) = 182.

In the survey, “prioritised” means that respondents ranked this issue among their top concerns. Participants were asked to rank key union demands from most to least important. If a respondent placed “Children's Education & Scholarships” in their top three concerns, it was counted as a prioritisation. The number of times an issue was ranked within these top slots contributed to the final count in the radar chart.

Figure 7.2: Radar chart of union focus areas – gendered differences in priorities



Source: Fieldwork data

With this broader picture in place, the following subsections examine the specific focus areas of men-led and women-led unions in detail, drawing on quantitative and qualitative insights from fieldwork, archives and historical labour movement trends.

7.3.1.1 Trade unions led by men

In the male-led union in Sirikonda, the primary focus is on securing basic labour rights, particularly minimum wages and job security. This reflects the traditional priorities of unions, which have historically emphasised wage increases as foundational to improving workers’ economic conditions. During an FGD, the male union leader emphasised this approach:

“Wages are key. We have always made wage increases the central concern, as workers need to be fairly compensated. If they get the income, they deserve for all their hard

work, they can live better. Without fair pay, it's hard for them. We put as much pressure as we can on contractors to negotiate fair agreements—ones that don't push work out of our villages but increase their share..."

— (Ranganna, Union leader, Sirikonda)

This focus on wage negotiations aligns with broader historical trends in labour movements. Agarwala's (2013) study, which involved field research across Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, involving over 300 interviews with labour union leaders, government officials, and 140 women workers, highlights this persistent emphasis. For instance, in a 2003 interview, Ram Ratnagar, General Secretary of the All-India Beedi and Cigar Workers Federation, stated:

"At that time, our main demand was a minimum wage from the employer. We thought everything else could only follow from that" (Agarwala, 2013, p. 38).

This reflects how securing fair wages has been historically viewed as the first step toward achieving justice for workers, with other welfare improvements expected to follow.

The emphasis on minimum wages is further supported by historical records. The Indian Labour Yearbook (1952) documents that the first recorded strike in the beedi industry occurred in Kerala in 1934, shortly after the establishment of the first beedi workers' union (Government of India, 1952). By 1951, strikes had become a dominant form of resistance, with that year alone witnessing 120 registered strikes in the industry. By 1969, nearly 50% of all industrial disputes in the sector revolved around demands for minimum wages and bonuses (Government of India, 1970).

The Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union (APBWU), (1997) organised state-level *mahasabhas* (public meetings) between 1972 and 1992, consistently prioritising the issue of minimum wage increases. The Poru Batalo historical archive documents these meetings, which took place in 1972, 1973, 1975, 1978, 1982, 1987, 1989, and 1992, with the demand for higher wages prominently featured on the agenda. A translated quote from this archive aptly summarises this focus:

"Wages are important; everything else will follow. If we first win the fight for fair wages, it will help us gain other rights and improve their lives" (APBWU 1997, p. 7).

This demonstrates how beedi workers have historically struggled with low wages, often far below the statutory minimum wage, making wage increases a central demand in their collective actions.

APBWU (1999) highlights the union's active role in addressing factory disputes, closures, and job losses due to strikes. In the late 1990s, the union concentrated on securing minimum wages, organising large-scale demonstrations, and strengthening grassroots organising across districts like Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Adilabad, Medak, Mahabubnagar, Warangal, and Nellore. The union's *Karya Darshi Nivedika* (Secretary's report), presented to the *Rashtra* (State) General Council, emphasised the need for membership growth, the formation of village and branch committees, and continued advocacy for improved labour conditions.

This emphasis remains dominant today. An analysis of 160 newspaper articles from six major Telugu dailies—*Sakshi*, *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, *Andhra Prabha*, *Namaste Telangana*, and *Prajashakti*—archived by unions like AITUC and IFTU from 2005 to 2018, highlights the prioritisation of wage demands in beedi workers' strikes. Approximately 69.4% of the articles focused on minimum wages, highlighting the dominance of wage demands in the movement, while only 17.5% addressed broader structural issues such as the COPTA, 2003 and GST 2017, and new labour codes. Welfare-related topics like healthcare, housing, and scholarships received even less attention, reflecting the economic focus of the movement. However, alongside wage demands, the male-led union has increasingly recognised the significance of addressing structural challenges like COPTA, 2003 and GST, 2017 which threaten job security and deepen existing vulnerabilities in the beedi industry.

The COPTA, 2003, which seeks to reduce tobacco consumption, represents a significant threat to the beedi sector. It is designed to regulate tobacco use and safeguard public health. Key provisions, such as mandatory pictorial warnings on packaging (see Figure 7.3 below), restrictions on advertisements, and bans on sales near educational institutions, have reduced demand for beedis by stigmatising tobacco use and raising consumer awareness of health risks. Additionally, COPTA's enforcement of compliance places financial strain on small-scale beedi manufacturers, who often struggle with the costs of redesigning packaging and meeting legal requirements (Chahar et al., 2019). Similarly, the introduction of GST replaced the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976, imposing a 28% tax on beedi production and increasing the financial burden on employers. These measures, combined with broader tobacco control policies like the GST on beedis, have shrunk profit margins and led to job cuts, particularly

affecting the rural, predominantly female workforce reliant on this sector for livelihoods (Pandey, 2023). Unions have prioritised this issue on their agenda, citing the lack of alternative employment options for displaced workers and the existential threat to the industry. As union leaders argue, addressing COPTA and GST impact is essential not only to preserve employment but also to ensure that existing labour protections and wages within the sector are not further eroded.

The male leader in the focus group discussion explained:

“We fight a lot to save the industry from collapse. Reducing GST on beedi production is crucial—the employers are suffering, and employment is shrinking. The COPTA Act is also taking a toll, we fight a lot against the pictorial warnings and there is no alternative employment in the sector.”

— (Thiru, Union leader, Sirikonda)

Figure 7.3: Pictorial Warnings on Beedi Packaging and Bundles



Source: Fieldwork

Labour codes are another significant concern for unions. All mandal and state leaders from interviews stated a fear that the new labour codes will dilute the hard-won protections of the BCA, 1966 and BWWF, 1976, which was specifically designed to address the unique needs of beedi workers (Mazumdar & Pillai, 2022). As the male leader noted:

“The long struggle for beedi legislation cannot be scrapped and turned into labour codes. We fought for these laws, and they must remain. Beedi workers have special needs, which is why these laws are critical. They were established after a lot of bloodshed, strikes, and even deaths.”

— (Bhaskar, Union leader, Sirikonda)

The IFTU mandal leader in an interview said:

“I went to Metpally prison two or three times fighting against exploitation by contractors, who gave workers unequal amounts of tobacco and cheated with the weighing machines. We used to burn the leaf stock to protest. I was actively involved in the struggles of the 90s. After all we’ve been through, these laws can’t just be taken away.”

— (Lakshman, Union leader, Sirikonda)

An interview with AITUC leader Boma Venkateshwaran, a trade union leader in the beedi workers’ movement in Andhra Pradesh which began in the early 1960s in Karimnagar, emphasised how trade union leaders “tirelessly pressured the government to enact protective legislation for beedi workers” (Chauhan, 2001, p.38).

Interviews with union leaders at the mandal level emphasise the significant contributions of leaders like C. Prabhakar Rao in Korutla mandal during the 1960s, where the offices of AITUC (see Figure 7.4) and IFTU (see Figure 7.5) are currently located (both unions were united under AITUC at that time). Ramulu, a senior AITUC leader, recalled Prabhakar Rao’s outstanding leadership, particularly during the march to Delhi to meet then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (see Figure 7.6). This legacy is honoured in Korutla, where a library named after Prabhakar Rao stands as a tribute to his enduring impact.

Figure 7.4: AITUC office and the C. Prabhakar Rao library in Korutla



Source: Fieldwork

Figure 7.5: IFTU office in Korutla



Source: Fieldwork

Figure 7.6: AITUC delegation from Korutla meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Delhi



Source: Fieldwork

This highlights the region's rich history of union activism in the beedi industry, with a clear focus on core priorities such as securing minimum wages and ensuring job security. While these historical and ongoing efforts have been critical in addressing key industry-wide concerns, the traditional male-led union structure has often overlooked gender-specific issues such as childcare, housing, healthcare, and education. By emphasising economic stability and structural challenges, these unions have advanced crucial goals but failed to address the nuanced, gendered needs of workers. This reflects a traditional, goal-oriented leadership style that prioritises securing financial stability and economic outcomes. However, it often lacks the relational and inclusive approaches necessary to comprehensively address broader welfare provisions that significantly impact the daily lives of beedi workers.

7.3.1.2 Trade unions led by Women

In contrast, the women-led union in Thandriyal adopts a more welfare-oriented approach, particularly advocating for state benefits that address the unique needs of female workers. The female leader, deeply familiar with the daily challenges faced by women workers, brings a gender-sensitive perspective to union efforts, focusing on welfare initiatives such as

scholarships and healthcare. As noted in Chapters 1 and 3, housing issues are excluded from the analysis due to significant dysfunction in their implementation.

The FGD revealed critical insights into the strategies employed by unions, particularly their emphasis on welfare and their proactive efforts to assist workers' children with scholarship applications. Leaders play a key role in guiding the community through the process, as explored in Chapter 6. Thandriyal's women-led union achieves a significantly higher scholarship receipt rate (57.5% compared to 25% in Sirikonda) due to strong community engagement and hands-on support, such as helping workers with Mee Seva submissions and document preparation.

The female leader's active involvement fosters trust within the community, making the scholarship application process more accessible and encouraging more students to complete their applications. In contrast, the male-led union in Sirikonda struggles with missed deadlines and limited direct support, which contributes to lower scholarship access. This disparity underscores the importance of community-based leadership in improving opportunities for beedi workers and their families.

One union member in Thandriyal emphasised the importance of supporting family welfare and education:

“Family welfare is key. When we can, why not fight for higher scholarship rates or help workers apply for scholarships for their children? The process is very hard, and we need to support our children.”

— (Suma, Beedi Worker and Union member, BC, Thandriyal)

This focus on family-oriented benefits, such as scholarships, reflects the union's broader commitment to improving workers' overall well-being, beyond just their economic conditions.

Since 2019, health benefits for beedi workers have been cut significantly. Mobile dispensary vans and a stationary dispensary in Korutla mandal still provide basic medicines and run health awareness campaigns on issues like eye care, iron deficiency, and tuberculosis. However, many workers do not use the dispensary in Korutla because it is too far—10–20 kilometres from their villages. Instead, they rely on village health sub-centres, which offer similar services but don't focus on just beedi worker-specific health concerns.

Workers also miss the tuberculosis (TB) subsistence allowance, which used to help them when they were unable to work due to illness. While TB medicines are still available at local centres, the financial support they once received has stopped. During interviews, 75% of workers mentioned this issue, stating how crucial it is for them during medical emergencies.

As one worker said:

“Health benefits have declined as facilities are cut, but we still want the TB subsistence allowance and similar provisions. Where are those?”

— (Latha, 47, BC, Thandriyal)

This advocacy aligns with Rao’s (1996) study on women’s empowerment through organisation, which emphasises the role of local leadership in achieving sustainable outcomes. Rao contrasts community-driven, bottom-up efforts with externally directed initiatives, noting that the former, when led by local leaders, are more successful. For example, in Jabalpur, women beedi workers organised collectively to overcome opposition and set their own pace for action. In contrast, externally driven efforts in Pudukkottai, where quarry workers faced caste and class barriers, encountered obstacles. Rao argues that empowerment must go beyond welfare to challenge societal structures, including economic inequality, cultural norms, and gendered power relations.

However, the female-led union, while recognising the power of contractors, understands the precarious nature of its position and avoids directly confronting local contractors due to the risk of retaliation. As one worker explained:

“We don’t want to challenge the contractors directly because they live in our village. If we push them, they will remember it. It could affect our jobs, and they could discriminate against us—less leaf, more rejections, and so on. We don’t want that.”

— (Kanaka, 36, BC, Thandriyal)

Research by Bhatta (1980) and Baud (1992) reveals that having an independent income enhances women’s status and decision-making power within the family. However, while the informal sector provides some space for women, it is shaped by deep-rooted power dynamics—class exploitation, gender subordination, and cultural values (White, 1993). Women’s economic participation does not automatically lead to equality, emancipation, or decision-making

autonomy. Rowbotham (1993) and Kabeer et al., (2013) highlights the gap between the ideals of casual work and the reality, emphasising the need for women to organise to overcome these constraints.

In this regard, empowerment, as defined by Kabeer (1999), involves both access to resources and the agency to make choices that challenge oppressive systems. True empowerment requires not just the ability to choose, but also the capacity to reshape the context of those choices, fostering transformative social change. For instance, women’s leadership in labour movements can exemplify empowerment by enabling them to address workplace inequalities and demand better conditions, thus actively confronting systemic gender norms (Adato & Mindek, 2000). Women in unions leverage collective power to challenge inequalities, improve conditions, and influence policy. In this sense, empowerment extends beyond an individual’s capability, towards dismantling systemic barriers and achieving collective transformation.

As Agarwala (2013) observes, the shift toward informal employment in the beedi industry and the decline of industrial strikes after 1973, marked a pivotal moment in union activism. During this period, unions began to move towards welfare-oriented strategies, a shift that continues today, particularly within women-led unions like the one in Thandiryal. In these unions, women workers in the village have strategically chosen to challenge the state as citizens with nonviolent strategies, rather than confronting employers directly, as the latter hold significant power over workers and could threaten their employment or lead to further exploitation. This strategic shift towards the state, as Agarwala notes in her study on state-labour-capital relations, exemplifies the transition “from work to welfare” (Agarwala 2006). In the case of Thandiryal, this approach reflects how the gender of leadership influences the priorities of the union. Women’s leadership tends to emphasise long-term welfare outcomes for workers, highlighting the role that leadership style and gender play in shaping the focus on specific needs and advocating for more sustainable solutions.

One union member commented,

“We cannot rely on the contractor to help us. They are not even paying the full wages. But the government has schemes for women and children—we just need to make them listen.”

— (Hema, Beedi worker and Union Member, BC, Thandiryal)

This welfare-focused strategy is shaped by women workers' recognition of their precarious position within the beedi industry. Contractors and subcontractors often exploit workers, failing to meet basic wage commitments.

Another union member noted,

“We may not be able to fight the contractors on wages, but we can help each other fill forms for the children's education benefits. That helps our families.”

— (Lavanaya, Beedi worker and Union Member, BC, Thandriyal)

This approach reframes advocacy around citizenship rights rather than labour rights, enabling the union to access welfare benefits for women and their families. Citizenship, linked to empowerment (Kabeer, 2021), is not just a legal status but an active process of claiming rights and challenging societal structures. Collective action, particularly in informal labour sectors where traditional unions may fail to represent women's needs, allows women to assert their citizenship. This is evident in movements like SEWA and the MEC movement in Nicaragua (Bickham-Mendez 2005), where women-led organisations have advocated for better rights and working conditions. These movements illustrate how women's collective agency leads to social and legal reforms, providing broader frameworks for social change.

During a FGD in Thandriyal, one union member expressed frustration with the limited impact of their ongoing mandal and state level protests for an increase of the minimum wage:

“They collect money as part of our membership, but after three or four years of protests, the increase in minimum wages is barely a few rupees. Why continue to protest for such a small increase when we could instead focus on fighting for securing welfare benefits for our children and families at the big strikes in the mandal and state?”

— (Indra, 39, FGD, BC, Thandriyal)

This sentiment underscores the dissatisfaction among workers who feel that despite years of struggle, the wage increases they achieve are minimal. For instance, the IFTU union records reveal that, as of 2024, workers are still earning only ₹ 221.21, a figure that has remained unchanged since June 21, 2022. This amount is significantly below the statutory minimum wage rates recently revised in Telangana for 2023 (₹ 310) and 2024 (₹ 333), highlighting a 33.6% shortfall, as detailed in Chapter 5 on “*being securely employed*”.

The women-led union's leadership has also been instrumental in accessing healthcare.

For example, one worker explained,

“Our leader knows what we need because she is one of us. She fights to make sure we get the health van to visit the village at least once a month.”

— (Nirmala, 42, BC, Thandriyal)

This inclusive, hands-on leadership has strengthened welfare advocacy, directly addressing members' everyday needs. By focusing on practical support for women workers and their families, the union aims to provide welfare benefits with a long-term perspective.

A comparison of the two unions highlights significant differences in their approaches. The male-led union in Sirikonda focuses primarily on wage increases and job security, addressing structural issues like GST and the survival of the beedi industry, but often neglecting gender specific needs. In contrast, the female-led union in Thandriyal adopts a broader, welfare-centred strategy, prioritising labour rights alongside healthcare, education, and family benefits. This aligns with studies by Datt (1997) and Radhakrishna and Sharma (1998), which highlight that women's participation in trade unions, both traditional and autonomous, reflects a growing focus on addressing precarious employment and empowerment. This shift emphasises collective struggle and development over purely economic concerns, fostering solidarity and broader empowerment beyond wage security. Through active community engagement, the female-led union emphasises gender-sensitive welfare, enhancing the overall well-being of workers and their families. This contrast illustrates how leadership styles influence union priorities and the effectiveness of their advocacy.

Research on beedi workers' unions aligns with broader studies showing women's leadership as collaborative and welfare-oriented, prioritising workers' and families' needs. Female leaders emphasise communal traits like collaboration and active listening, promoting empowerment and shared decision-making, while male leaders often prioritise agentic traits, such as self sacrifice and visionary leadership (Prowse et al., 2022)⁶¹. Similarly, in British trade unions,

⁶¹ Prowse et al. (2022) surveyed 466 representatives from the Public and Commercial Services Union, finding that both male and female representatives value communal leadership traits, challenging traditional views of leadership as requiring agentic, “heroic” qualities.

female full-time trade union officers (FTOs) focus on issues like childcare, maternity leave, healthcare, equal pay, work-life integration, and sexual harassment, while male FTOs emphasise pay and working conditions (Heery & Kelly, 1988). Gender-diverse leadership is therefore essential to address the specific needs of women workers, particularly in industries like beedi production where they form the majority (Kabeer, 2005a). Historically, as Omvedt (1978) observes, the 1970s marked a shift in India's women's movements, especially in Andhra Pradesh, where activism evolved from traditional strikes to non-disruptive protests targeting state officials, framing welfare as an inalienable right rather than a negotiable benefit. This strategic shift reflects broader changes in labour activism, emphasising the importance of welfare.

Building on this, the next subsection focuses on the second short-term outcome on “representation and voice – inclusion in decision making”.

7.3.2 Representation and Voice–Inclusion in Decision-Making: Short-term Outcome Two

The male-led union in Sirikonda is characterised by centralised decision-making dominated by men, leaving women with limited involvement in leadership or strategic decisions. Evidence from fieldwork indicates that women's participation is largely limited to attending strikes and meetings, with agenda-setting, public speaking, and negotiations handled by male leaders. Women rarely spoke during these forums, and no women occupied formal leadership positions, reflecting exclusion that operates both through hierarchical control and routinised silence. This structure marginalises women's voices, restricting their ability to influence union priorities or advocate for their gender-specific needs. As established in Section 7.3.1, union priorities are set largely by male leaders and focus on critical industry-level issues such as wages, taxation, and regulatory survival, while often overlooking gender-specific concerns like healthcare and education.

In contrast, the women-led union in Thandriyal demonstrates a more participatory model at the village level, where women actively engage in discussions, shape priorities, and articulate welfare concerns. The following testimonies illustrate how, even within this more inclusive local structure, women continue to face barriers to representation as decision-making shifts to mandal and state levels.

One woman worker said,

“The men don’t ask us what we think. They don’t need us to speak—they just need us to sit there in strikes, so it looks like everyone is involved.”

— (Rajamma, BC, Union member and Beedi Worker, Thandriyal)

This tokenism reinforces the exclusion of women’s voices from decision-making processes, perpetuating their marginalisation. One woman worker explained,

“We go for the strikes because they give us some money for the day. It’s better than what we make rolling beedis, so we sit there and watch while the big men speak. We don’t know what to say even if we wanted to.”

— (Muthakka, Beedi Worker, BC, Thandriyal)

Another worker described the experience as disempowering:

“Even when we want to speak, we feel we cannot. We are not trained for it. We don’t know how to speak in public or what to say, so we just let them [the men] do it.”

— (Bhagya, BC, Beedi Worker, Thandriyal)

This dynamic reinforces a cycle of exclusion, where women are neither encouraged nor equipped to participate in leadership roles or advocacy. This statement underscores not only the economic precariousness of women workers but also their lack of training or confidence to participate in public forums.

The women-led union in Thandriyal stands out for its empowering and inclusive leadership style, which actively involves members in decision-making processes and provides leadership opportunities. The female leader adopts a grassroots approach, encouraging women workers to voice their concerns, take on leadership roles, and shape the union’s agenda.

A strong sense of solidarity is evident, with 92% of workers from both villages highlighting the value of having a woman leader from their community. Many expressed that a female leader fosters a deeper understanding of their issues and creates a safe space for discussing personal and work-related challenges.

As one worker in the focus group shared:

“It feels like we have someone to share our problems with. We feel less alone, knowing we’re all going through similar struggles. Together, we voice our opinions and work to improve our lives and our families’ futures.”

— (Gangu, FGD, Thandriyal)

Another worker added:

“We are like sisters. We sit together outside our homes, rolling beedis, sharing our health concerns, talking about our children, and helping each other. It’s not just work; it’s a bond we build as we support one another.”

— (Seetha, FGD, Thandriyal)

Unions in the informal sector, like SEWA, represent a shift towards relational or social unionism (Kannan, 1999), where empowerment and solidarity replace traditional employer-employee dynamics. Women build strong bonds, often referring to each other as “work sisters,” emphasising mutual support and solidarity. This relational unionism fosters inclusive, participatory models that reshape both labour relations and social norms, emphasising personal empowerment, collective strength, and holistic self-development (Ratnam & Jain, 2002).

Despite the grassroots success of the women-led union in Thandriyal, significant barriers persist when attempting to influence higher-level decision-making. At both the mandal and state levels, women leaders struggle to assert themselves in meetings often dominated by male representatives. As the women leader in a focus group discussion explained:

“At the village level, I speak, I lead, and I work with my members. But when we go for bigger strikes or meetings, it’s always the men who speak. We are just there to show that women are involved.”

— (Woman leader, TPBWU, Thandriyal)

This lack of representation reflects a “pyramid of exclusion,” where women become increasingly absent as one ascends in power and authority (Cobble, 2016). This dynamic limit the union’s ability to advocate for systemic policy changes at higher levels and underscores the ongoing marginalisation of women’s voices within broader union structures. As another union member pointed out:

“Our leader works so hard for us, but when we go to mandal-level meetings, it’s as if she doesn’t exist. The big men from the union take over, and they don’t listen to us. The men at the state level say they support us, but they don’t let us speak. Even our leader doesn’t get to talk. We just sit and listen.”

— (Durga, Union Member and Beedi Worker, Thandriyal)

This reflects the exclusion of women in traditional unions, echoing Kabeer et al.’s (2013) analysis:

“The failure of mainstream trade unions to represent the interests of these workers is not purely a reflection of the greater numerical presence of men in their leadership and membership, but also the extent to which patriarchal interests have influenced their evolution and shaped their organisation and strategies.” (Kabeer et al., 2013, p.260)

It is remarkable the extent to which women successfully organise at the local level despite the barriers they face at higher levels. Nonetheless, while grassroots organising thrives, women’s upward mobility within union hierarchies remains constrained by patriarchal norms—what Kabeer (1999) describes as systemic limitations on agency in unequal societies.⁶²

Fieldwork also revealed that while women lead at the village level, no women hold leadership positions at the mandal, district, or state levels. The gender representation ratio is strikingly low. This highlights how, even within a women-led union, structural barriers persist, limiting the agency and voice of women leaders beyond the local context. Feminist scholars have argued that gender democracy is essential to narrowing the leadership gap and addressing systemic barriers (Briskin, 2012). As Kaminski and Yakura (2008, p. 459) remark,

“There is a saying in the labour movement: the leadership should look like the membership.”

This statement underscores the importance of gender proportionality in union leadership—ensuring leadership mirrors the composition of its members (Kirton, 2015)—alongside broader democratic practices that promote equitable participation through dialogue and inclusivity (Young, 2000; Kirton & Healy, 2013). Despite these ideals, male-dominated leadership

⁶² For example, Kabeer (2005b) highlights how initiatives like microfinance programs have enabled women to assert financial independence despite structural constraints.

structures continue to hinder women's representation and meaningful participation (McEldowney et al., 2009).

Moreover, frameworks promoting inclusivity often fail to address deeper structural inequalities, instead reinforcing superficial representation without real power shifts (Blair-Loy, 2001; Fletcher, 2004; Kirton & Healy, 2013). The exclusion of women from union leadership is after all rooted in historical gender dynamics that shape organisational structures and decision-making (Berg et al., 2012; Kirton & Healy, 2012). Indeed, trade unions, shaped by masculinised leadership norms, have systematically marginalised women, raising questions about the democratic legitimacy of institutions that claim to represent all workers (Colgan & Ledwith, 2000; Kirton & Healy, 2008).

Thus globally, women remain underrepresented in union leadership (Kaminski and Yakura, 2008). In India, a study of 200 collective bargaining agreements found fewer than five women involved in negotiations (Ratnam, 2001). Similarly, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reported that in three out of four national trade union centres, women comprised less than 50% of the membership, with even fewer in top decision-making roles⁶³ (ILO, 1998). These trends underscore the structural barriers that, despite growing advocacy for gender parity, limit women's leadership opportunities.

In this regard, Bhatt (1997) and Kannan and Sreekumar (1998) emphasise leadership "from below" in movements like SEWA and WWF, where participatory structures empower women to take on leadership roles. These models challenge traditional, top-down leadership by fostering decision-making within the community itself, enabling women to assert influence in ways that reflect their lived realities. However, rural women still face resistance, with men often opposing their leadership (Selliah, 1989; Maini, 2018). While attitudes toward gender equality are shifting, entrenched institutional barriers remain, demonstrating that inclusion in leadership remains a contested process rather than a linear progression.

These patterns reflect Stewart's (2005) concept of horizontal inequalities in leadership exclusion and Kabeer's (2021) notion of intersecting inequalities, where gender, economic status, and institutional norms collectively restrict women's advancement in trade unions. In

⁶³ While international organisations like the ILO, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) advocate for gender balance, women are still underrepresented in decision-making roles within Indian trade unions (see Ratnam, 2001).

the Sirikonda and Thandriyal unions, these dynamics are evident. Women beedi workers actively participate in strikes and mobilisations, but their role remains largely symbolic, with men controlling advocacy and decision-making. In Sirikonda, the absence of women in leadership prevents gender-specific welfare concerns from being addressed. In contrast, the women-led union in Thandriyal has successfully secured state welfare benefits by centring community-driven strategies. However, despite local successes, its influence is constrained within broader union hierarchies, where male-dominated structures persist.

As for at state level, women leaders continue to face tokenism, reinforcing a pattern of exclusion that limits their ability to shape policy decisions. Even within women-led unions, structural barriers prevent leadership from extending beyond the grassroots level. This highlights how gendered hierarchies operate at multiple levels, maintaining systemic limitations on women's leadership and decision-making power in trade unions.

Building on this, the next section focuses on the third short-term outcome on “intersectionality - stronger solidarity networks”.

7.3.3 Intersectionality - Stronger Solidarity Networks: Short-term Outcome Three

Social capital, defined as the network of relationships and trust that facilitates collective action (Putnam, 2000), is critical in building solidarity and advocacy to improve conditions and welfare for women workers. To fully understand these dynamics, an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) is essential. Research by Raman (2020)⁶⁴ and Pandey and Varkkey (2020) underscore how the intersection of caste, gender, and class shapes union leadership and advocacy. Ensuring solidarity that includes marginalised groups is crucial for fostering meaningful participation and representation. In *Dalithan*, Kochu (2024) exposes the deep-rooted Dalit exclusion within Kerala's communist parties, revealing how they exploit Dalit labour while maintaining ties with landowners, ultimately betraying the very cause of the oppressed. Building on this, Soundararajan, Sharma and Bapuji (2024) shows how caste-based disparities in social capital intensify occupational precarity for Dalit labour contractors in Tamil

⁶⁴ Raman (2020) examines the experiences of Dalit women workers in Munnar's tea plantations, showing how multiple social identities intersect to limit their agency and representation. His work reinforces the need for a holistic, intersectional approach to union leadership and solidarity.

Nadu's garment sector, limiting their mobility, undermining their leadership, and trapping them in systemic disadvantage—even within the same job role as their upper-caste counterparts.

Both villages in this study have faced challenges in achieving this inclusive solidarity. While leaders in both Thandriyal and Sirikonda come from the BC community, their approaches reveal limitations. Thandriyal's leadership has successfully mobilised BC community members but have failed to include SC workers in union activities and benefits. Similarly, Sirikonda has struggled due to the absence of women leadership and the lack of caste inclusion. Effective solidarity requires addressing both gender and caste to create equitable representation and participation.

In Thandriyal, SC women workers expressed frustration at being excluded. One worker noted:

“We are always left behind. The leader from Thandriyal only calls women from her own community, never reaching out to us. Our concerns are ignored, and we're not part of decisions that impact us.”

— (Venkatamma, SC, Non-Union Member and Beedi Worker, Thandriyal)

The leader, herself from the BC community, reportedly excludes SC women from strikes when called upon by state or mandal-level male leaders. This reinforces the urgent need for leadership that actively engages all caste groups, ensuring that their voices and needs are included in decision-making processes.

Hensman (2002) critiques the trade union movement for its “abject failure... to take up the issue of equality” (p.16), emphasising how fragmented unions rooted in caste and gender hierarchies result in fragmented bargaining power. Her study of six organisations across India, the All India Chemical and Pharmaceutical Employees' Federation in Bombay; Women's Wing of the All-India Bank Employees' Association; Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh; Mahila Mukti Morcha in Madhya Pradesh; Navayuga Beedi Karmika Sangam in Hyderabad; Sarba Shanti Ayog and Sasha in Calcutta; and SEWA in Ahmedabad reveals progress in advocating for women's rights. However, she concludes that the broader trade union movement remains led by upper-caste male leadership, leaving women—especially Dalits and Muslims—out of leadership and decision-making roles.

Caste influences access to resources, with unions often reflecting caste dynamics in leadership and distribution of benefits. While unions are meant to serve all members, they often fail to

distribute benefits equally. Hensman points out that Dalit women and Muslims are frequently excluded from leadership, limiting their participation, knowledge of services, and access to benefits. This lack of representation worsens inequalities, as marginalised groups are left without the support that they need from collective action.

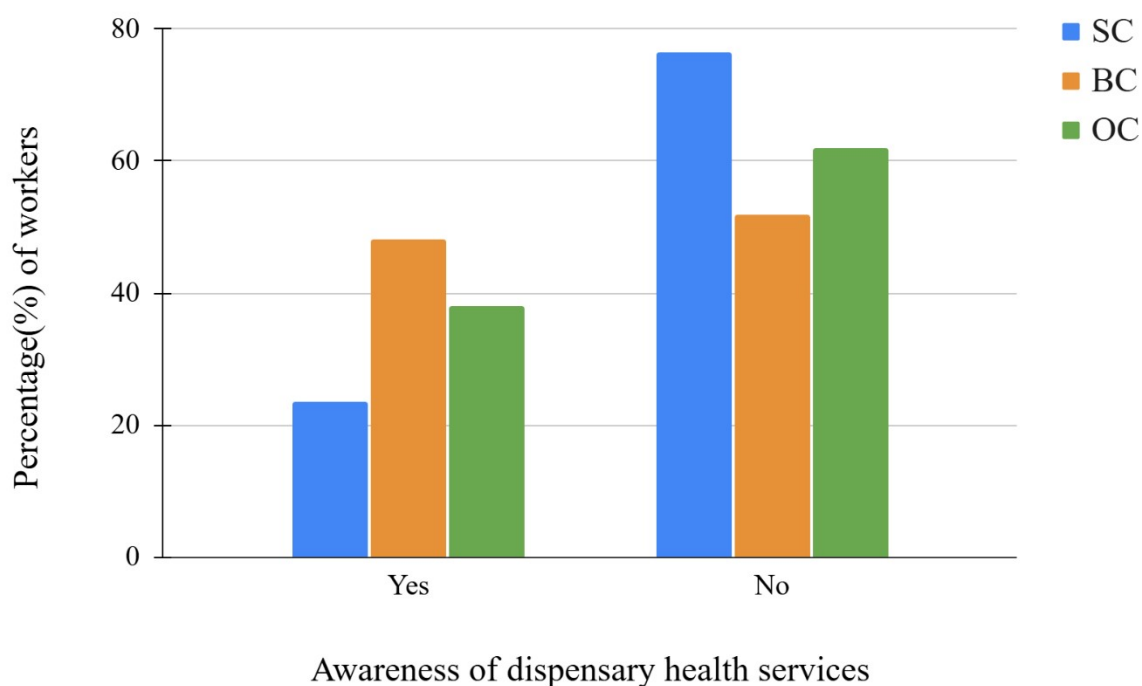
This pattern of exclusion is not unique to India: studies show that similar dynamics are evident globally, where leadership tends to be shaped by dominant social groups, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Women and people of colour often face intersecting barriers to recognition and advancement in union spaces, including biases in perception, emotional labour burdens, and systemic undermining of their authority. These dynamics can compel them to adopt coping strategies such as minimising visibility or deflecting credit (Gray, 1993; Carli & Eagly, 2011, 2012; Bryant-Anderson & Roby, 2012; Kirton & Healy, 2013).

The fieldwork survey highlights caste-based disparities in union membership, with 22.5% of BC members and 24% of OC members unionised, compared to only 11.8% of SC members. As discussed in Chapter 5, SC beedi workers face structural barriers, including the absence of SC contractors, forcing them to rely on BC contractors who often discriminate against them. This discrimination manifests in lower wages, higher rejection rates of their beedis, and poorer working conditions. Chapter 6 further illustrated that lower union membership among SC workers translates into reduced access to benefits, such as scholarships for their children.

These disparities extend beyond union participation to awareness of essential services. A Chi-square test reveals a statistically significant association between caste and awareness of dispensary health services ($\chi^2 = 16.57, p < 0.001$), indicating that caste plays a crucial role in shaping access to health-related information and services.

This trend is further reflected in the survey findings on health service awareness (see Figure 7.7 below): while 48.1% of BC workers and 38% of OC workers are aware of both static and mobile dispensaries, only 23.6% of SC workers possess this knowledge.

Figure 7.7: Awareness of dispensary health services by caste



Source: Fieldwork survey

These caste-based experiences are reflected in the semi-structured interviews. For example, several workers shared their experiences with the mobile dispensary van. One SC worker commented:

“We have never seen the mobile dispensary van. They never came into our colonies as far as we know. They certainly never came door to door like ASHA workers.”

— (Kanaka, 43, SC, Thandriyal)

Another SC worker added:

“The vans stop at beedi shops, which are in BC colonies, and only people from those colonies go if they want to. The vans never come inside our colony, and we are never informed by anyone. We miss out.”

— (Narsakka, 38, SC, Thandriyal)






The absence of caste-specific leadership as a major obstacle to inclusion has been discussed in previous empirical chapters. Without representation from the SC community, these workers are not only unaware of available services, but also lack the support needed to advocate for their rights or improve their working conditions. In my observations, there was no SC leader at any level—local, mandal, district, or state. The only leader I encountered was a male ST leader from CITU, who does not work in these villages.

Thus, static and mobile dispensaries in Korutla mandal are largely inaccessible to SC colonies due to low awareness and a lack of representation from SC leadership and contractors. These issues highlight the role of spatial segregation—SC communities, often residing on the periphery of villages, are cut off from essential services and union activities that are concentrated in the core areas where other caste groups live. This geographic isolation reflects broader patterns of caste-based exclusion, as seen in Singh (2020), who noted that Dalits in urban areas like Meerut are pushed to the outskirts, further limiting their access to services. Similarly, a study by Xu Az. (2024) in São Paulo, Brazil, surveying 1,000 households across different neighbourhoods, showed that segregation weakens collective action for public goods. Conversely, while integration fosters greater cooperation and progress toward equitable resource distribution.

Figure 7.8 (Sirikonda map) and Figure 7.9 (Thandriyal map), created using Google Satellite Maps and Figma, highlight the distribution of caste groups and the location of beedi workshops, *Karkhanas*. The maps show that most beedi shops are situated in BC colonies, demonstrating how spatial segregation along caste lines limits access to benefits for SC colonies, who reside on the periphery.

Figure 7.8: Spatial segregation of caste groups and beedi shop locations in Sirikonda

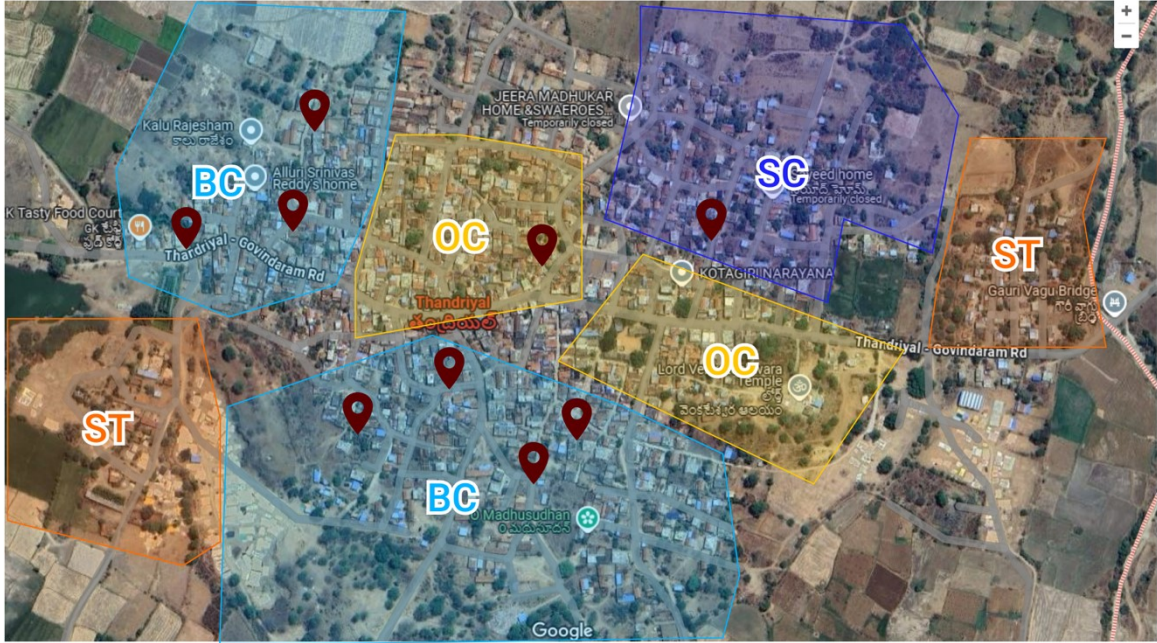







-  **Karkhanas (Beedi workshops)**
-  **BC**
-  **OC**
-  **SC**
-  **ST**

Sirikonda

Source: Author’s creation

Figure 7.9: Spatial segregation of caste groups and beedi shop locations in Thandriyal



-  **Karkhanas (Beedi workshops)**
-  **BC**
-  **OC**
-  **SC**
-  **ST**

Thandriyal

Source: Author’s creation

Caste-based spatial segregation in India restricts access to essential services and economic opportunities for marginalised groups, perpetuating systemic inequalities (Bharathi et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2019). Meanwhile, political favouritism often excludes SC colonies from vital

infrastructure such as schools and sanitation (Bharathi et al., 2018)⁶⁵. This exclusion forces Dalit labourers into hazardous outdoor work with high climate risks, worsened by poor housing and lack of green spaces (Shah et al., 2024)⁶⁶. Segregation also entrenches income inequality by limiting job opportunities along religious and occupational lines (Roy et al., 2018)⁶⁷. Beyond economic impacts, spatial segregation weakens civic participation, with wealthier, segregated communities experiencing greater engagement than poorer residents, highlighting the need for inclusive public initiatives (Wichowsky, 2019)⁶⁸.

These studies and the evidence from this research, underscore the significant impact of spatial segregation on access to resources, opportunities, and collective action, reinforcing caste and class-based disparities. The core-periphery model, where wealthier areas are at the core and marginalised groups are relegated to the periphery, shows how inequality is deepened by spatial divisions. Reducing this segregation is therefore key to improving the inclusivity of civic action and ensuring equal access to welfare benefits for all members of society. Strengthening social capital and building solidarity is also crucial—this can only be achieved when all members of the village are included, with a focus on both gender and caste inclusivity.

Having examined the three short-term outcomes, Section 7.4 shifts to the ongoing debate on union strength, analysing supply and demand constraints that limit women’s participation and leadership. Field SSIs reveal these recurring challenges as key barriers: addressing them could enhance women’s agency and fortify the labour movement.

⁶⁵ Singh et al. (2019) studied caste-based residential segregation across nearly 60% of Indian cities between 2001 and 2011, finding persistent spatial inequalities, especially in smaller towns. Bharathi et al. (2018) analysed data from nearly 600,000 villages, showing that spatial segregation at the sub-district level worsens access to services for Scheduled Caste colonies and that political favouritism excludes marginalised groups from infrastructure such as secondary schools and sanitation.

⁶⁶ Shah et al. (2024) demonstrated how caste-based spatial segregation in India’s labour market pushes Dalit workers into hazardous outdoor jobs with extreme heat exposure, aggravated by inadequate housing and limited access to cooling infrastructure.

⁶⁷ Roy et al. (2018) surveyed 500 households across 37 slums in Bengaluru, finding that segregation by religion and occupation perpetuates income inequality and restricts access to job opportunities and resources.

⁶⁸ Wichowsky (2019) used data from 30 large metropolitan areas in the U.S., involving 50,000 respondents, to show that residential income segregation weakens civic engagement, with wealthier residents having greater opportunities to participate in local organisations compared to poorer residents.

7.4 Union Strength: Decline or Evolution?

Union strength in India has witnessed a complex evolution, with a surge in membership—from 35 million in 2008 to nearly 100 million by 2013—accompanied by a sharp decline in political influence (Pratap, 2022). This paradox is rooted in the breakdown of alliances, such as the fracture of the joint platform formed by CTUOs in 2010, and the loss of collective bargaining power as unions have become less effective in representing workers, especially in the informal sectors. For example, the share of Lok Sabha seats held by unions has plummeted from 21% in 1971 to just 5-6 MPs today, underscoring the diminished impact of unions in influencing national policies. Additionally, the informal sector, now comprising 41.7% of union members, faces job insecurity and inadequate representation, further eroding union strength. The growth of contract labour, which increased from 12.26% to 42.27% between 1990-91 and 2013-14, has also contributed to weakening unions' power in formal manufacturing sectors (Badigannavar et al., 2013; Shyam Sundar, 2019).

The weakening of union strength is particularly evident in regions like Andhra Pradesh, where privatisation in the 1990s and the rise of informal jobs undermined unions (Tendulkar, 2003). This is a trend observed globally, as unions have struggled to organise migrant and informal workers, who represent a significant portion of the workforce. Neoliberal policies have further fragmented the labour force, weakening unions' political clout (Mahmood, 2016). In this regard, Dewan (2024) examined the impact of the upcoming labour codes, showing how they weaken unions, particularly affecting women. The Code on Industrial Relations (2019) raises the threshold for protections from 100 to 300 workers, excluding 90% of factories. This allows discrimination in employment terms and denies workers redress. Strikes are restricted across all sectors, with penalties for inciting illegal actions. Unions now need 51% worker support for recognition. For women, organising is even harder, and many are denied “worker” status, limiting their legal options. These changes prioritise business interests, further eroding labour rights, especially for women.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. While union power in India has diminished, scholars like Cobble (2016) suggest that unions are evolving. On a global scale, union membership has risen by 78%, with substantial growth in emerging economies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, offsetting losses in older industrial countries. Alternative labour movements, such as worker centres, labour NGOs, and community alliances, have emerged as adaptable and viable models for advancing workers' rights in the face of a changing labour landscape. These

movements advocate for democratic participation and recognise that daily actions and personal interactions drive lasting social change.

7.4.1 Supply and Demand Constraints

Male leader participants in this study from IFTU and AITUC, emphasised the importance of women in leadership roles during fieldwork, expressing a strong desire for greater female representation. They articulated a willingness to provide resources, leadership training, and other forms of support to achieve this goal. As one leader stated,

“Women have unique perspectives and skills that unions need. Without their voices, we cannot claim to truly represent the workforce.”

— (Ranganna, IFTU)

This aligns with Heery and Kelly’s (1998) findings, which suggest that a minority of male FTOs, particularly those with left-leaning and progressive ideologies, are committed to advancing gender equality within unions.

Hugo Gorringe’s (2005; 2017) research on Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu offers a critical lens on such rhetoric, showing how calls for inclusion often coexist with entrenched power dynamics that continue to marginalise underrepresented groups. Gorringe’s analysis of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) underscores how leadership structures and strategies, despite their progressive aspirations, may inadvertently reinforce exclusionary practices. Applying this insight to union leadership, male leaders’ stated commitments to gender equality must be evaluated not just for their intentions but for their effectiveness in dismantling structural barriers and fostering genuinely inclusive collective capabilities.

Despite these rhetorical commitments, women are still rarely promoted to higher leadership positions, prompting the question: *what systemic constraints continue to impede their advancement?* SSIs with women workers revealed barriers to union participation and leadership, which can be categorised as supply-side and demand-side constraints.

Supply-side constraints are rooted in personal, social, and economic factors that inhibit women’s ability to participate actively in unions. Women workers frequently cited the “triple burden”—balancing paid work, household duties, and family responsibilities—as a primary obstacle. Scholars have argued that entrenched social hierarchies and domestic responsibilities

severely limit women's ability to engage in union activities and advocate for systemic change (Baker & Robeson, 1981; Hensman, 2002, 2011). In this regard, one worker shared,

“My day starts at 5 a.m. and ends at midnight. After taking care of my children and household chores, there is no time left for union meetings.”

— (Sravanthi, 35, BC, Sirikonda)

Time-use surveys corroborate this, noting that women are 48% more likely than men to multitask with unpaid domestic work (NSSO, 2019; Chindarkar et al., 2024).

For women in industries like beedi-making, these challenges are compounded. Gopal (1999) emphasises that while working from home offers flexibility, it also results in long hours, low wages, and isolation—conditions that undermine collective bargaining and solidarity. Similarly, Ledwith (2012) points to the undervaluation and manipulation of women's labour in such industries, noting that gendered norms exploit women's dexterity while erasing their contributions. This exploitation leaves women overburdened and under-supported.

Economic insecurity also plays a significant role. Many women prioritise immediate income over long-term union engagement, due to the precarious nature of their jobs.

“If I lose this job, my family will starve. How can I risk that for union work?” asked a woman beedi worker.

— (Ratnakka, 41, BC, Thandriyal)

Moreover, the fear of retaliation from employers or family members, as well as the risk of harassment or violence during protests, discourages activism. In low-wage industries, women often hesitate to participate unless the benefits are clear and outweigh the risks (Neetha, 2001; Hensman, 2002).

Demand-side constraints stem from societal norms, workplace segregation, and organisational practices that limit women's active involvement. Patriarchal norms and job segregation consistently place women in lower-status roles, even within industries dominated by female workers, such as beedi rolling and garment manufacturing (Neetha, 2001; Joshi, 2007). These roles rarely offer pathways to leadership. As one female worker remarked,

“Even in unions, men make decisions. We are only asked to follow.”

— (Kanakamma, 43, BC, Thandriyal)

Union structures often mirror the hierarchical and gendered inequalities of workplaces. Colgan and Ledwith (1996) argue that informal male-dominated networks—such as after-hours meetings—exclude women, who cannot participate due to time constraints or social expectations. One male union leader acknowledged,

“We know that after-hours meetings can exclude women, but during the day we all have other work commitments. These meetings are when we manage to get the real work done.”

— (Ramulu, Male Union Leader, IFTU)

This informal exclusion perpetuates male dominance in decision-making.

Authoritarian and patriarchal structures within unions further marginalise women’s voices in bargaining teams and leadership, reinforcing the male-dominated status quo (Evans, 2017). For instance, in industries like beedi rolling, many women remain unaware of their union membership, with wage deductions made without their consent, as previously noted.

Cultural stereotypes and internalised gender ideologies undermine women’s confidence to pursue leadership roles, as they are socialised into subordinate positions that discourage asserting authority (Kirton & Healy, 2004). One female worker admitted,

“Even if I want to lead, I feel I am not qualified. Men are better at these things.”

— (Ravalakka, 52, BC, Sirikonda)

These internalised beliefs perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and underrepresentation.

The cumulative effect of these supply and demand-side barriers severely limits women’s “capability for voice” within unions (Bonvin, 2012). The absence of “process freedom”—the ability to participate in decisions impacting their labour—is particularly pronounced in the beedi industry, where patriarchal norms and economic constraints intersect.

Addressing these barriers requires gender-sensitive reforms within unions, including flexible schedules, childcare support, and targeted recruitment of women into leadership roles. As Maini (2018) suggests, gender quotas for leadership positions can be effective, ensuring that

issues like maternity leave, workplace safety, and sexual harassment are prioritised. Such measures not only increase representation but also “foster empowerment and improve working conditions” (Evans, 2017, p. 1619).

Finally, the inclusion of more women in leadership roles can strengthen union solidarity and enhance collective bargaining. As Weldon and Htun (2013) observe, women-led unions are more responsive to the needs of female workers, creating a virtuous cycle of empowerment. By addressing both supply and demand-side constraints, unions can become more inclusive, transparent, and worker-driven. In the evolving landscape of labour movements, particularly with the growing feminisation of the workforce, inclusive unionism is not just desirable but essential for revitalising unions and advocating for social change.

7.5 Conclusion: From Wages to Dignity – Women Leaders Redefining Union Priorities

In conclusion, the analysis of the three short-term outcomes—(i) access to state welfare benefits, (ii) representation and voice, and (iii) intersectionality—highlight how gendered leadership dynamics within unions influence these outcomes. Framing these findings through the lens of the CA emphasises the importance of expanding the *capabilities of all* workers, enabling them to lead lives they value while fostering *collective capabilities* through union affiliation and solidarity.

Regarding access to state welfare benefits, the contrasting approaches of male-led and woman led unions underscore how leadership style shapes priorities and affects workers’ *capabilities*. The female-led union in Thandriyal adopts a welfare-centred approach, addressing broader issues such as healthcare, education, and family benefits in addition to labour rights. This reflects a commitment to enhancing *affiliation* by strengthening social connections and solidarity. In contrast, the male-led Sirikonda union prioritises wage security and structural issues, often neglecting gender-specific needs. This contrast illustrates how women leaders shift union agendas to foster *collective empowerment* and broader well-being, transcending traditional economic concerns.

In terms of representation and voice, the findings highlight the barriers women face in both types of unions, which constrain their *capability for voice*. In Sirikonda, women workers remain on the periphery of decision-making processes, while in Thandriyal, women leaders

face exclusion from higher-level negotiations, despite their grassroots success in securing state welfare benefits. These structural and patriarchal barriers undermine women's ability to participate meaningfully, limiting the development of their *agency freedom*. Structural reforms that promote gender-inclusive leadership are crucial to dismantling these barriers and advancing women's ability to fully contribute to union priorities.

Regarding intersectionality and solidarity, the women-led union in Thandriyal excels at building community networks that enhance *affiliation* and create spaces for collective problem-solving. These networks address both labour rights and welfare needs, contributing to tangible improvements in the lives of workers. However, the exclusion of marginalised groups, such as SC workers, reveals the need for leadership that fosters truly inclusive *collective capabilities*. In contrast, the male-led Sirikonda union struggles to address both gender-specific and caste based needs, failing to create a union culture that values *diverse capabilities* and equitable participation. This comparison underscores the critical need for caste-inclusive and gender sensitive leadership to ensure that unions foster solidarity that strengthens the *capabilities of all*.

Women-led unions are redefining union priorities by shifting the focus from transactional, work-related benefits to broader issues of welfare, dignity, and empowerment (Simpson & Kaminski, 2007; Kaminski & Yakura, 2008). By centring their leadership on the lived experiences and needs of workers, women leaders can foster *collective capabilities*, enabling unions to focus on long-term empowerment and well-being rather than short-term economic gains. By advocating participatory decision-making and empowering members to shape union agendas, they strengthen the *capability for voice* and move unions away from narrow "poor relief" frameworks toward a vision rooted in dignity and respect (Mazumdar, 2018). In places like Thandriyal, women-led unions demonstrate how welfare can be redefined through community-driven approaches that expand the *capabilities* of workers both inside and outside the workplace. This transformative, relational model of unionism builds stronger *affiliation* through solidarity, and integrates caregiving and family well-being as central to worker empowerment.

These strategies challenge traditional production-oriented welfare models, such as those outlined in the BCA 1996 and the BWWF 1976 legislation for beedi workers. This research suggest that women leaders are more likely to advocate for holistic frameworks that recognise the interconnectedness of labour, gender, and caregiving. This aligns with Cooper et al., (2023),

who emphasise the importance of social connections, community engagement, and solidarity in advancing well-being.

As union strength declines, these innovative approaches offer opportunities to revitalise unions and address challenges in the labour movement (Joshi, 1999; Catalyst, 2004; Krishnan & Park, 2005). Strengthening union presence, fostering political advocacy, and expanding access to welfare provisions can enhance *affiliation* and create the conditions for sustained improvements in worker welfare, gender inclusivity, and social equity. These strategies not only enhance welfare but also contribute to the creation of a reimagined social contract between workers, the state, and employers (Agarwala, 2008).

By prioritising collective capabilities and fostering opportunities for “*being affiliated*,” unions can transcend traditional limitations and adopt inclusive, bottom-up approaches to worker wellbeing (Rao, 1996). This reorientation offers a sustainable, relational model of unionism that responds to the realities of diverse, precarious labour.

8. Conclusion: Rights, Resistance, and Capabilities - Reimagining Labour Laws for the Informal Sector

8.1 Introduction: Revisiting the Research Focus

This study set out to examine how the BCA, 1966 and the BWVF Act, 1976 have shaped labour welfare in India's beedi industry. While these laws establish crucial entitlements, this research moved beyond a narrow legalistic view to explore how welfare outcomes are realised—or constrained—in practice. It argues that access to legal protections is neither automatic nor uniform; it depends fundamentally on workers' ability to organise themselves and to assert their rights, particularly in a sector marked by informality, subcontracting, and gendered home-based production.

Framed within Amartya Sen's (1999) CA, this study reconceptualises labour laws not simply as regulatory instruments, but as potential enablers of substantive freedoms. Yet these capabilities can only materialise through effective implementation, underpinned by robust collective agency. In highlighting the role of worker-led organisations—especially women-led unions—this research underscores how collective capabilities drive enforcement, echoing the ILO's Decent Work Agenda emphasis on social dialogue as essential to realising rights on the ground.

The intersectional feminist approach to labour welfare is a key contribution, as it centres the experiences of the predominantly female beedi workforce, who face compounded marginalisation due to caste, class, and gender. By prioritising women's voices, leadership, and vulnerabilities, the study reveals how women-led unions and collective organising challenge exclusionary state welfare systems and traditional trade unions. This approach not only highlights structural inequalities but also underscores the transformative power of inclusive collective action in shaping effective labour law enforcement and advancing equitable welfare initiatives. Methodologically, it uses a bottom-up, mixed-methods, theory-based evaluation that centres women's voices, power relations, and lived experiences (Jackson, 2006; Sudarshan and Nandi, 2018).

Focusing on two villages in Telangana—India's third largest beedi-producing state—this research fills critical gaps in labour law scholarship by evaluating the impact of legislation on

welfare, exploring why implementation varies regionally, and showing how women-led collective action can reshape access to rights and welfare. It presents key findings, theoretical and empirical contributions, methodological reflections, and practical recommendations, reimagining labour laws as tools to expand capabilities rather than static entitlements.

The sections that follow are organised as follows: Section 8.2 addresses the research questions through an integrated analysis of findings; Section 8.3 discusses the study's theoretical and empirical contributions; Section 8.4 reflects on methodology; Section 8.5 links findings to policy; and Section 8.6 outlines future research directions and concluding thoughts.

8.2 Addressing the Research Questions

This section synthesises the study's key findings in response to the main research question: What is the impact of the legislation designed to protect the rights of beedi workers in India [Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966; Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976] on their welfare? The evidence presented in Chapters 5 and 6 provides crucial insights into this question by evaluating two central *functionings* that are shaped by these laws: *being securely employed* (working conditions) under the BCA 1966; and *being educated* (scholarships for children) under the BWWF 1976.

The BCA, 1966 has influenced working conditions in the beedi industry, yet significant gaps exist between legal protections and the lived experiences of home-based women workers. As detailed in Chapter 5, and illustrated by the ToC (Figure 5.1), the first short-term outcome—regulated work hours, remains largely unrealised. Despite legal provisions to limit excessive working hours, enforcement is weak, and the flexible nature of home-based work blurs the boundary between labour and personal time. In addition, financial necessity forces women to work beyond legal limits, while the piece-rate payment system incentivises long and irregular hours. Caste and gender dynamics further influence work patterns: SC women face a “triple burden” of paid labour, unpaid domestic work, and agricultural labour, whereas BC women remain confined to home-based work due to restrictive social norms.

The second outcome, reduced exploitation, remains largely unachieved. The beedi industry's decentralised structure allows contractors and employers to evade labour protections, resulting in exploitation and unequal treatment, particularly for SC workers. Subcontractors, largely from dominant caste groups, maintain control over work distribution and exploit vulnerable

workers, making it difficult for them to negotiate better conditions. The third outcome, access to fair wages, continues to be contentious. Thus, despite legal provisions under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 and the BCA, 1966, workers still earn far below statutory wage levels. While unions have challenged wage structures through collective bargaining, their efforts are undermined by widespread contractor evasion, inconsistent employer compliance, and weak enforcement.

The fourth outcome, access to social security benefits like the PF, is undermined by systemic irregularities. While many workers have PF cards, access is limited due to employer noncontributions, wage manipulation, and bureaucratic obstacles, which in addition, disproportionately affect married women. As a result, rather than safeguarding workers, the PF system often serves as an additional mechanism of control, thereby deepening financial precarity.

Overall, although the BCA, 1966 formally recognises home-based workers, it fails to translate into meaningful protection due to weak enforcement and the absence of legal and institutional frameworks tailored to informal, gendered labour (Madhavi, 2006). Moreover, while unions have made important gains, they are constrained by structural weaknesses in labour law implementation. Thus, the capability “to be securely employed” remains unfulfilled, requiring not only stronger legal enforcement and reform but also enhanced worker agency and sustained collective action.

Turning to the BWWF, 1976, its impact is examined primarily through the scholarship scheme discussed in Chapter 6, which serves as a proxy for welfare outcomes related to the capability “to be educated”. Historically, the scheme has provided some support, but its effectiveness has declined due to low scholarship amounts, lack of awareness, and cumbersome application processes. These limitations, compounded by caste-based disparities, have reduced the programme’s overall impact—particularly for SC women, whose children are least likely to benefit. Consequently, the scheme’s potential to expand the capability to be educated remains constrained.

Women-led unions have in practice played a pivotal role in supporting education, by fostering community engagement and collective capabilities, but the direct financial impact of the scholarship itself remains limited. Psychological benefits, such as raising aspirations, have been noted, but the broader outcomes of improved educational attainment are constrained by deeper cultural and economic barriers. Child labour reduction initiatives between 1991 and 2010,

particularly from 2004 to 2010, played a more significant role in driving increased school enrolment than the scholarships alone, demonstrating that educational reforms and improved school infrastructure are crucial to enhancing the capability “to be educated”.

As for long-term intergenerational mobility, this remains constrained by cultural expectations, such as early marriage and domestic responsibilities, which limit FLFP. Furthermore, even as women attain education, they remain reliant on beedi work due to limited job creation, skill mismatches, and societal restrictions. Thus, while educational achievement expands the horizon of aspirations, it does not by itself ensure escape from beedi work or lead to secure employment. In conclusion, the scholarship scheme under the BWWF, while symbolically significant, has limited transformative potential in its current form. For education to effectively drive intergenerational mobility, it must be paired with policies that support employment generation, skill development, and normative change that supports women’s economic participation.

Having addressed the main research question, the study next turns to the sub-questions that unpack the underlying drivers shaping these outcomes.

The first sub-question examines: What are the factors that contribute to the implementation and enforcement of these labour laws, and how do these factors explain the differential implementation and variations in impact? As laid out in Chapter 3, the study identifies three sets of factors that influence the implementation and enforcement of labour laws and account for variations in impact across regions: supply-side factors (governance structures), demand side factors (collective action), and contextual factors (economic conditions and the political landscape). This analysis underscored the critical importance of collective action as a demand side driver, thereby motivating the second sub-question: What role does women-led collective action and leadership play in shaping the implementation of labour laws to ensure the welfare of beedi workers in the selected villages?

This question was explored in Chapter 7, and the key findings are summarised here. The evidence demonstrates that collective action, particularly through women-led unions, profoundly shapes the implementation and enforcement of labour laws and enhances workers’ collective capabilities. Women’s leadership has played a pivotal role not only in negotiating rights but also in redefining the very idea of worker welfare and empowerment within the beedi sector. The findings indicate, for example, that women-led unions adopt a welfare-centred

approach that prioritises broader issues like healthcare, education, and family benefits, in contrast to male-led unions that focus primarily on economic concerns like wage security. This shift has led to the development of more inclusive unions that focus not only on wages but also on workers' well-being and long-term enhancement of collective capabilities.

The findings also highlight significant barriers that women face in achieving a voice within unions. In Sirikonda, women workers remain on the periphery of decision-making, while in Thandriyal, women leaders are excluded from high-level negotiations despite their success in securing state welfare benefits. These gendered leadership dynamics underscore the need for gender-inclusive leadership reforms to ensure women's meaningful participation and the expansion of their agentic freedom within unions.

Intersectionality also plays a crucial role in shaping union solidarity. While the Thandriyal union excels in fostering solidarity and collective empowerment, the exclusion of SC workers illustrates the need for unions to also address caste-based inequalities. The women-led unions' success in building community networks has helped them to navigate both labour rights and welfare needs, contributing to substantial improvements in workers' capabilities, but these networks must be caste-inclusive to ensure equitable participation.

The transformative approach of women-led unions challenges traditional models of unionism by focusing not just on short-term economic gains but on long-term empowerment and dignity. These unions redefine welfare by integrating caregiving and family well-being, thereby broadening the scope of worker empowerment. Women leaders advocate for frameworks that recognise the interconnectedness of labour, gender, and caregiving, aiming to foster collective capabilities and affiliation. By prioritising social equity and inclusivity, these unions demonstrate that true empowerment arises from addressing both economic and welfare needs, thereby fostering a reimagined social contract between workers, the state, and employers. In contrast, male-led unions often neglect these dimensions, restricting their ability to address the diverse needs of workers. Such exclusivity weakens fundamental interconnectedness, thereby constraining basic capabilities. In short, genuine inclusive solidarity is essential for meaningful change.

This study has shown that while labour laws aim to protect worker welfare, their promises often go unfulfilled on the ground—undermined by weak enforcement, fragmented governance, and persistent social hierarchies. Caste and gender remain critical axes of exclusion, shaping who can access legal protections, state benefits, and dignified work. As underscored by the CA,

formal legal entitlements—such as regulated work hours, fair wages, and educational scholarships—do not automatically translate into real freedoms or equal capabilities. The uneven distribution of economic, social, and political resources means that marginalised women, particularly from SC backgrounds, are systematically constrained in their ability to realise these entitlements.

Ultimately, achieving the vision of “leave no one behind” requires more than the existence of labour laws: it demands a fundamental rethinking of labour governance itself. Legal reform must be coupled with inclusive, women-led collective action that can hold institutions accountable and reshape power dynamics from below. Only through this dual approach—combining state responsibility with grassroots mobilisation—can we move beyond formal rights to ensure the actual expansion of workers’ capabilities: to be securely employed, to be educated, and to shape the conditions of their own lives.

8.3 Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

This study’s intention was to go beyond simply documenting the gaps between legal promises and workers’ lived realities. Instead, by critically engaging with the CA, intersectionality, and labour law scholarship, it offers a more nuanced account of how informal, caste- and gender structured labour regimes shape—and often constrain—the potential of labour law to advance substantive freedoms.

A key theoretical contribution lies in how this research extends the CA to interrogate informal economies, shifting the focus from formal rights towards the structural and relational processes that determine whose capabilities are actually expanded. Unlike much existing CA-inspired labour law literature, which predominantly engages with industrialised contexts and formal wage employment (Salais, 2004; Langille, 2011; Deakin, 2011), this study demonstrates how capabilities are undermined by informal employment arrangements, spatial marginality, and deep-seated social hierarchies. In doing so, it shows the analytical value of using the CA to illuminate why formal statutory entitlements embodied by instruments like the BCA, 1966 and BWWF, 1976, fail to secure meaningful opportunities for many beedi workers.

At the same time, by embedding intersectionality within a capability’s lens, this study shows how intertwined identities—caste, gender, and locality—function not merely as personal attributes but as structural forces that shape conversion factors (Robeyns, 2003). This approach

deepens intersectional critiques of labour law by exposing how exclusion is institutionally produced and sustained across multiple domains: the state, the household, contractor networks, and even within unions. As Crenshaw (2015) and Kabeer (2010) emphasise, intersectionality must move beyond descriptive analysis to inform how institutions are designed and implemented. The study reinforces this argument by demonstrating how access to schemes such as provident funds and welfare scholarships, is often obstructed by caste-driven gatekeeping and gendered assumptions about dependency. Expanding capabilities, it argues, requires confronting these intersecting hierarchies that mediate access to both legal entitlements and collective forms of support.

In relation to *collective capabilities*, the study moves beyond celebratory accounts of unions to highlight their ambivalence: as potential engines of empowerment but also as spaces that can reproduce existing inequalities (Kochu, 2024). By comparing leadership dynamics and solidarity practices across sites, it refines how we think about agency within collective action—not as uniformly emancipatory, but as shaped by the same caste and gender hierarchies that structure broader labour relations. This insight deepens our understanding of why unions sometimes fail to fully realise their transformative potential, and points to the importance of fostering genuinely inclusive organisational cultures.

Finally, by linking insights from the CA and intersectionality with the concept of horizontal inequalities (Stewart, 2008), the research pushes for a more relational, group-sensitive approach to labour governance. It suggests that to meaningfully “leave no one behind,” labour law must move beyond distributive frameworks focused solely on formal entitlements. Instead, it must become a mechanism for dismantling institutionalised disadvantage and building solidarities that address economic, social, and cultural exclusions simultaneously.

These contributions are grounded in a methodological approach that also represents a substantive contribution to labour law scholarship. By combining a theory-driven evaluation of law with a bottom-up, narrative-centred inquiry, the study offers a novel way of analysing legal interventions in informal labour markets. This empirical grounding enables a richer understanding of how legal rights are interpreted, contested, and reconfigured on the ground. Rather than treating the law as a static text, the study traces its life through everyday practices and struggles, revealing how statutory schemes like provident funds or scholarships are experienced as sites of both promise and control.

In sum, this study does not simply add to existing debates on informality or worker welfare. Instead, it invites a rethinking of how we conceptualise labour law's purpose: not merely as a guarantor of individual rights, but as a site for advancing collective capabilities and substantive equality in deeply stratified contexts (Samman and Roche 2014; Bassel 2017). This reconceptualisation has significant implications for how future legal, policy, and union strategies might be designed—foregrounding the relational and intersectional dynamics that ultimately determine whether rights translate into lived freedoms.

8.4 Methodological reflections

This research journey underscores that knowledge production is never detached from the researcher's own social location. My positionality—as a Dalit woman from a beedi-working family in Telangana—did not simply shape access in the field; it profoundly influenced the questions I asked, the way data was interpreted, and the theoretical insights generated.

Rather than fitting neatly into insider–outsider binaries, my position was fluid and often contradictory. Shared language, caste identity, and intimate familiarity with beedi work facilitated deep trust with participants, enabling narratives that might have remained unspoken to an external researcher. Yet at the same time, being an unmarried, first-generation academic also rendered me atypical, surfacing questions about gender norms and respectability. These layered interactions reveal how intersectionality is not just an analytical tool to examine participants' lives, but also a lens to understand the shifting power dynamics within research itself.

This positionality did more than shape data collection; it challenged me to critically examine the authority and partiality of the knowledge produced. It highlighted how research is inherently situated, mediated by shared and divergent experiences of caste, gender, and class. Such methodological reflexivity sharpened my analysis of how legal frameworks interact with social hierarchies—because I too was navigating these hierarchies throughout the research process.

Collaborations with unions and local health officials offered rich entry points into the landscape of beedi labour. Yet barriers—such as bureaucratic refusals to provide data through RTIs—exposed how state opacity is itself part of the marginalisation sustaining informal economies. These were not simply methodological hurdles, but substantive findings about the governance

of informality. Similarly, the need to triangulate income data through proxies and estimation, underscored the precarity and mistrust shaping how workers engage with outsiders, even researchers from within their own communities. Adopting a feminist epistemological stance was therefore not only about centring women’s voices but about recognising relational accountability and resisting extractive research logics (Harding, 1991). It meant approaching stories of hardship and resilience with an ethical commitment to honour their complexity, without reducing them to data points serving academic agendas.

More broadly, these experiences point to the importance of scholarship led by those from historically marginalised backgrounds. Such approaches bring different questions to the fore, disrupt dominant narratives, and deepen understandings of how caste, gender, and informality intersect in shaping workers’ lives. In reflecting on these methodological dimensions, this research affirms that how we know is inseparable from what we come to know. This insight, rooted in both personal and collective struggles, strengthens the thesis’s broader argument: that legal and policy interventions must attend to the lived, intersectional realities of those they aim to protect. It also suggests that future research on informal labour would benefit from similarly grounded, reflexive approaches that challenge conventional hierarchies of expertise and authority.

8.5 Strengthening Protections and Expanding Opportunities for Beedi Workers: A Policy Roadmap

This research underscores that improving the lives of beedi workers—particularly home-based women workers from marginalised caste groups—requires more than nominal legal protections. It calls for an integrated approach that strengthens enforcement, addresses exploitative wage systems, ensures meaningful access to social security, and expands pathways for education and alternative livelihoods.

Home-based work is not a peripheral economic activity but a vital part of India’s labour landscape (Gupta, 2023). The new labour codes, particularly the Code on Social Security (2020) and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHC) Code (2020), represent important progress in formally recognising home-based workers, including those in the beedi sector. However, significant gaps remain, as these codes continue to privilege industrial premises, leaving home-based workers without clear assurances of minimum

wages, regulated working hours, or adequate health safeguards. Bridging this divide requires India to ratify ILO Convention 177 on Home Work and to incorporate its principles into domestic legislation by revising the BCA, 1966. This would help ensure that home-based beedi workers receive the same wage, safety, and welfare protections as their counterparts in factory settings. Such legal reforms must also be supported by strengthened labour inspection in rural areas and the establishment of grievance redressal mechanisms that enable workers to report violations without fear of retaliation.

Addressing the exploitative piece-rate wage system is equally critical. This system entrenches insecurity, compelling workers—especially women balancing unpaid care work—to endure long, unpredictable hours while still earning below statutory minimum wages. While a wholesale shift to hourly wages may be complex in dispersed home-based settings, hybrid or fixed wage models, co-developed with unions, could help stabilise incomes. Enforcing wage transparency through formal contracts and digital payments would also reduce informal deductions and underreporting by middlemen.

At the same time, legal entitlements have limited impact without meaningful practical access. In practice, protections for beedi workers are frequently undermined by employer evasion of provident fund contributions and by bureaucratic processes that exclude many married women from maternity benefits. Implementing the Code on Social Security, 2020 must therefore extend beyond formal provisions to include streamlined registration, simplified procedures, and active outreach to ensure that home-based workers can effectively claim their rights. While the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 was designed to provide a safety net for informal workers, including those in the beedi sector, its vague provisions, narrow coverage, and slow rollout have significantly constrained its reach. This highlights the importance of integrating and strengthening existing legislative frameworks—ensuring that the Code on Social Security operates in coordination with laws like the BCA 1966—to deliver robust and enforceable protections for home-based workers.

Moreover, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty demands investments beyond the immediate workplace. The Beedi Workers' Scholarship programme, originally intended to facilitate educational mobility, has become inadequate due to stagnant scholarship funds and cumbersome processes. Significantly such funds, indexing them to inflation, and simplifying applications—through digital platforms supported by local assistance—would help children of beedi workers to stay in school. However, education alone is not enough; without viable local

employment, many youth remain trapped in informal work. As the beedi industry confronts mounting challenges and heightened health concerns linked to tobacco products, long-term policy must also prioritise creating viable exit pathways for workers. Targeted vocational training and partnerships with NGOs and industries are crucial for developing region-specific employment initiatives and skill development programmes that offer workers and their families the skills that are aligned with evolving labour markets, enabling transitions into secure and dignified livelihoods.

Strengthening worker voice and addressing intersectional inequalities are also fundamental. Women-led unions have demonstrated how organising around labour rights can simultaneously advance demands for healthcare, childcare, and broader social support. Supporting such unions—through leadership training, funding, and legal protections—can amplify their impact. At the same time, caste hierarchies continue to shape who leads and who participates. Policies must therefore actively foster leadership from marginalised caste groups to ensure that collective bargaining genuinely reflects the diversity of beedi workers.

In summary, a truly just policy agenda for beedi workers must weave together robust legal protections, fairer wage systems, enforceable social security, quality education, alternative livelihoods, and stronger collective agency. This research highlights that such reforms are not merely economic necessities but moral imperatives—rooted in recognising the inherent dignity of workers whose labour has long sustained both rural economies and national industries. Ensuring that India’s labour policies centre the lived, intersectional realities of its most precarious workers, is essential for building a fairer and more inclusive future.

8.6 Way Forward

While this study provides important insights into the socio-economic conditions of beedi workers and the functioning of labour laws, further research is needed to address areas that remain outside its scope due to time and resource constraints. A more detailed exploration of the broader informal labour market, particularly other forms of home-based work, would offer a fuller picture of how subcontracting models impact worker vulnerability and could inform more nuanced policy interventions. Comparative studies across home-based industries—such as garment stitching or incense stick rolling—could help identify common risks and successful strategies, paving the way for stronger protections for informal workers. Given the increasing reliance on home-based labour, especially among women, understanding how different

occupations navigate labour rights and economic precarity would enable more targeted policy frameworks. Similarly, cross-national research in countries with comparable informal economies, such as in Southeast Asia and Latin America, could provide valuable lessons. Examining how these countries integrate informal workers into formal protections—through wage regulation, social security, or transition programmes—would help India refine its own approach by learning from global best practices.

Another critical area for future inquiry is the long-term impact of education on intergenerational mobility within beedi worker families. While education is widely recognised as a pathway out of poverty, there is limited evidence on whether children of beedi workers successfully move into more secure employment or remain trapped in informal, low-paid work. Longitudinal studies tracking educational and employment trajectories, particularly for young women, would reveal whether current welfare schemes and skills programmes are truly fostering upward mobility or if further interventions are needed to break persistent cycles of precarity.

Archival research emerged as a particularly rich aspect of this study, offering historical context on the evolution of labour movements and union dynamics. Future work could delve deeper into Telugu-language archives, union documents, and local records to trace the history of worker organising. This would illuminate how past struggles shape today's labour landscape and provide lessons for revitalising collective action in contemporary contexts.

Looking ahead, there is also a pressing need to examine how India's new labour codes might affect beedi workers, especially concerning wages, social security, and job stability. Although these codes have yet to be fully implemented, baseline assessments—through predictive models or small pilot studies—could help anticipate unintended outcomes and guide more responsive policy. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable here, tracking how workers' conditions evolve over time with changes in regulation, industry demand, or enforcement practices. A stronger quantitative focus on interventions such as minimum wage compliance, digital wage payments, or social protection uptake, could provide critical evidence on what actually improves worker well-being.

By advancing research along these lines, policymakers, academics, and worker organisations can co-produce a deeper, evidence-based understanding of informal labour. Such insights will be essential for crafting policies that not only protect beedi workers but also build a more equitable and resilient labour system across India's vast informal economy. As labour laws

continue to evolve, this study's findings underscore the urgent need for sustained advocacy and transformative legal reforms that truly uphold the rights and dignity of informal workers.

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Annexure I

A detail on Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment), Act, 1966: Section 8-27

Section	Provision	Detail
8	Cleanliness	Every industrial premises shall be kept clean and free from effluvia arising from any drain, privy or other nuisance and shall also maintain such standard of cleanliness including whitewashing, colour washing, varnishing or painting, as may be prescribed.
9	Ventilation	For the purpose of preventing injury to the health of the persons working therein, every industrial premises shall maintain such standards of lighting, ventilation and temperature, as may be prescribed.
10	Overcrowding	No room in any industrial premises shall be overcrowded to an extent injurious to the health of the persons employed therein.
11	Drinking water	The employer shall make in every industrial premises effective arrangements to provide and maintain at suitable points conveniently situated for all persons employed therein, a sufficient supply of wholesome drinking water.
12	Latrines and urinals	In every industrial premises, sufficient latrine and urinal accommodation of such types as may be prescribed shall be provided and shall be so conveniently situated as may be accessible to the employees at all times while they are in the industrial premises
13	Washing Facilities	In every industrial premises, where blending or sieving or both of tobacco or warming of beedi in hot ovens is carried on, the employer shall provide such washing facilities for the use of the employees, as may be prescribed
14	Creches	In every industrial premises wherein more than [thirty] female employees are ordinarily employed, there shall be provided and maintained a suitable room or rooms for the use of children under the age of six years of such female employees.
15	First aid	Every industrial premises shall provide such first aid facilities as may be prescribed.

16	Canteens	The State Government may, by rules, require the employer to provide and maintain in every industrial premises wherein not less than two hundred and fifty employees are ordinarily employed, a canteen for the use of the employees.
17	Working hours	No employee shall be required or allowed to work in any industrial premises for more than nine hours in any day or for more than forty eight hours in any week:
18	Wages for overtime work	Where any employee employed in any industrial premises is required to work overtime, he shall be entitled in respect of such overtime work, to wages at the rate of twice his ordinary rate of wages.
19	Interval for rest.	The periods of work for employees in an industrial premises each day shall be so fixed that no period shall exceed five hours and that no employee shall work for more than five hours before he has had an interval for rest of at least half an hour.
20	Spread over	The periods of work of an employee in an industrial premises shall be so arranged that inclusive of his intervals for rest under section 19, they shall not spread over more than ten and a half hours in any day:
21	Weekly holidays.	Every industrial premises shall remain entirely closed, except for wetting of beedi or tobacco leaves, on one day in the week which day shall be specified by the employer in a notice exhibited in a conspicuous place in the industrial premises and the day so specified shall not be altered by the employer more often than once in three months and except with the previous written permission of the Chief Inspector.
22	Notice of periods of work.	There shall be displayed and correctly maintained in every industrial premises a notice of periods of work in such form and in such manner as may be prescribed, showing clearly for every day the periods during which the employees may be required to work.

23	Hours of work to correspond with	No employee shall be employed in any industrial premises otherwise than in accordance with the notice of work displayed in the premises under section 22.
	notice under section 22	
24	Prohibition of employment of children.	No child shall be required or allowed to work on any industrial premises.
25	Prohibition of employment of women or young persons during certain hours.	No woman or young person shall be required or allowed to work in any industrial premises except between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.
26	Annual leave with wages	Every employee in an establishment shall be allowed in a calendar year leave with wages
27	Wages during leave period	For the leave allowed to him under section 26, an employee shall be paid at the rate equal to the daily average of his total full-time earnings for the days on which he had worked during the month immediately preceding his leave exclusive of any overtime earnings and bonus but inclusive of dearness and other allowances

Annexure II

• A detail on Beedi Worker Welfare Fund Act, 1976; Source: (ILO 2003)

List of Schemes under the BWWF
Health
Static-cum mobile/static allopathic and static ayurvedic dispensaries
Scheme for reservation of beds in TB hospitals
Scheme for domiciliary treatment of bidi workers suffering from TB
Scheme for treatment of bidi workers suffering from cancer
Scheme for treatment of bidi workers suffering from mental diseases
Scheme for treatment of bidi workers (including homeworkers (gharkhata) suffering from leprosy
Grant of financial assistance to bidi workers for purchase of spectacles
Maternity benefit scheme for female bidi workers
Scheme for payment of monetary compensation for sterilisation to bidi workers
Reimbursement of expenditure as financial assistance to bidi workers in respect of heart diseases
Reimbursement of expenditure as financial assistance to bidi workers in respect of kidney transplantation
Group Insurance Scheme
Housing
Build Your Own House Scheme
Housing scheme for economically weaker sections of bidi workers
Grant of subsidy to cooperative societies of the bidi industry for construction of worksheds and godowns
Education
Award of scholarships to the children of bidi workers (including homeworkers)
Composite scheme for financial assistance to the schoolchildren of bidi workers for supply of one set of dress, slates, notebooks and textbooks
Payment of incentives on passing final university/board examinations from high school onwards
Scheme to provide incentive/financial assistance of 1 rupee to female children of bidi workers, on the basis of attendance in schools
Recreation
Establishing of audio-visual sets/(cinema vans)/exhibition of films

Organising sports, games, social and cultural activities for bidi workers
Holiday home scheme for bidi workers
Providing TV sets for the bidi workers' industrial cooperative societies
Providing colour TV sets for community halls in housing colonies for bidi workers
Social Security
Group Housing Scheme

Annexure III

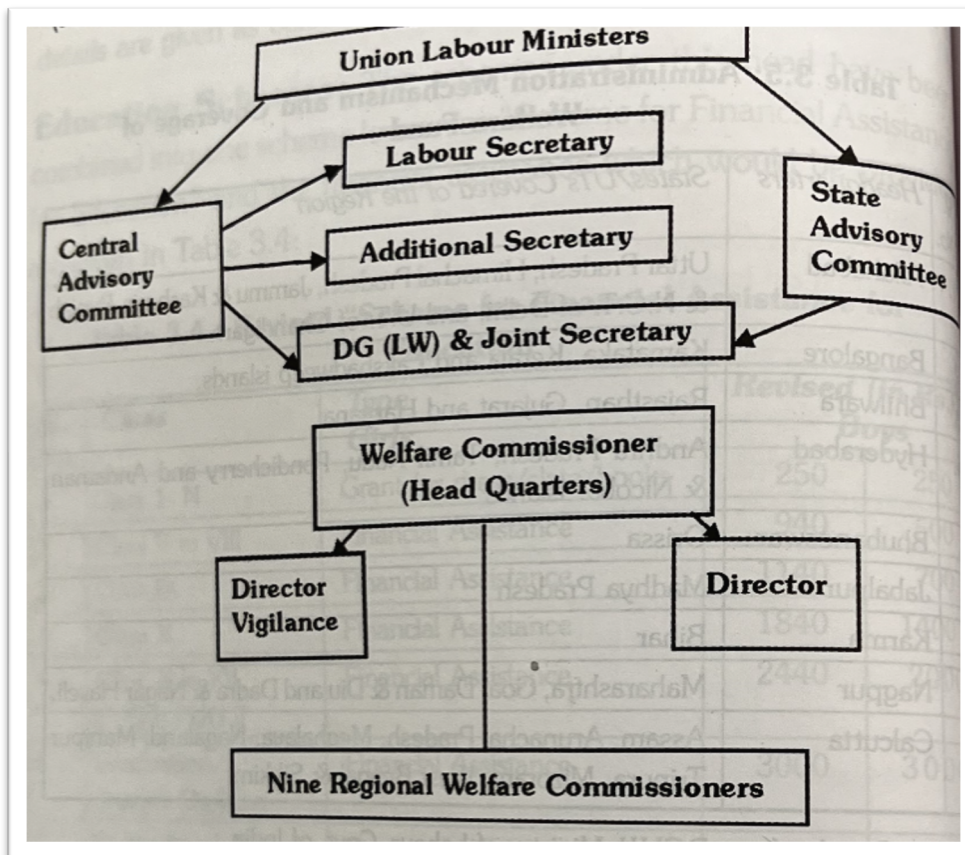
- Statutory Minimum Wages Across the Beedi Industry Supply Chain (Government of Telangana, 2024)

NAME OF THE EMPLOYMENT: TOBACCO (INCLUDING BEEDI MAKING) MANUFACTORY				
Sl. No.	Category of Employee	Basic Wage proposed in the draft notification at 1768 CPI points	Cost of living allowance to be paid per each point of increase (in Rs.)	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
1	Beedi making manufactory including Gharkata for rolling 1000 beedies	333.00	0.19	
PIECE RATE WAGES FOR PACKERS FOR ONE LAKH BEEDIES IN BEEDI INDUSTRY				
Sl. No.	No. of Beedies per bundle	Type of Packing	Basic Wage proposed in the draft notification at 1768 CPI points	Cost of living allowance to be paid per each point of increase (in Rs.)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1	25	One Wrapper	478	0.27
2	25	One Wrapper + One Lable	533	0.30
3	25	One Wrapper + Two Lables	588	0.33
4	20	One Wrapper	555	0.31
5	20	One Wrapper + One Lable	621	0.35
6	20	One Wrapper + Two Lables	698	0.39
7	15	One Wrapper	588	0.33
8	15	One Wrapper + One Lable	665	0.38
9	15	One Wrapper + Two Lables	753	0.43
10	10	One Wrapper	753	0.43
11	10	One Wrapper + Onle Lable	918	0.52
12	10	One Wrapper + Two Lables	1028	0.58
Piece rate wage for Ring Beedi work for 1000 beedies			223	0.13

TIME RATE WAGES OF BEEDI ROLLERS, BEEDI PACKERS AND OTHER CATEGORY WORKERS IN BEEDI MAKING INDUSTRY			
Sl. No.	Category of Employee	Basic Wage proposed in the draft notification at 1768 CPI points	Cost of living allowance to be paid per each point of increase (in Rs.)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1	Tobacco Distributor/ Beedi Sorter / Tray Filler/ Gampawala/ Watchman etc., (per month)	9725	5.50
2	Beedi Rolling (minimum time rate) (per day)	5325	3.01
3	Ring Beedi Work (minimum time rate) (per day)	5325	3.01
4	Beedi Packer (minimum time rate) (per month)	10225	5.78
5	Clerk/ Typist / Cashier (per month)	10225	5.78
6	Furnaceman/ Battiwala (per month)	10725	6.07
7	Accountant (per month)	11225	6.35
8	Manager (per month)	13225	7.48

Annexure IV

- Structure of Tripartite Committees (Rehman 2007)



- Education system in Telangana; Source: (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Education Stage	Class Range	Overview	Governing Body
Primary Education	Classes 1-5	Foundational education focuses on basic literacy and numeracy skills.	Directorate of School Education
Upper Primary Education	Classes 6-8	Intermediate education with a broader curriculum, preparing students for secondary education.	Directorate of School Education
Secondary Education	Classes 9-10	Completion of secondary school certificate, critical for higher education opportunities.	Telangana State Board of Secondary Education

Higher Secondary Education	Classes 11-12	Typically provided by junior colleges, enabling students to specialize before college.	Telangana State Board of Intermediate Education
Undergraduate Education	After Class 12	Pursuit of bachelor's degrees across various disciplines at colleges and universities.	Telangana State Council of Higher Education (TSCHE)
Postgraduate Education	After Undergraduate	Advanced studies leading to master's and doctoral degrees in specialized fields.	Telangana State Council of Higher Education (TSCHE)

The education system follows a 10+2+3 structure, where students complete ten years of schooling, followed by two years of higher secondary education, and then three years of undergraduate study. The curriculum is determined by the respective educational boards, ensuring consistency in academic standards. This framework represents the educational landscape at the time of enrolment for the sampled students, while also taking into account updates introduced by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and proposed reforms in 2023.

- Earlier Vs New beedi scholarship rates for boys and girls (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2023)

S. No	Class/Category	Earlier scholarship rates per annum (Rates in INR) (2002-2003 to 2021-2022)		New scholarship rates per annum (Enhanced) w.e.f AY 2022-2023 (Rates in INR)
		Female	Male	
				Both Male/Female
1	I to IV (for purchase of dress/books etc.)	250	250	1000
2	V to VIII	940	500	1500
3	IX	1140	700	2000
4	X	1840	1400	2000
5	XI to XII	2440	2000	3000
6	ITI	10000	10000	6000
7	Polytechnic	NA	NA	6000

8	Degree courses (including B.Sc. Agriculture)	3000	3000	6000
9	Professional courses (BE/MBBS/MBA)	15000	15000	25000

- Required documents, costs and time incurred during application process with Mee Seva Centers; Source: Author's creation based on Fieldwork data

Document Required	Where to Get It	Steps Involved	Cost (Approx)	Time/Visits Incurred
1. Beedi Scholarship Offline Form (2 copies)	School	Visit school to get the form filled and signed	₹6 (2 copies)	1 visit to school
2. Beedi Employment I.D. (last 6 months)	Likely available at home	Obtain a xerox copy from the existing document	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to a xerox shop
3. Beedi Passbook (front and current page)	Likely available at home	Xerox of the passbook's front and current pages	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to a xerox shop
4. P.F. Account Slip (current)	Secure it from the main Beedi Office if not available at home	Obtain a xerox copy of the latest P.F. slip	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to the main Beedi Office + xerox shop
5. Income Certificate	Mandal Revenue Office	Visit mandal office, submit application, collect certificate	₹50-₹100	1-2 visits, travel costs incurred depending on distance
6. Community (Caste) Certificate	Mandal Revenue Office	Obtain certificate if not already available	₹50-₹100	1-2 visits, travel from village to mandal

7. Bonafide Certificate	School	Obtain from the school and get signed	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to school
8. Previous Mark Statement (eg. 10th/12th)	School	Collect the mark statement and make xerox copies	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to school + xerox
9. College Fees Receipt	College	Obtain fee receipt and make xerox copies	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to college + xerox shop
10. Bank Passbook (first page)	Bank & xerox shop	Get the passbook xeroxed	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to xerox shop
11. Aadhaar Card Xerox	Aadhaar Centre (if new), Xerox shop	Obtain Aadhaar if not available, and xerox	₹3 per xerox	1 visit to xerox shop or Aadhaar centre if new

- Education and child labour initiatives in India and Andhra Pradesh (1999-2010);

Source: Author's creation

Level	Initiatives	Description/Impact
National Level	Legislative Reforms	
	Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986	Prohibits child labour and regulates working conditions for children.
	Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009	Guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years.
	Key Programs	
	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2000	Focused on achieving Universal Elementary Education (UEE).
	Mid-Day Meal Scheme, 1995	Enhanced school attendance, particularly among marginalized groups.
	National Child Labour Project (NCLP), 1988	Provided non-formal education and rehabilitation for child labourers.

	Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), 1975	Offered early childhood education, nutrition, and child protection services.
	Beedi Scholarships	Scholarships aimed at children of beedi workers, encouraging school attendance and reducing child labour.
	Impact	Increased awareness and legislative framework laid the foundation for further initiatives at the state level.
State Level (AP)	State-Specific Initiatives	
	AP State Based Project (APSBP), 1999	Targeted interventions in high child-labour districts (e.g., Mahabubnagar, Kurnool).
	Expansion of NCLP	Established 1,000 rehabilitation schools by 2007 to support child labourers.
	Mid-Day Meal Scheme (2003)	Achieved full coverage for 6.3 million students by 2004, significantly improving nutrition and attendance.
	Badi Bata Enrollment Drive (late 1990s)	Conducted outreach to identify and enroll school dropouts.
	MVF (Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation)	Grassroots movement focused on transitioning child labourers to formal education.
	Social Welfare Hostels	Provided accommodation and financial support to marginalized children.
	Residential and Non-Residential Bridge Courses (RBC/NRBCs)	Aimed to reintegrate working and dropout children into the education system.
	Impact	Direct implementation of national initiatives, tailored to local contexts, led to increased enrolment and retention rates.
Flow of Impact	Connection Between Levels	

	National Initiatives → State-Level Implementation → Grassroots Movements	National programs set the stage for statespecific initiatives, which were further enhanced by local efforts and community engagement.
	Outcomes	
	Increased Literacy Rate	Literacy rate in AP rose from 44.04% in 1991 to 67.66% in 2011.
	Reduction in Child Labour	Child labour rate in AP decreased from 10% to 4.7% by 2010.

Annexure V

Survey Questionnaire	
<p>Demographics</p> <p>Village: <input type="checkbox"/> Sirikonda <input type="checkbox"/> Thandriyal</p> <p>Colony: <input type="checkbox"/> SC Colony <input type="checkbox"/> BC Colony <input type="checkbox"/> OC Colony</p> <p>Name of the respondent: <input type="checkbox"/> Write name <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say</p> <p>ID</p> <p>Name of the interviewer: <input type="checkbox"/> Write name</p> <p>Age: <input type="checkbox"/> 13–18 <input type="checkbox"/> 19–24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25–34 <input type="checkbox"/> 35–44 <input type="checkbox"/> 45–54 <input type="checkbox"/> 55+</p> <p>Marital Status: <input type="checkbox"/> Never married <input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced <input type="checkbox"/> Deserted <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed</p> <p>Religion: <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim <input type="checkbox"/> Christian <input type="checkbox"/> Other</p> <p>Caste: <input type="checkbox"/> OC <input type="checkbox"/> BC <input type="checkbox"/> SC</p> <p>Sub-caste:</p> <p>Education: <input type="checkbox"/> No formal education <input type="checkbox"/> Preprimary <input type="checkbox"/> Primary (up to 5th std) <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary (6th–10th std) <input type="checkbox"/> Higher secondary (11th–12th) <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate</p> <p>Literacy: <input type="checkbox"/> Can read and sign <input type="checkbox"/> Can read only <input type="checkbox"/> Can sign only <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot read or sign</p> <p>How long have you been living at this address (since marriage)? <input type="checkbox"/> 10–15 years <input type="checkbox"/> 15–20 years <input type="checkbox"/> 20–35 year <input type="checkbox"/> >35 years <input type="checkbox"/> Been here all my life</p> <p>Did you work as a beedi worker in the previous village and have a PF? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, had a PF <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, no PF <input type="checkbox"/> No, no PF <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p>	<p>Do you have an alternate source of income? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, what is the alternate occupation? <input type="checkbox"/> Tailoring <input type="checkbox"/> Livestock <input type="checkbox"/> Manual labour <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture (own/others) <input type="checkbox"/> No alternate source <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p> <p>Why did you choose this secondary activity? <input type="checkbox"/> Better earning opportunity <input type="checkbox"/> More flexible timing <input type="checkbox"/> No other viable option <input type="checkbox"/> To supplement income <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p> <p>If yes, do you earn more money from your alternate source than from your primary job? <input type="checkbox"/> More <input type="checkbox"/> Less <input type="checkbox"/> Same <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know / No answer</p> <p>If not, why not? <input type="checkbox"/> Not allowed to go out <input type="checkbox"/> Occupations not honoured for our group <input type="checkbox"/> Social judgement <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of opportunity <input type="checkbox"/> Old age <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p> <p>Do you have any debt? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, how much? <input type="checkbox"/> ₹1–25,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹25,000–50,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹50,000–75,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹75,000–1,00,000 <input type="checkbox"/> >₹1,00,000 <input type="checkbox"/> Zero <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Why did you borrow money? <input type="checkbox"/> Daughter's dowry <input type="checkbox"/> Son's marriage <input type="checkbox"/> House construction <input type="checkbox"/> Health expenses <input type="checkbox"/> Accident/injury <input type="checkbox"/> Daily expenses <input type="checkbox"/> Children's education <input type="checkbox"/> Others <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Assets (tick all that apply): <input type="checkbox"/> Poultry <input type="checkbox"/> Cattle <input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural land <input type="checkbox"/> Plot land <input type="checkbox"/> No assets <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p> <p>Type of ration card <input type="checkbox"/> BPL (Below poverty line) <input type="checkbox"/> APL (Above poverty line) <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p>

<p>Is this house rented or owned? <input type="checkbox"/> Owned <input type="checkbox"/> Rented</p> <p>If owned, what type of house is this? <input type="checkbox"/> Kutchra <input type="checkbox"/> Pucca <input type="checkbox"/> Slab</p> <p>If rented, how much do you pay (incl. bills)? <input type="checkbox"/> ₹0–1000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹1000–2000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹2000–3000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹3000–4000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹4000–5000 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹5000–6000 <input type="checkbox"/> >₹6000</p> <p>Type of family: <input type="checkbox"/> Single person <input type="checkbox"/> Sub-nuclear family <input type="checkbox"/> Nuclear family <input type="checkbox"/> Joint family <input type="checkbox"/> Complex family <input type="checkbox"/> Others: specify _____</p> <p>Purpose of this job (MULTIPLE RESPONSE): <input type="checkbox"/> Livelihood <input type="checkbox"/> To save up for my daughter(s) marriage <input type="checkbox"/> For children education <input type="checkbox"/> Alcoholic and unemployed husband <input type="checkbox"/> Easy to manage domestic responsibilities while earning <input type="checkbox"/> To be independent <input type="checkbox"/> No alternate source <input type="checkbox"/> Others _____</p> <p>What is your family size? Write the actual number: _____</p> <p>How many earning members? Write the actual number: _____</p> <p>Do you have a latrine? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>How do you get drinking water? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE) <input type="checkbox"/> Drink tap water <input type="checkbox"/> Buy mineral water from water plant <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____</p> <p>How do you get water for non-drinking purposes? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE) <input type="checkbox"/> Water tap: in own house <input type="checkbox"/> Water tap: neighbour's <input type="checkbox"/> Water tap: common <input type="checkbox"/> Water tap: public <input type="checkbox"/> Hand pump: own <input type="checkbox"/> Hand pump: neighbour's <input type="checkbox"/> Hand pump: common <input type="checkbox"/> Hand pump: public <input type="checkbox"/> River/spring <input type="checkbox"/> Purchased water <input type="checkbox"/> Tanker <input type="checkbox"/> Other: specify _____</p>	<p>Have a separate room for kitchen? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>How often do you eat outside of your home? <input type="checkbox"/> 2–3 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month <input type="checkbox"/> Never</p> <p>How much would that cost? Specify amount: _____</p> <p>Monthly income from beedi rolling <input type="checkbox"/> <1000 Rs <input type="checkbox"/> 1000–2000 <input type="checkbox"/> 2000–3000 <input type="checkbox"/> 3000–4000 <input type="checkbox"/> 4000–5000 <input type="checkbox"/> >5000 <input type="checkbox"/> Others, specify: _____</p> <p>What is your opinion on the income you are making from beedi working? <input type="checkbox"/> It is highly insufficient for my survival <input type="checkbox"/> It covers my basic needs, but not much else <input type="checkbox"/> It is enough to survive, but not enough to thrive <input type="checkbox"/> It is more than enough to meet my needs and live comfortably</p> <p>Do you have any monthly savings? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, in what form? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE) <input type="checkbox"/> Money at home <input type="checkbox"/> Informal credit group <input type="checkbox"/> Chit fund <input type="checkbox"/> Post office savings <input type="checkbox"/> Stocks and bonds <input type="checkbox"/> Bank deposit <input type="checkbox"/> Others _____</p> <p>If yes, how much savings? Specify the amount in Rs: _____</p> <p>How many of your kids are male and female? (e.g., 1F, 2M): _____</p> <p>How many of the children are working and earning income? <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>How much are they making? (Total child income) <input type="checkbox"/> <1000 <input type="checkbox"/> 1000–3000 <input type="checkbox"/> 3000–5000 <input type="checkbox"/> 5000–7000 <input type="checkbox"/> 7000–9000 <input type="checkbox"/> 9000–11000 <input type="checkbox"/> 11000–13000 <input type="checkbox"/> 13000–15000 <input type="checkbox"/> >15000 <input type="checkbox"/> Others, specify: _____</p> <p>What does your husband do? _____</p> <p>How much income does your husband make? <input type="checkbox"/> <1000 <input type="checkbox"/> 1000–3000 <input type="checkbox"/> 3000–5000 <input type="checkbox"/> _____</p>
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<p>Main source of cooking fuel <input type="checkbox"/> Electricity <input type="checkbox"/> Gas cylinder <input type="checkbox"/> Kerosene <input type="checkbox"/> Coal <input type="checkbox"/> Firewood <input type="checkbox"/> Cow dung cakes <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p>	<p>5000–7000 <input type="checkbox"/> 7000–9000 <input type="checkbox"/> 9000–11000</p>
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<p>Proportion of income from beedi making <input type="checkbox"/> <25% <input type="checkbox"/> 25–50% <input type="checkbox"/> 50–75% <input type="checkbox"/> 75%–Full</p> <p>Work Details</p> <p>Length of service <input type="checkbox"/> 1–5 years <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 years <input type="checkbox"/> 10–15 years <input type="checkbox"/> 15–20 years <input type="checkbox"/> 20–25 years <input type="checkbox"/> 25–30 years <input type="checkbox"/> 30–35 years <input type="checkbox"/> 35–40 years <input type="checkbox"/> >40 years</p> <p>Working days per week <input type="checkbox"/> <3 <input type="checkbox"/> 3–5 days <input type="checkbox"/> 5–6 days <input type="checkbox"/> 7 days per week</p> <p>Do you experience regular employment throughout the month, or are there periods where you are out of work due to beedi company closures caused by a lack of tobacco and leaf supply? <input type="checkbox"/> Regular employment with no interruptions <input type="checkbox"/> Occasional disruptions due to closures <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent disruptions due to closures <input type="checkbox"/> Consistently out of work for extended periods</p> <p>How many days of work do you get? <input type="checkbox"/> <10 days <input type="checkbox"/> 10–15 days <input type="checkbox"/> 15–20 days <input type="checkbox"/> 20–29 days <input type="checkbox"/> Full month</p> <p>Working hours per day <input type="checkbox"/> <3 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 3–5 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 5–7 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 8–9 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 9–10 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> >10 hrs</p> <p>Beedis rolled per day <input type="checkbox"/> 200–300 <input type="checkbox"/> 300–400 <input type="checkbox"/> 400–500 <input type="checkbox"/> 500–600 <input type="checkbox"/> 600–700 <input type="checkbox"/> 700–800 <input type="checkbox"/> 800–900 <input type="checkbox"/> 900–1000 <input type="checkbox"/> >1000</p> <p>Your speed of beedi making (per hour) <input type="checkbox"/> <100 beedis <input type="checkbox"/> 100 <input type="checkbox"/> 200 <input type="checkbox"/> 300 <input type="checkbox"/> >300</p> <p>Beedi worker ID card <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Beedi worker PF <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you have a bank account? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If NO to ID and PF, have you made a request to your contractor? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> 11000–13000 <input type="checkbox"/> 13000–15000 <input type="checkbox"/> >15000 <input type="checkbox"/> Others, specify: _____</p> <p>Overall Family Monthly Income <input type="checkbox"/> <2000 <input type="checkbox"/> 2000–3000 <input type="checkbox"/> 3000–4000 <input type="checkbox"/> 4000–5000 <input type="checkbox"/> 5000–6000 <input type="checkbox"/> 6000–7000 <input type="checkbox"/> 7000–8000 <input type="checkbox"/> 8000–9000 <input type="checkbox"/> 9000–10000 <input type="checkbox"/> >10000 <input type="checkbox"/> Others, specify: _____</p> <p>Are you a full-time or part-time worker? <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time</p> <p>Type of worker <input type="checkbox"/> Contract-system <input type="checkbox"/> Salepurchase system <input type="checkbox"/> Others</p> <p>Are you working for a registered or unregistered company? <input type="checkbox"/> Registered <input type="checkbox"/> Unregistered <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>Have you been working for this company since the start? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, why? <input type="checkbox"/> Good relationship with contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to leave due to harassment <input type="checkbox"/> Want to keep PF in current company <input type="checkbox"/> Good quality material <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor advocates for workers <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>If NO, was the previous company in the same village? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Why did you change? (Multiple responses possible) <input type="checkbox"/> Good relationship with new contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Harassment <input type="checkbox"/> PF issues <input type="checkbox"/> Bad leaf quality <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Are you working for more than one company at the same time? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, why? <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting family workers <input type="checkbox"/> Need more income <input type="checkbox"/> Help during illness <input type="checkbox"/> Bad relationship with contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Are you retired? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, why are you still working? (Multiple responses possible) <input type="checkbox"/> No other source of income</p>
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If yes, how long has it been? _ Specify:
days/months/years

What did the contractor say about when you'll
receive it? ___ (Specify: days/months/years)

Depend on children

Work from home is convenient To avoid

<p>If not, why did you not make a request? (Multiple responses possible) <input type="checkbox"/> Did not know the process <input type="checkbox"/> Thought it wasn't necessary <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't want to trouble the contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Thought contractor would handle it <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't know I was eligible for PF <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Place of beedi rolling <input type="checkbox"/> Inside the house only <input type="checkbox"/> Outside the house (veranda) <input type="checkbox"/> Both</p> <p>Do you have a say in the amount of tendu leaf you receive? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, how much do you choose per day? <input type="checkbox"/> 500–750 g <input type="checkbox"/> 750 g – 1 kg <input type="checkbox"/> >1 kg</p> <p>How frequently does the tendu leaf quantity change? <input type="checkbox"/> Varies with my schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Same every day <input type="checkbox"/> Changes frequently</p> <p>Do you sometimes find yourself without work due to a lack of leaf supply from the company? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, happens frequently and significantly impacts my work <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, happens occasionally and somewhat impacts my work <input type="checkbox"/> No, rarely happens and has minimal impact <input type="checkbox"/> No, never happens and has no impact</p> <p>If NO, how much leaf do you get? <input type="checkbox"/> <500g <input type="checkbox"/> 500g – 750g <input type="checkbox"/> 750g – 1kg <input type="checkbox"/> >1kg</p> <p>In the last 6 months, how would you rate the quality of the tendu leaf you receive? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Better <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p>How frequently do you encounter poor quality tendu leaf? <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always</p> <p>If you do not meet the expected output of 1000 beedis from 500g leaf, what is the reason? (Multiple responses) <input type="checkbox"/> Poor quality leaf <input type="checkbox"/> Health issues / physical limitations <input type="checkbox"/> Work interruptions</p>	<p>boredom <input type="checkbox"/> Flexible work and unlimited earning potential <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>If retired, did you get your lump-sum PF amount? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, soon after retirement <input type="checkbox"/> No, waiting more than 2–3 years <input type="checkbox"/> No, not aware of this</p> <p>Do you get paid timely? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Hours per day spent on household responsibilities: <input type="checkbox"/> <1 hour <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 2–3 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 3–4 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 4–5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> >5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer</p> <p>While managing beedi work, how do you handle household responsibilities? <input type="checkbox"/> Challenging every day <input type="checkbox"/> Manage it well <input type="checkbox"/> Try best, sometimes difficult <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer</p> <p>Are you aware of the ill effects of tobacco and prolonged sitting? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>To what extent are you aware that rolling beedis can harm your and your baby's health? <input type="checkbox"/> Completely aware <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat aware <input type="checkbox"/> Not very aware <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all aware</p> <p>If aware of the harm, what precautions are you taking? <input type="checkbox"/> Work away from beedis/leaves <input type="checkbox"/> Wear protective gear <input type="checkbox"/> Limit time spent rolling <input type="checkbox"/> Looking for alternative job <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <input type="checkbox"/> Nothing</p> <p>Do you take breaks while rolling beedis? <input type="checkbox"/> No breaks <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, to talk to family/friends <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, to stretch/rest <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes, but feel bored</p> <p>How do you feel about rolling beedis? <input type="checkbox"/> Hate it <input type="checkbox"/> Dislike it <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed feelings <input type="checkbox"/> Like it <input type="checkbox"/> Love it</p> <p>What time do you usually wake up? <input type="checkbox"/> Before 4:00 AM <input type="checkbox"/> 4:00 – 5:30 AM <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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<p><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of access to better quality leaf</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>5:30 – 7:00 AM <input type="checkbox"/> 7:00 – 8:30 AM <input type="checkbox"/> After 8:30 AM</p>
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<p>How frequently do you reach the expected output? <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently</p> <p>How often do you receive tobacco? <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week <input type="checkbox"/> Other:</p> <p>How often do you run short of tobacco? <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often</p> <p>How much do you spend on equipment (scissors, trays, etc.)? <input type="checkbox"/> ₹10–₹100 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹100–₹200 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹200–₹300 <input type="checkbox"/> >₹300</p> <p>Do you have enough materials to meet daily targets? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Never</p> <p>What do you do when you don't have enough materials? (Multiple responses) <input type="checkbox"/> Spend own money <input type="checkbox"/> Accept wage cut <input type="checkbox"/> Borrow from others <input type="checkbox"/> Work extra hours <input type="checkbox"/> Request extra materials from supplier <input type="checkbox"/> Other:</p> <p>From where you buy leaves to make up for lowquality supply? <input type="checkbox"/> Street sellers (cheaper than contractor) <input type="checkbox"/> Buy from contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Do not buy, accept wage cut <input type="checkbox"/> Borrow from others <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Approx. weekly cost to buy additional leaves/materials: <input type="checkbox"/> ₹10–₹100 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹100–₹200 <input type="checkbox"/> ₹200–₹300 <input type="checkbox"/> >₹300</p> <p>Why do you spend your own money despite the financial loss? <input type="checkbox"/> No choice <input type="checkbox"/> Grateful for job, want independence <input type="checkbox"/> Accept loss as sacrifice <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Average number of rejected beedis per day: <input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1–24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25–49 <input type="checkbox"/> 50–99 <input type="checkbox"/> 100 or more <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer</p>	<p>What time do you usually go to bed? <input type="checkbox"/> Before 9 PM <input type="checkbox"/> 9 – 11 PM <input type="checkbox"/> 11 PM – 1 AM <input type="checkbox"/> After 1 AM</p> <p>Do you chew tobacco? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you smoke? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you talk about your problems as a beedi worker with others? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all</p> <p>Health benefits</p> <p>Do you have a Health card? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If NO, are you aware you should be having one issued by your employer to claim all the health benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Heard some time, but never received <input type="checkbox"/> Said he will give us, but never gave</p> <p>What health issues have you experienced as a result of prolonged sitting? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Back pain <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches <input type="checkbox"/> Neck pain <input type="checkbox"/> Shoulder pain <input type="checkbox"/> Fingers hurts <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify): _____</p> <p>What health issues have you experienced as a result of exposure to tobacco? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Cough <input type="checkbox"/> Shortness of breath <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches <input type="checkbox"/> Eye irritation <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify): _____</p> <p>What is the reason for continuing to roll beedis despite the negative health effects of tobacco? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> It is the source of my livelihood and I need the money <input type="checkbox"/> I do not have any other means of income <input type="checkbox"/> I have no other choice but to work in this industry <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of alternative job opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of education or skills to find other employment <input type="checkbox"/> Family tradition or cultural expectation <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
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How many additional beedis do you keep to avoid rejections? 0 10–15 16–20 21–25 >25 Prefer not to answer

Scholarship details

[If respondent has children only]

<p>Does rejection affect tendu leaf quantity next day? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Vendor reduces amount regardless <input type="checkbox"/> Vendor gives as much as I need <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer</p> <p>Are you aware of the beedi worker dispensary that offers benefits to beedi workers? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Have you received any services from the beedi dispensary doctors who come to your village in a van? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Never heard of it <input type="checkbox"/> Once a year <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes</p> <p>How many times have you visited the beedi worker dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 times <input type="checkbox"/> 3–4 times <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 times <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 times</p> <p>If you have not visited the beedi worker dispensary, what is the reason? <input type="checkbox"/> It is located too far away <input type="checkbox"/> I prefer to purchase supplies from local stores <input type="checkbox"/> I use local hospitals for medical care <input type="checkbox"/> I prefer private hospitals over public facilities <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of proper public transportation <input type="checkbox"/> Not aware of the dispensary's existence <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>What other sources do you use for medical consultation? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Private hospitals <input type="checkbox"/> Government hospitals <input type="checkbox"/> Local clinics or health centers <input type="checkbox"/> Traditional healers or practitioners <input type="checkbox"/> Over-the-counter/self-medication <input type="checkbox"/> Mobile hospital <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>Have you been diagnosed with any of the following conditions as a result of your work? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Eye issues <input type="checkbox"/> Musculoskeletal diseases <input type="checkbox"/> Pallor <input type="checkbox"/> High blood pressure <input type="checkbox"/> Overweight <input type="checkbox"/> Toxic optic neuropathy <input type="checkbox"/> Tuberculosis <input type="checkbox"/> Lung cancer <input type="checkbox"/> Gynaecological disorders <input type="checkbox"/> Children born with congenital disorders <input type="checkbox"/> Joint pains <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous system issues</p>	<p>How many children under 18 do you have in your household? <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 or more <input type="checkbox"/> 0</p> <p>Do any of your children get exposed to tobacco smoke? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do your children help you during beedi making? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>If yes, what do they help with? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Beedi making <input type="checkbox"/> Leaf cutting <input type="checkbox"/> Leaf wetting/drying <input type="checkbox"/> Thread tying <input type="checkbox"/> Bundle making <input type="checkbox"/> Delivering to contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Mixing tobacco <input type="checkbox"/> Others: _____</p> <p>Are you teaching your child beedi making? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, why are you teaching them? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Need help <input type="checkbox"/> Marriage prospects <input type="checkbox"/> Support livelihood <input type="checkbox"/> Earn from home in future</p> <p>How many of your children are currently going to school? <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p>How far is the school from your home? <input type="checkbox"/> <1 km <input type="checkbox"/> 1–5 km <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 km <input type="checkbox"/> 10–15 km <input type="checkbox"/> >15 km <input type="checkbox"/> Lives in hostel <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>How do your children usually commute to school? <input type="checkbox"/> Walk <input type="checkbox"/> Bike <input type="checkbox"/> Public transport <input type="checkbox"/> Private transport <input type="checkbox"/> Lives in hostel</p> <p>If your children are not going to school, what is the reason? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Not interested <input type="checkbox"/> School too far <input type="checkbox"/> Financial issues <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural beliefs (e.g., "girl, so no need") <input type="checkbox"/> Domestic work <input type="checkbox"/> Health issues <input type="checkbox"/> Other:</p> <p>Are you aware of scholarships under the BWWF Act? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, has your child received a scholarship under the BWWF Act?</p>
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Skin diseases <input type="checkbox"/> High creatinine in urine
<input type="checkbox"/> Respiratory impairment <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue
<input type="checkbox"/> Back pain <input type="checkbox"/> Shoulder pain <input type="checkbox"/> Knee | |
|---|--|

<p>joint pain <input type="checkbox"/> Sneezing bouts during beedi rolling <input type="checkbox"/> Early morning coughs <input type="checkbox"/> Sinusitis <input type="checkbox"/> Finger pain <input type="checkbox"/> Nail discoloration <input type="checkbox"/> Vision problems <input type="checkbox"/> Watering eyes <input type="checkbox"/> Musculoskeletal issues <input type="checkbox"/> Respiratory problems <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent headaches</p> <p>Have you received maternity benefits from the beedi dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, once <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable (not female / never pregnant)</p> <p>Have you received spectacles from the beedi dispensary for vision issues? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable (no vision issues)</p> <p>Did you receive sterilisation benefits from the dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>What is your perspective on the concept of menstrual leave as a workplace benefit? <input type="checkbox"/> Aware and support it <input type="checkbox"/> Not familiar with it <input type="checkbox"/> Negative perception <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>Do you receive regular treatment for TB/Cancer/Asthma from the beedi dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>What issue did you go for?</p> <p>What is the distance from your current location to the beedi dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> <1 km <input type="checkbox"/> 1–5 km <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 km <input type="checkbox"/> >10 km <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>What is the distance from your current location to the nearest healthcare centre? <input type="checkbox"/> <1 km <input type="checkbox"/> 1–5 km <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 km <input type="checkbox"/> >10 km <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Health benefits</p> <p>Do you plan to visit the beedi dispensary in the future? (<i>If they've never visited or benefitted, skip this section</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe</p> <p>If not, what is the reason? <input type="checkbox"/> Bad service in the past <input type="checkbox"/> Too far / costly <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of transport</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, currently receiving <input type="checkbox"/> No, never received</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Received in the past</p> <p>If yes, how many of your children received it? <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7</p> <p>Where does your child study? <input type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Government</p> <p>Did you enrol boys in private and girls in government school? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> I do not differentiate</p> <p>If YES, why do you follow that pattern? <input type="checkbox"/> No use in girls getting quality education <input type="checkbox"/> She won't provide for us due to marriage</p> <p>If your child has not received a BWWF scholarship, what is the reason? <input type="checkbox"/> Unaware of deadline <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of information <input type="checkbox"/> Process difficult <input type="checkbox"/> Not informed by others <input type="checkbox"/> Did not consider applying</p> <p>Has the contractor informed you about scholarships under BWWF Act? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, currently informed <input type="checkbox"/> No, never informed <input type="checkbox"/> Told once in the past</p> <p>What other sources of funding does your child have? <input type="checkbox"/> BPL <input type="checkbox"/> College/school <input type="checkbox"/> SC/ST scholarship <input type="checkbox"/> Nothing <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>If your child is in private school and gets no funding, how do you manage fees? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Husband's income <input type="checkbox"/> Own income <input type="checkbox"/> Debt <input type="checkbox"/> Assets <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>If in private school, what is the total amount spent on fees and other expenses? Amount in ₹: _____</p> <p>If your child is in govt. school with no funding, how do you manage other costs (e.g., travel)? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Husband's income <input type="checkbox"/> Own income <input type="checkbox"/> Debt <input type="checkbox"/> Assets <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>
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<p>If you visited the dispensary, did you have a positive experience with the service provided? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Did you receive consultation, medication, or treatment for your diagnosed disease at the dispensary? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Were you satisfied with the level of treatment you received? <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat dissatisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely dissatisfied</p> <p>If you were satisfied with the treatment, how would you rate the service and what was provided? <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent, comprehensive treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Good, basic treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate, minimal treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Poor, limited treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Very poor, no treatment</p> <p>To what extent do you believe using this service has improved your overall health and well-being? <input type="checkbox"/> Significantly improved <input type="checkbox"/> Improved somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> No impact <input type="checkbox"/> Negative impact <input type="checkbox"/> Never used</p> <p>Did you opt for a private hospital due to poor service at a public hospital? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>If yes, how much did it cost you?</p> <p>What is the reason for your perception of poor services at the dispensary? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate facilities <input type="checkbox"/> Staff attitude <input type="checkbox"/> Limited access <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>Has receiving treatment for TB or other respiratory illnesses allowed you to continue working or return to work? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Has receiving treatment for back pain or other musculoskeletal disorders related to beedi work improved your ability to perform work-related tasks? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight</p>	<p>If your child is in a government school, are you satisfied with the education quality? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you dream of enrolling your child in a private school with full facilities? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>[Questions for child above 18 years]</p> <p>Has your school principal or teacher informed you about BWWF scholarships? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Did you apply through school principal or teacher? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, and received <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Applied in past only <input type="checkbox"/> Applied but no funding</p> <p>If NOT, why not? <input type="checkbox"/> No knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of scam <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of rejection <input type="checkbox"/> Process complications <input type="checkbox"/> Not interested <input type="checkbox"/> Family circumstances <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>If YES, who helped you apply? <input type="checkbox"/> School computer <input type="checkbox"/> Friend <input type="checkbox"/> Relative <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher <input type="checkbox"/> Principal <input type="checkbox"/> Broker <input type="checkbox"/> Village-level pension distributor <input type="checkbox"/> Network <input type="checkbox"/> Union support <input type="checkbox"/> Applied independently</p> <p>If you did NOT apply through school staff, why not? <input type="checkbox"/> Forgot <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't think it was important <input type="checkbox"/> Negative past experience <input type="checkbox"/> Not worth time or effort</p> <p>If you had a negative experience, please explain:</p> <p>Have you received the scholarship? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Have you applied but were denied? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, once <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, twice <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, multiple times <input type="checkbox"/> No, never applied</p> <p>If denied, what was the reason? <input type="checkbox"/> Rejected at district level <input type="checkbox"/> Principal didn't submit <input type="checkbox"/> Missed Mee Seva deadline <input type="checkbox"/> School verification incomplete</p>
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<p>improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Have the sterilisation benefits provided you with more control over your reproductive health and improved your overall quality of life? <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Have the maternity benefits provided sufficient financial support during your leave and helped maintain your standard of living? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Have the spectacles or vision aids improved your ability to perform work-related tasks and increased your productivity? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Has the provision of these benefits improved your overall satisfaction with your work and working conditions? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Has the provision of these benefits improved your overall physical and mental health and wellbeing? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Has the provision of these benefits helped reduce any gender disparities or discrimination faced in the workplace? <input type="checkbox"/> Significant improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Slight improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable</p> <p>Do you feel these benefits have improved working conditions and health outcomes for beedi workers in your community? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p>	<p>Do you know how much funding each grade receives under BWWF? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>What costs are involved in applying? <input type="checkbox"/> Approx. ₹200 <input type="checkbox"/> More than ₹200 (scans, travel, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Does your school have access to computers? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Scholarships Impact</p> <p>[Only for those who received the scholarship]</p> <p>Has the scholarship improved your school attendance? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved <input type="checkbox"/> No difference <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to attend regularly</p> <p>Were you able to purchase supplies with the scholarship? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, all <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough <input type="checkbox"/> Did not use for supplies</p> <p>Has the scholarship reduced financial burden on your family? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Not much <input type="checkbox"/> No burden to begin with</p> <p>Do you feel more motivated to excel because of the scholarship? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No change <input type="checkbox"/> Already motivated</p> <p>Impact on your academic performance? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved <input type="checkbox"/> Minor impact <input type="checkbox"/> No impact</p> <p>Able to join extracurriculars due to the scholarship? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No difference <input type="checkbox"/> Don't participate</p> <p>Impact on your well-being and quality of life? <input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> No change <input type="checkbox"/> Negative</p> <p>Has it helped pursue any career goals? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No difference <input type="checkbox"/> No specific goals</p> <p>Do you feel more confident about your future due to the scholarship? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No change <input type="checkbox"/> No difference</p>
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In what ways have you observed positive impacts from these benefits? (*Multiple response*)
Increased job satisfaction Improved

<p>retention <input type="checkbox"/> Enhanced performance <input type="checkbox"/> Better work-life balance <input type="checkbox"/> Healthier work environment <input type="checkbox"/> Employee engagement <input type="checkbox"/> No positive impacts <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure / don't know</p> <p>Other benefits</p> <p>Are you aware that the minimum wage you are entitled to is higher than what you are currently paid? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, what did you do about it? <input type="checkbox"/> Raised issue with contractor <input type="checkbox"/> Brought up with labour union <input type="checkbox"/> Formed a group <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>Did any of these actions work out? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, what was the result? <input type="checkbox"/> Successful <input type="checkbox"/> Unsuccessful <input type="checkbox"/> Partially successful <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ If NO, what happened? <input type="checkbox"/> Failure of action <input type="checkbox"/> No change in outcome <input type="checkbox"/> Ineffective <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Are you aware that you are entitled to benefits in case of natural or accidental death? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Are you aware of any other monetary entitlements you're eligible for? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Are you aware of the age of retirement? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you have a way to address sexual harassment issues? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Collective action</p> <p>If YES, is it through unionisation? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Do you have an opportunity to participate in unions? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Are you a member of a union? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, how much is your annual membership fee? ₹ _____</p>	<p>Has the scholarship positively impacted your family or community? <input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> No change <input type="checkbox"/> Negative</p> <p>(end of questions for this section)</p> <p>*What are the top 3 issues that most need to be resolved? (<i>Check 3 max</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Better pay <input type="checkbox"/> Job security <input type="checkbox"/> COPTA Act <input type="checkbox"/> Reduction of GST in the industry <input type="checkbox"/> Social security <input type="checkbox"/> Others (specify): _____</p> <p>Do you feel well-prepared to face the future? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes</p> <p>What are you doing to prepare for the future? (<i>Multiple response</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Preventive health measures <input type="checkbox"/> Education of children <input type="checkbox"/> Economic investments <input type="checkbox"/> Unionisation <input type="checkbox"/> Skill development/training <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>If YES, reasons for feeling prepared: <input type="checkbox"/> Can care for family/self <input type="checkbox"/> Manage own economic activity <input type="checkbox"/> Savings/economic stability <input type="checkbox"/> Family support <input type="checkbox"/> Not clearly articulated <input type="checkbox"/> No reason given</p> <p>If NO, reasons for not feeling prepared: <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot care for family/self <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot manage economic activity <input type="checkbox"/> No savings/too poor <input type="checkbox"/> Too old <input type="checkbox"/> No family support <input type="checkbox"/> Not clearly articulated <input type="checkbox"/> No reason given</p> <p>Have you missed work due to menstrual pain/discomfort or pregnancy? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Do you feel comfortable discussing menstrual issues with union representatives/co-workers? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you received any maternal health support/information from the union (e.g., maternity benefits, prenatal care)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p>
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<p>How long have you been a member of the union? _____ years/months</p> <p>Have you made demands or negotiated for better wages or benefits with any of the following? (Multiple response) <input type="checkbox"/> Employer <input type="checkbox"/> Unions <input type="checkbox"/> Fellow beedi workers <input type="checkbox"/> Community elders/panchayat <input type="checkbox"/> Government officials</p> <p>Are you aware that you and your children are entitled to welfare benefits under the law? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>Have you received at least one benefit under the Beedi Workers Act? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>If you are a union member, do you believe being in the union helped you get benefits you would not have otherwise? <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly agree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>As a woman worker, do you think the gender of union leaders affects how well they represent your needs? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, female leaders understand better <input type="checkbox"/> No, gender doesn't matter <input type="checkbox"/> Depends on the specific issue <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>If you received benefits, did you receive them through your union? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>If you are a member of a union, is it male-led or women-led? <input type="checkbox"/> Male-led <input type="checkbox"/> Women-led <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you received more information about the available benefits since your union became maleled or women-led? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Do you feel that your union has helped you to access the available benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p>	<p>Have you noticed differences in maternal health support between male-led and women-led union villages? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you received union support on reproductive health (e.g., menstrual products, safe sex, fertility issues)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you noticed changes in union leadership since women were included? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has the inclusion of women leaders impacted access to benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Access <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable (men-led union)</p> <p>How has it impacted wage negotiations and working conditions? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Negotiating Power <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable (men-led union)</p> <p>Have you experienced discrimination or harassment by male union leaders or members? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How satisfied are you with union representation and advocacy? Scale: 1 (Very Dissatisfied) – 10 (Very Satisfied): _____</p> <p>Have you received training from the union on your worker rights or gender equality? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has union advocacy impacted your job satisfaction and security? <input type="checkbox"/> Increased Satisfaction/Security <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you seen a change in attitudes/treatment of women workers since women leaders were included? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Attitudes <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Would you recommend the union to other women workers to access legal benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Have reproductive health benefits/policies improved since women leaders joined the union? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Availability/Quality <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p>
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<p>Have you experienced any barriers in accessing benefits (e.g., lack of information, difficulty applying)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Do you feel that union leadership (male vs. female) affects benefit access? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Men-led <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Women-led <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Benefits you have received (check all that apply): <input type="checkbox"/> Minimum wage <input type="checkbox"/> Health & medication <input type="checkbox"/> Pension <input type="checkbox"/> Provident Fund <input type="checkbox"/> Scholarships <input type="checkbox"/> Recreation <input type="checkbox"/> Spectacles <input type="checkbox"/> Maternity benefits</p> <p>How many benefits have you received so far?</p> <p>Do you think your children's education helped you become aware of legal benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat agree <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not children, but political connections <input type="checkbox"/> Not children, but other family members <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable (no children)</p> <p>Do current laws adequately protect beedi workers' rights? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure</p> <p>How did you first learn about your union/labour organization? <input type="checkbox"/> Through colleague/friend <input type="checkbox"/> Through a union rep/organizer <input type="checkbox"/> Social media/online <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>How has union membership helped you as a beedi worker? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved working conditions <input type="checkbox"/> Better pay/benefits <input type="checkbox"/> Legal/medical help <input type="checkbox"/> Improved job security <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Have you ever participated in union activities related to the beedi industry? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If YES, please describe those activities:</p>	<p>Have you received union information/training on reproductive health and family planning? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How important are reproductive health-related benefits and policies for women workers? <input type="checkbox"/> Very Important <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Important <input type="checkbox"/> Not Important</p> <p>How satisfied are you with union attention to reproductive health issues? Scale: 1 (Very Dissatisfied) – 10 (Very Satisfied): _____</p> <p>Would you support the union more if it advocated for reproductive health benefits? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Do you think women-led unions play a key role in securing legal benefits for beedi workers? <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat agree <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>Pension</p> <p><i>(This section only applies to retired workers. Skip if respondent is non-retired.)</i></p> <p>Are you currently receiving a pension, as you are retired? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, is it regular?</p> <p>How has the pension benefit impacted your financial situation? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Financial Situation <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has the pension benefit impacted your retirement planning? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Retirement Planning <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Has the pension benefit helped you to feel more secure about your financial future? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How satisfied are you with the pension plan's investment options and returns? Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p>
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<p>How should unions further improve working conditions and benefits for beedi workers? <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Collective bargaining for better pay/benefits</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Advocacy for stronger legal protections</p>	<p>Have you received any guidance or education on retirement planning or financial literacy from the</p>
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<p><input type="checkbox"/> Education and training for workers <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>Skill development training</p> <p>Have you received any skill development training that is mandated by law for beedi workers in hazardous occupations dealing with tobacco? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>I did not get the training, but my child did: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, once <input type="checkbox"/> No, never</p> <p>If yes, how useful was the training in helping you develop new skills? <input type="checkbox"/> Very Useful <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Useful <input type="checkbox"/> Not Useful</p> <p>If you have not received any skill development training, do you feel that this lack of training has hindered your ability to move out of the industry or transition to a less hazardous occupation? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p> <p><i>(Skip this section if the worker did not get the skill development benefits)</i> What did you learn as a part of skill development training?</p> <p>How useful was the training in helping you develop new skills? <input type="checkbox"/> Very Useful <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Useful <input type="checkbox"/> Not Useful</p> <p>Have you explored opportunities to use your new skills to move out of the beedi industry or transition to a less hazardous occupation? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p> <p>Have you faced any barriers to using your new skills to move out of the industry, such as lack of job opportunities or discrimination? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p> <p>Do you feel that the government or employers have provided sufficient support to help beedi workers transition to alternative occupations? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you noticed any improvements in workplace safety or working conditions since the introduction of the law mandating skill development training for beedi workers in hazardous occupations?</p>	<p>pension plan? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has the pension benefit impacted your job satisfaction and loyalty to your employer or former employer? <input type="checkbox"/> Increased Satisfaction and Loyalty <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Would you recommend the pension benefit to other employees or retirees? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Provident Fund</p> <p>Are you a member of the provident fund? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><i>(Skip the following questions if the person does not have a PF)</i></p> <p>How long have you been a member of the provident fund?</p> <p>How has the provident fund benefit impacted your financial situation? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Financial Situation <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has the provident fund benefit impacted your retirement planning? <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Retirement Planning <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Has the provident fund benefit helped you to feel more secure about your financial future? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Have you utilized any loans or withdrawals from the provident fund? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How satisfied are you with the investment options and returns provided by the provident fund? Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p> <p>Have you received any guidance or education on retirement planning or financial literacy from the provident fund? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>How has the provident fund benefit impacted your job satisfaction and loyalty to your employer? <input type="checkbox"/> Increased Satisfaction and Loyalty <input type="checkbox"/> No Impact <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p>
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Significant Improvement Slight

<p>Improvement <input type="checkbox"/> No Improvement <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>How satisfied are you with the quality of the skill development training provided to beedi workers in hazardous occupations? Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p> <p>Would you recommend this skill development training to other beedi workers in hazardous occupations? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Do you feel more empowered to advocate for your rights and better working conditions as a result of the skill development training? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know</p> <p>Housing benefits</p> <p>Did you receive housing facilities? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Have you received the promised housing facilities from your employer or government, and do you have legal ownership of the housing? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, I have received and legally own the promised housing <input type="checkbox"/> No, I have not received the promised housing <input type="checkbox"/> I have received the housing but do not legally own it <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure if I legally own the housing</p>	<p>Would you recommend the provident fund benefit to other employees? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>State Benefits</p> <p>Do you receive Aasara pensions given by the state? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, I do because I have a PF <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, even though I do not have PF <input type="checkbox"/> No, because I do not have PF <input type="checkbox"/> No, even though I have PF</p> <p>If NO, why? <input type="checkbox"/> Not registered in their records despite having a PF <input type="checkbox"/> No PF <input type="checkbox"/> Getting some other pension</p> <p>Did anyone in your family receive Kalyana Lakshmi? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not eligible</p> <p>Did you get your spectacles under Kanti Velugu scheme? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not eligible</p> <p>Did you get maternity benefits under the KCR Kit? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not eligible</p> <p>Did you get a 2BHK under the Telangana state scheme? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Promised but never received</p> <p>Do you think media (newspapers, TV, social media) plays a role in accessing benefits or raising awareness? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure</p> <p>Did any local leaders (MLA, ward member, Sarpanch) assure anything for beedi workers such as financial benefits or pay increase? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If Yes, what are they?</p> <p>If Yes, did they fulfill those promises? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>To what extent do you believe the overall benefits you have received have led to an improvement in your living conditions/welfare? <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Agree nor Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p>
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Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Women-led Union Members	Male-led Union Members
<p>Can you tell me how and why you joined this union? Did someone encourage you, or was it your own decision?</p> <p>What changes, if any, have you experienced since joining the union? In your daily life, income, family responsibilities, or status in the community?</p> <p>How do you usually participate in collective actions or meetings? What motivates you to join, and what makes participation difficult?</p> <p>When the union raised demands (e.g., higher wages, welfare schemes), what role did you play? Were these demands met? In what ways?</p> <p>Where have you felt the benefits of union membership — at home, in the workplace, or in the community?</p> <p>Do you feel women-led unions focus more on issues that affect women workers, such as health, childcare, safety, or harassment? Can you give any examples?</p> <p>Do you feel more comfortable sharing your problems with women leaders? Why or why not?</p> <p>Would you consider taking up a leadership role in the union if given the opportunity? What would make this easier or harder for you?</p> <p>Have you had experience in both women-led and male-led unions? If yes, what differences did you notice?</p>	<p>What encouraged you to join this union? What benefits have you experienced personally, and what have others around you experienced?</p> <p>How does the union raise and pursue workers' demands? What kinds of successes or challenges has it faced?</p> <p>Do women workers participate actively in this union? If yes, how? If not, why do you think that is?</p> <p>Are women represented in union leadership? If not, what barriers do you see?</p> <p>Do women face any hesitation in speaking up during meetings or raising issues? How does that affect union activities or priorities?</p> <p>Do you think the gender of the union leader influences how problems are understood or addressed?</p> <p>What expectations do you think women workers have from unions? Are those being met?</p> <p>What changes would you like to see in the structure or leadership of the union moving forward?</p>
<p>Union Leaders</p> <p><i>(some union leaders were also interviewed as key informants representing broader union federations or inter-union dynamics)</i></p> <p>Can you share the background and goals of your union in relation to beedi workers?</p> <p>What are the major challenges your union is currently facing?</p> <p>How do you engage with government officials, contractors, or producers?</p>	<p>Non-Union Members</p> <p>Have you ever been approached to join a union? What made you decide not to join?</p> <p>What are your views on unions in general? Do you think they bring any change to workers' lives?</p> <p>Do you know anyone who is in a union? Have you seen any differences in their work, pay, or treatment?</p> <p>If you had the opportunity, would you consider joining a union in the future? What would make you feel more comfortable or confident about joining?</p> <p>What kinds of issues do you wish someone could raise on behalf of beedi workers?</p> <p>Do you feel your voice is heard in your workplace or community? If not, why?</p>

<p>Are there structural or political constraints that limit your ability to represent workers effectively?</p> <p>How are women represented in your leadership and decision-making processes?</p> <p>How do you coordinate with other unions or networks working with informal workers?</p> <p>What policy changes do you advocate for, and how do you mobilise for them?</p>	
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Focus Group Discussion Guide – Union Members and Leaders

(Conducted separately in women-led and male-led union villages)

Have you participated in any union meetings, protests, or other collective activities?

What were they about? What made you join (or not join)?

What demands have been raised by your group recently or in the past?

Were any of them successful? What happened afterward?

How do men and women contribute differently in union spaces?

Do men support women’s participation? How?

What are the main differences you’ve noticed between women-led and male-led unions?

Which do you feel better represents your concerns, and why?

Do your groups or meetings continue regularly? If not, what are the challenges?

Have you ever raised or supported a demand for higher wages? What was the outcome?

Are the issues discussed here reflective of your lived reality as a beedi worker? What’s missing from this conversation?

Why do you think some women are more active in unions while others remain uninvolved?

If you were in my place (as a researcher), what would you focus on to understand women’s union participation better?

Based on our discussion, do you feel I’ve captured your situation correctly? Is there anything I misunderstood?

Key Informant Interview Guide

<p>Contractors and Subcontractors</p> <p>Can you describe your role in the beedi production and distribution chain?</p> <p>How do you recruit, manage, and monitor workers?</p> <p>What challenges do you face in balancing production targets with worker concerns?</p> <p>How do you interact with producers, factory personnel, and local authorities?</p> <p>Are you aware of any welfare schemes applicable to beedi workers?</p> <p>What do you know about access to scholarships for beedi workers' children?</p> <p>Beedi Packers</p> <p>What does a typical workday look like for you?</p> <p>What kinds of challenges do you face in your work?</p> <p>How are you paid, and how regularly?</p> <p>Do you interact with factory personnel or contractors?</p> <p>What improvements would make your working conditions better?</p>	<p>Factory Personnel, Government Officials, Labour Commissioners</p> <p>What is your role in overseeing the beedi industry?</p> <p>How do you implement or enforce labour protections for beedi workers?</p> <p>How well are current policies and schemes working, in your opinion?</p> <p>What gaps or challenges do you encounter in applying these policies?</p> <p>Education Officials (Teachers, Principals)</p> <p>How many students in your school come from beedi worker families?</p> <p>What challenges do these students face in staying in school?</p> <p>Are they benefiting from government scholarship schemes? What is your role in assisting them with scholarships applications?</p> <p>What additional support could help them complete their education?</p> <p>Medical Officer (Beedi Dispensary)</p> <p>What are the most common health problems faced by beedi workers?</p> <p>How do your services connect with broader government health or welfare programs?</p> <p>What challenges do you face in providing care or outreach?</p> <p>What changes could improve healthcare for beedi workers?</p> <p>You mentioned managing skill development programs — what is the uptake like?</p> <p>Since you previously managed scholarships (before the switch to the online National Scholarship Portal), what differences have you observed?</p>
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