



# **Socio Economic Characteristics of Women Beedi Workers in Murshidabad District of West Bengal, India**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the socio-economic status of beedi workers in the Suti-II Block of Murshidabad District, West Bengal. A traditional agro-forest-based and unorganized industry in India is the beedi industry, where predominantly women laborers are engaged in beedi rolling. A sample of 100 respondents was selected through the Simple Random Sampling Without Replacement Method (SRSWOR). Data were collected using a pretested schedule. The results indicate that 56 per cent of respondents are aged between 30 -40 years, 50 per cent are illiterate, and 60 per cent earn between ₹3001 - ₹4000 per month. Approximately 64 per cent live in pucca houses, 56 per cent have 9 to 12 years of work experience and 86 per cent consider beedi rolling as their secondary occupation. The study highlights the challenging conditions faced by beedi workers, including low wages, limited educational opportunities, and arduous working conditions. The study suggests improved health education, minimum wages, enhanced legal protections, and

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increased awareness regarding the rights and welfare of beedi workers to better their socio-economic status.

*Keywords: Socio-economic; women beedi workers; informal labour; employment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The informal sector plays a vital role in economic development in developing countries, providing employment and livelihoods, especially for women. It accounts for two-thirds of non-agricultural employment and is a significant source of income for women, who often face poor working conditions and low pay (Das & Pande, 2000). Education is key to women's participation in the labour market, but in countries like India, low literacy and restrictions on women's economic activities hinder their potential. Despite these challenges, women in the informal sector use their skills to create goods and support their families, highlighting their importance as a human resource (Roy, 2021).

Beedi manufacturing is a traditional agroforest industry in India, representing over half of the country's tobacco consumption (John, 2008). It is a major employer in the unorganized household sector, with around 300 large manufacturers and many small-scale producers. Beedis are hand-rolled, unfiltered cigarettes made from sun-dried tobacco flakes and wrapped in a tender or temburni leaf, held together by a cotton thread. They are smaller than regular cigarettes and require more frequent puffs due to low combustibility. Beedis are available in both branded and unbranded varieties (Darling et al., 2015).

The Labour Welfare Scheme is carried out across the nation through Labour Welfare Organizations located in 18 regions to ensure the welfare of Beedi Workers and their families. According to the latest data, there are 49.82 lakh registered Beedi workers in the country, of which 36.25 lakh are women. No child has been documented to be employed in the Beedi making sector (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2024).

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The beedi industry in India remains a significant source of informal employment, particularly for women from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. Kumar et al. (2025) revealed stark disparities between registered and unregistered

women beedi workers in Karnataka, noting limited access to social security schemes and the exacerbation of vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mohandas, 1980). Despite recognizing the hazardous nature of their occupation, most women expressed unwillingness to transition to alternative livelihoods due to age, poor education and economic insecurity (Kumar et al., 2021). Similar trends were observed in Telangana, where home-based women workers remained economically dependent on beedi rolling, often earning less than ₹10,000 per month (Sultana, 2023).

Tyagi et al. (2023) documented widespread health problems—including musculoskeletal, respiratory, and reproductive disorders—affecting both women workers and their families. These findings are reinforced by Telugu and Aruna (2025), who found that over 75% of women reported chronic health issues, yet had minimal awareness of safety practices. Studies in West Bengal (Neogi & Sen, 2021) and Andhra Pradesh (Paul et al., 2023) further emphasize the physical toll of beedi rolling, compounded by inadequate healthcare access and workplace protections.

While some studies noted awareness of welfare entitlements, uptake remains inconsistent. Mangasuli and Sherkhane (2016) found higher utilization of social schemes among beedi workers compared to non-beedi laborers, largely due to long-term exposure to the industry. However, most workers remain outside the protection net due to informal employment structures, lack of identification and gender-based constraints (Rahmatullah et al., 2023). Moreover, legal instruments such as the Beedi and Cigar Workers Act (1966) and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act (1976) have not been effectively enforced. Overall, the literature underscores a multidimensional crisis: hazardous health conditions, lack of alternative livelihood pathways, limited welfare access, and weak legal enforcement. The introduction of innovative metrics like the Extended Full-Time Equivalent (E-FTE) framework by Eshwari et al. (2025) suggests a way forward in quantifying and addressing workforce inefficiencies. These

findings call for a comprehensive policy overhaul that integrates occupational health, social protection, skill development, and gender-sensitive labor reforms.

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

- To determine the socio-economic characteristics of women beedi workers.
- To give suggestions to enhance their living conditions.

### **4. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study was conducted purposively in the Murshidabad District of West Bengal during 2022-23. The entire area is mostly populated by the Minorities, many of whom live in poverty, have little access to education, and rely on physical work for a living. For this research, the Jangipur sub-division was chosen purposively. The Suti-II block has been selected purposively in this study because a significant portion of its population works in the beedi sector. Most of the female beedi laborers are from Minority communities. For this study, a cluster of two villages was purposively selected from the Suti-II block.

A complete list of women beedi workers' households for the two villages was prepared separately. For each village, 50 sample households were randomly selected with the help of the Simple Random Sampling Without Replacement Method (SRSWOR). This way, 100 sample respondents were randomly selected for the research study.

A structured questionnaire schedule was prepared based on the pilot survey. The primary data were collected from the women beedi workers using a pretested schedule in the study area. The primary data collection was carried out through face-to-face interviews conducted by the researcher. For the study, eight variables viz age, education, earning per month, types of houses, experience of work, nature of work, mode of work and working hours were taken into consideration, which constituted the socio-economic profile of women beedi workers. Simple statistical tools like percentages were used for the analysis and interpretation of data.

#### **4.1 Age**

It refers to the chronological age of the respondent in completed years at the time of the

interview. It serves as a critical demographic variable influencing her productivity levels, work experience, and susceptibility to occupational health concerns.

#### **4.2 Educational Qualification**

Educational qualification represents the highest level of formal schooling completed by the female beedi worker. This variable is indicative of her literacy status, awareness levels, and potential to pursue alternative income-generating activities.

#### **4.3 Earnings per Month**

Monthly earnings pertain to the total remuneration received by a woman beedi worker from her occupational engagement within a given month. This serves as a fundamental measure of her financial well-being and economic contribution to household sustenance.

#### **4.4 Type of House**

Type of house refers to the structural classification of the dwelling occupied by the beedi worker, categorized as kutcha, semi-pucca, or pucca. It is a proxy for assessing the individual's socio-economic standing and quality of living conditions.

#### **4.5 Experience of Work**

Work experience captures the total number of years the woman has been involved in beedi manufacturing. Extended experience is generally associated with enhanced skill and productivity, though it may concurrently signify long-term exposure to occupational hazards.

#### **4.6 Mode of Work**

Mode of work describes the employment arrangement under which the beedi worker operates, whether through contractual terms, home-based settings or intermediary systems. This variable significantly affects her employment security, income consistency and eligibility for social protection benefits.

#### **4.7 Nature of Work**

Nature of Work refers to the level and form of engagement in beedi-making activities, categorized as primary (main source of livelihood), secondary (supplementary income

activity) and casual (irregular or temporary involvement without job security).

#### 4.8 Working Hours

Working hours denote the average duration, measured in hours per day, that a woman devotes to beedi-related tasks. This measure is essential for evaluating her workload, time allocation and exposure to physical and mental fatigue.

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine the profile characteristics of women beedi workers. The findings were tabulated, analyzed, and presented.

#### 5.1 Age

The age distribution of 100 respondents is shown in Table 1. None of the respondents were below

the age of 20, accounting for 0 per cent of the total. The majority of respondents, 56 per cent, fell in the 30-40 age range. In the 20-30 age group, there were 14 respondents, making up 14 per cent of the total. The 40-50 age group comprised 24 respondents (24 per cent), while the 50-60 age group had 6 respondents, constituting 6 per cent of the total.

This finding is in conformity with the finding of Ramakrishnappa et al., (2014), Mishra and Mishra (2015), Mercy and Smiley (2020), Mallick and Satpathy (2021) and Nafees et al., (2021).

#### 5.2 Educational Qualification

The study reveals that 50 per cent of the respondents were illiterate, 38 per cent had a primary education, 8 percent had completed Secondary school and 4 per cent had a high school (HS) education. Similar findings were reported Mishra and Mishra (2015), Mallick and Satpathy (2021) and Nafees et al., (2021).

**Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of the Women Beedi Workers (n=100)**

Components	Category	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>	Below 20 yr	0	00
	20yr-30 yr	14	14
	30yr -40 yr	56	56
	40 yr -50 yr	24	24
	>50 yr	6	6
<b>Education Qualification</b>	Illiterate	50	50
	Primary	38	38
	Secondary	8	8
	HS	4	4
<b>Earnings per month</b>	Below Rs 2500	14	14
	Rs.2500-Rs.3000	20	20
	Rs.3001-Rs.4000	60	60
	Above Rs.4000	6	6
<b>Type of house</b>	Kuccha	0	0
	Mixed	36	36
	Pucca (concrete)	64	64
<b>Experience of work</b>	1-4 yr	0	0
	5-8 yr	32	32
	9-12 yr	56	56
	Above 13 yr	12	12
<b>Mode of work</b>	Industry	0	0
	House	100	100
<b>Nature of work</b>	primary	14	14
	Secondary	86	86
	Casual	0	0
<b>Working Hours</b>	Below 3 hours	18	18
	3-6 hours	82	82
	7-9 hours	0	0

### **5.3 Monthly Income from Beedi Rolling**

The result shows that the majority, 60 per cent, earn between Rs 3001 and Rs 4000 monthly, while 20 per cent earn between Rs 2500 and Rs 3000. Only 6 per cent of respondents earn above Rs 4000 and 14 per cent earn below Rs 2500 per month. This result was in line with finding of Ansari and Raj (2015), Mishra and Mishra (2015), Amutha and Chellai (2018), and Nafees et al., (2021).

### **5.4 Type of House**

The results of study depict that 64 per cent of the respondents have been living in Pucca (concrete) houses. 36 per cent of respondents have been living in mixed houses, while none of them live in Kuccha houses. This finding was in line with finding of Mishra and Mishra (2015), Mercy and Smiley (2020) and Nafees et al., (2021).

### **5.5 Experience of Work**

Work experience relates to the number of years that respondents have been engaged in beedi rolling. The respondents' work experience in the beedi-making sector is exhibited in Table 1. It shows that none have 1-4 years of experience, 32 per cent have 5-8 years, 56 per cent have 9-12 years, and 12 per cent have over 13 years of experience. This finding is supported by the result of Ramakrishnappa et al., (2014) and Mercy and Smiley (2020).

### **5.6 Mode of Work**

The respondents' work modes are shown in Table 1. It shows that none of the respondents work at an industry location, and all of the respondents roll beedi at home. The finding is in agreement with the findings reported by Amutha and Chellai (2018) and Mercy and Smiley (2020).

### **5.7 Nature of Work**

Beedi rolling is a process that women do and it varies individually. For some, it serves as their primary occupation, while others engage in it as a secondary activity. The study shows that 86 per cent of the respondents consider beedi rolling as their secondary work, 14 per cent regard it as primary work and No respondents engage in beedi rolling on a casual basis. This finding is in concurrence with

the findings reported by Mercy and Smiley (2020).

### **5.8 Working Hours**

The beedi production has inconsistent working hours. The distribution of working hours among respondents in the beedi-making industry is displayed in Table 1. It reveals that 18 per cent of respondents work for less than 3 hours, 82 per cent work between 3 to 6 hours, and none work for 7 to 9 hours. This finding was in line with finding of Ansari and Raj (2020) and Mercy and Smiley (2020).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Beedi manufacturing is a traditional agroforest industry in India, representing over half of the country's tobacco consumption. It is a major employer in the unorganized household sector, with around 300 large manufacturers and many small-scale producers. The majority of beedi rolling employment consists of individuals between the ages of 30 and 40 who possess years of experience and have varied earnings. Individuals' educational status is often low, so the majority work from home with flexible hours, primarily considering beedi rolling as an additional occupation to earn money to support their families.

## **7. RECOMMENDATION**

Beedi workers, who engage in the manual process of rolling beedis (hand-rolled cigarettes), sometimes encounter difficult working conditions that include low remuneration, long work hours, and occupational hazards. Here are some recommendations to enhance their conditions:

1. Implementing health education initiatives and organizing complimentary medical check-up camps for beedi workers/rollers at the local level to enhance healthcare awareness.
2. The remuneration provided to beedi rollers is significantly lower in comparison to the minimum wage. They roll the beedi all day long, a laborious and time-consuming task for which they receive very little payment; the state government need to maintain surveillance on this.
3. Most of the time, companies or subcontractors take advantage of workers in the beedi business. Therefore, rules should be made that make them

responsible for the workers, and they should face harsh punishments if they don't follow the rules. Also, any problems with payments should be closely monitored. The implementation of a beedi workers cooperative to reduce the influence of intermediary the beedi business.

4. The State government should implement effective efforts to deal with the prevalent issue of child labour in this industry.
5. Workers, most of whom are poor, belong to backward castes and illiterate don't know much about the Beedi Acts. Education and training programs are needed.
6. Organize awareness programs to emphasize the health hazards linked to use of tobacco and the need of advocating for the rights and welfare of beedi workers.
7. Both government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a responsibility to actively promote the rights and well-being of beedi workers. They should promote and fight for their interests, as well as ensure the effective implementation of welfare programs designed for their benefit. In addition, they are required to execute numerous projects aimed at improving the conditions of workers in the beedi industry.

#### DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Authors hereby declare that no generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

#### CONSENT

As per international standards or university standards, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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