

## Mumbai: Bidi workers struggle amid COVID-19 lockdown

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Maharashtra government's decision to ban loose bidis to curb coronavirus and discourage smoking has added to the woes of 5,500 bidi workers in Mumbai who have become jobless amid the lockdown.



*Narsubai Machha (L) and Uma Mudigunda (R)*

Ghatkopar areas.

The bidi workers and unions expressed fear that one of the oldest working communities in the city, may soon disappear without help.

The bidi workers mostly come from the Telugu community who migrated to Mumbai for work in the late 18th century. The name Kamathipura was derived from these hard-working labourers (Kaam means work in Marathi). They prominently stay at Kamathipura, Worli, Chunabhatti, Bandra, Sion, Prabhadevi, Sewri, and

These workers roll bidis with hands which, according to the government, is a cause of worry in COVID-19 times.

"I was born and brought up here at Kamathipura. My parents lived with rolling bidis and now I do the same. But the lockdown has stopped my work completely. I am looking for some alternative work but it's hard to find. My nephew is working but he is struggling due to the pandemic. Many of our workers have started searching for housemaid jobs and are ready to do any kind of small work to earn money," Narsubai Machha (64) said. She has a family of four to run.

For a 42 years old widow, Uma Mudigunda, rolling bidi was the only source of income. "I have been raising my two children alone as my husband expired. During the lockdown, I got ration only once. But there is no other help or assistance I have. Even my house rent which is Rs 10,000 per month is due from January. My children's school fees are yet to be paid. I am looking for some alternate work but not getting it. I cannot even travel to search for work as trains are not running," Uma said.

The bidi workers would get Rs 300 to 310 for rolling 1000 bidis. They would sell the loose bidis to shops every day and buy tobacco and dry leaves from them. There are small bidi making units in Mumbai which are closed too. The shopkeeper would brand the loose bidis in a packet and sale. One worker would make up to 1000 bidis in a day's time depending on his skills.

Comrade Dr Buchirajam Katkam, general secretary of Bombay Bidi Kamgar said the workers have been witnessing slow closure of the business after 2014. "In a big city like Mumbai, these traditional businesses are fast vanishing. Instead of helping these workers, the Centre has stopped their welfare schemes like LIC insurance, scholarship to children. Bidi workers have no protection now. The lockdown has just stopped their business," Katkam said.

Hema Akkanpelli (38) from Ghatkopar is also struggling to make ends meet after her husband, a driver by profession, lost his job. "I feel very helpless right now. There is no work, our savings are over. My children are studying and my husband too is in search of a job. I have been rolling bidis since my childhood and have seen my parents doing the same. I do not have any other skills to take up a new job. Every day has become a battle of survival for us," Hema said.

Once the bidi workers were at the forefront in fighting for the rights of co-workers in the city through their union. They had participated in mill strikes and the Samyukta Maharashtra movement.

"The Telugu community was mostly in bidi work or mill jobs. Their contribution to the city's working-class culture is unforgettable. There are many people dependent on the bidi work like tobacco grower farmers, bidi makers who are mostly women, small shops, and bidi units. I condemn that the government has snatched their bread and butter by banning loose bidis. The poor people cannot afford cigarette packets like the elites. They smoke loose bidis and its made by poor people only," communist leader Prakash Reddy said. He has been leading the bidi workers since his student days from the 1970s.

**Source:** <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/coronavirus/news/mumbai-bidi-workers-struggle-amid-covid-19-lockdown/articleshowprint/78486366.cms?prtpage=1>