

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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Woman rolling beedis (materials - leaf, tobacco, thread) © Madhuri Kamtam

Tobacco's Adverse Effects on Poorly Paid Women Beedi Workers: View From the Field

Madhuri Kamtam

It has been 3.5 months since I began my fieldwork in India in October 2022. My research focuses on the collective action, gender, caste, and labor laws in the Indian beedi industry. Beedi is a home-made, hand-rolled country cigar which is a prominent occupation for women in rural India. My main research question is to examine the impact of the legislation on living, working conditions and welfare of the beedi workers as well as understanding the role of collective action in translating the policy into welfare.

My fieldwork experience has been wonderful, exciting, rewarding, yet at the same time stressful, challenging, and depressing. Being able to travel to the field, live in a hamlet, get to know the residents, and conduct interviews with them was such a unique and intriguing experience. The process taught me so much, and it was very insightful in many ways. Meeting beedi workers and knowing about their daily struggles was very beneficial in demonstrating the significance of these women's stories and their influence on today's economy. I didn't anticipate finding these many subtleties in each narrative and undoubtedly many issues and

MANIFESTO

With this new format of Newsletter, the Fieldwork Support Network wants to shed light on the various fieldworks conducted at UEA in order for all of your research to be shared within the PGR community and form a true network.

This will be a great opportunity for you to not only learn about new and innovative topics but also get to know people who might work with similar methodologies or within the same area or region as you.

We hope these stories will be inspiring and that you might too, want to take part.

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Interviews with beedi rollers in Sirikonda © Madhuri Kamtam

worries that I had never heard of or read about before since I had only been reading papers in addition to my real experience with beedi workers. After all, in essence, that is the goal of fieldwork.

The industry is massive and involves many different parties, including beedi rollers, contractors, owners, and union leaders/members. Because of the complexity and dynamic nature of these relations, I had to often step back to comprehend and disseminate the information in order to

move forward with clarity and avoid losing my framework, perspective, and epistemological stance.

Although it's fantastic to immerse oneself in the field, reality is complex, so it won't be as easy as it would be in theory. Complexity that goes beyond comprehension. I anticipated and envisioned that meeting individuals and connecting with them would be challenging, but that once I got to them, I could just ask whatever questions I needed to. That didn't happen, though. The situation was reversed. Since I began reaching out much earlier, which is fortunate in my case because locating individuals was not difficult (although I do admit that this is frequently the most difficult part). In my case, so far it has been the approach towards the participant which was difficult. My positionality always got in my way. My caste identity has been an issue most of the time. Subtle forms of discrimination were visible and were also painful at times. I often came across scenarios where I was denied information due to my caste being a lower-status one. It really stirred me up to think about caste politics in India and understand how that affects the researchers ascribed status vs achieved status.

I've also seen instances where employees were quiet, reaching a data saturation point, and there was uncertainty about the credibility of the responses because of their fears of losing jobs and the owners' capital flight. It took me a long time to gradually overcome these issues so that I could really focus my questions while yet allowing participants to express themselves as fully as possible.

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Madhuri Kamtam is a second year Ph.D. student at UEA in the school of International Development. Her research looks at labor laws, welfare, and collective action in home-based occupations, with a focus on the beedi industry in India.



Beedi bundles submitted by the contractor in the packaging office © Madhuri Kamtam