

Where fingers move fast but not wages, Bengal's bidi belt votes tomorrow



PHOTO: ISHITA AYAN DUTT

Tardy uniform wage implementation, health hazard plague workers

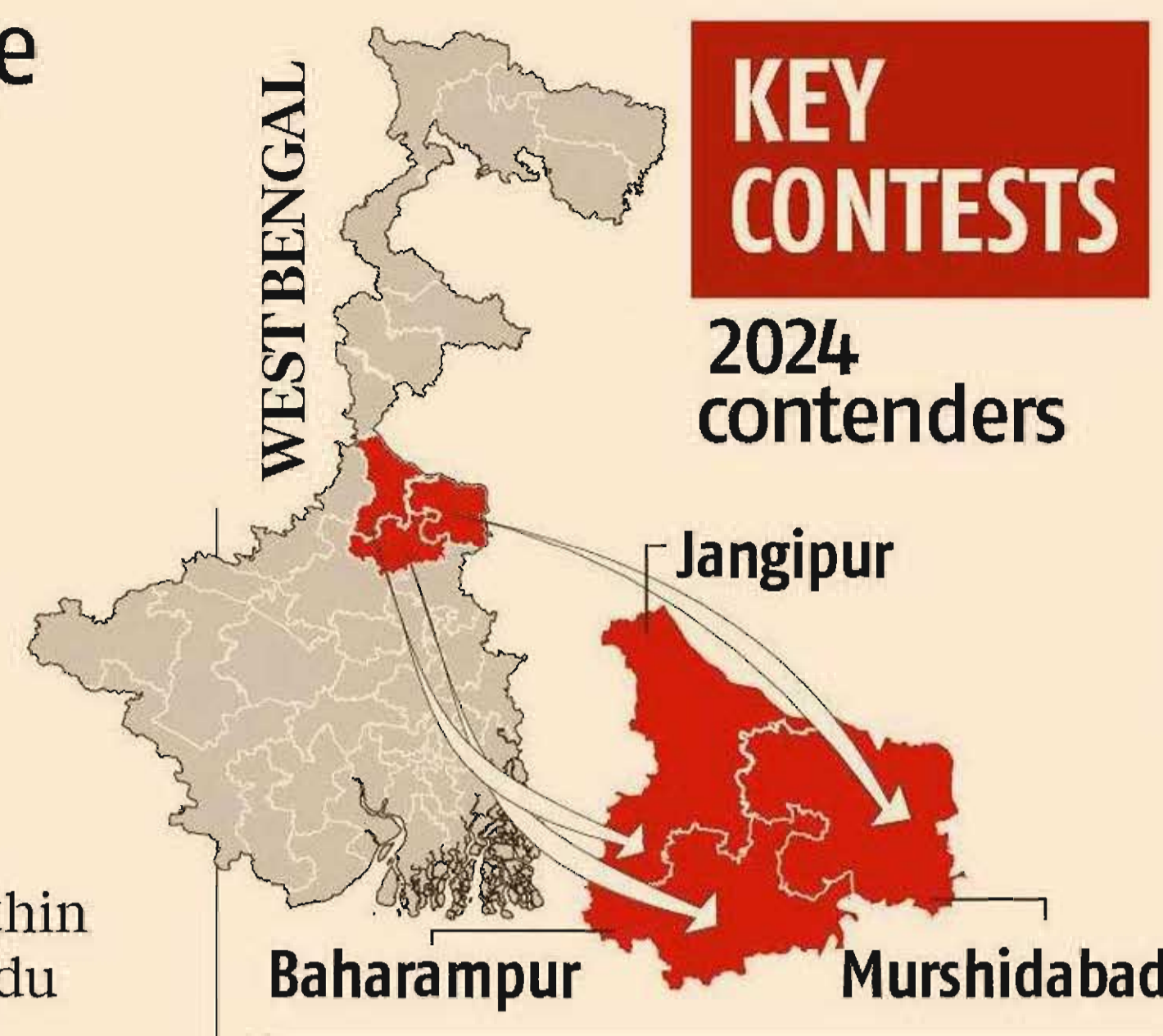
ISHITA AYAN DUTT

Lalgola/Raghunathganj (Jangipur/West Bengal), 5 May

For 22-year-old Heera Khatun, rolling bidis is like a religion.

The income from the small, thin stick of tobacco wrapped in kendu leaves helped fund her college education — at least, until she was married off and dropped out. Notwithstanding the meagre earnings, she is now looking forward to making a future with her husband on the back of her skill to roll bidis.

Heera's father was a small-time tailor who did not have the talent to make anything from scratch. Mending and repairing were more his forte. But



Murshidabad May 7

Abu Taher Khan, TMC	Mohammed Salim, CPI (M)	Gouri Sankar Ghosh, BJP
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Jangipur May 7

Khalilur Rahaman, TMC	Murtoja Hossain Bakul, INC	Dhananjay Ghosh, BJP
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Baharampur May 13

Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, INC	Yusuf Pathan, TMC	Nirmal Kumar Saha, BJP
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it translated into little income.

"The family was always in need; whatever I have managed is from rolling bidis," she says.

Her husband, a mason, is currently in Kerala, scouting for better opportunities. "The wages are double there (Kerala), and I roll about 500 bidis a day — we have to plan for the

future of our one-year-old infant."

In the narrow, winding roads of Pathanpara in Lalgola, the scene for the women-at-home bidi rollers is invariable. The women finish their domestic chores and get going to make a living.

The raw material and tools for the finished product — kendu leaves,

tobacco, thread, and a pair of scissors — are neatly laid out on a kulo (bamboo tray). Seated cross-legged, the fingers start working deftly.

The wages are low here — ₹150 for 1,000 bidis rolled, which even the best don't manage to achieve in a day. And the hours are long, often leading to postural cramps. But, it's a skill honed for years and the lifeblood of many homes in this rural hamlet.



Numbers speak

Lalgola is part of the Jangipur Lok Sabha (LS) constituency in Murshidabad district, the bidi hub of India.

According to the Ministry of Labour & Employment annual report for 2022-23, West Bengal has the largest number of bidi workers in the country at nearly 37 per cent.

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MP farmers struggle to make the most of soaring wheat prices

As Madhya Pradesh goes to the third phase of polling on Monday, low wheat procurement by the government and dropping yield of the crop has farmers worried along with a host of other issues that concern their daily lives.

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE reports from the ground

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Burning injustice: Bidi workers' plight goes up in smoke

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Centre of Indian Trade Unions (Citu)-affiliated Murshidabad Zilla Beedi Mazdoor and Packers Union estimates the number of bidi workers in West Bengal at 2.2 million, with Murshidabad accounting for the largest share at 1.2 million, making them an important vote bank. About 95 per cent are women, says Jyotirup Banerjee, general secretary of the union.

Most of them are Muslims.

According to Census 2011, Murshidabad has a majority Muslim population of 66.27 per cent.

As for the men in the district, many have migrated to states like Kerala for higher wages.

Occupational hazard

Komila Bibi has no such luck. Her husband was paralysed and incapacitated for the past four years.

"I have to roll 800-900 bidis a day to make ends meet. I have been the sole earning member for some years now," she rues.

It's afternoon. Komila is wrapping up her domestic duties. Until evening, she is going to be rolling bidis, much against the diktat of her doctor. Komila contracted tuberculosis

MURSHIDABAD

2019 results

Total electors: **1,725,187**

Abu Taher Khan, TMC: **41.56%**

Abu Hena, INC: **25.99%**

Humayun Kabir, BJP: **17.04%**

Badaruddoza Khan, CPI (M): **12.43%**

JANGIPUR

2019 results

Total electors: **1,616,213**

Khalilur Rahaman, TMC: **43.14%**

Mafuja Khatun, BJP: **24.3%**

Abhijit Mukherjee, INC: **19.61%**

Md Zulfikar Ali, CPI (M): **7.32%**

BAHARAMPUR

2019 results

Total electors: **1,638,378**

Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, INC: **45.43%**

Apurba Sarkar, TMC: **39.23%**

Krishna Joyardar, BJP: **10.99%**

about four years back. She did give it up for a year. But once cured, she got back to the trade. "I don't have a choice; I have a daughter and son to raise and a paralytic husband to take care of."

Seated next to her, Mamata Bibi complains of breathlessness from rolling bidis. "When I walk, I feel breathless. My doctor says it's due to a heart problem and has asked me to stop rolling bidis," she says.

Bidi workers are considered to be among the most vulnerable in the informal sector.

In December 2022, a World Health Organization (WHO) study noted that bidi rolling is an occupational health hazard. The WHO country office for India undertook a rapid evidence synthesis of existing studies in the country related to environmental risks and

health hazards amongst bidi workers, their families, and communities.

All 95 studies analysed consistently reported a high prevalence of disease conditions or related symptoms, across all organ systems of the body.

Wage disparity

Is it worth it, Regina Bibi asks.

"We fight for years and get minimal increases in wages. Does ₹150 compensate for the labour that we put in day and night?"

"The mahajan says it's the company which decides on the wages. But in other parts of Jangipur, people are getting ₹170-180," she points out. Munshi, mahajan, or contractor is an important cog in the wheel. They collect the bidis from the workers and deliver them

to the companies.

About 20 kilometres from Lalgola, Mou Begam in Raghunathganj (Jangipur LS constituency) gets ₹170 for 1,000 bidis. Between mother and daughter, they manage to roll about 1,000 a day. The glorified shack where she lives tells that it's woefully inadequate.

The wage stipulated by the West Bengal government for a worker involved in bidi making ranges between ₹253.03 and ₹267.44 per 1,000 bidis rolled depending on the district.

But government sources concede that it is an informal sector and companies contract out the work — implementation is a problem.

Bidi barons

The raw materials for bidi — kendu leaves and tobacco — are both imported from other states.

"Bidi is subject to a high goods and services tax rate. The raw material is imported, and the finished product goes to North and South India. It is not possible to compete with companies in the South, which procure the raw material locally at the government-stipulated wage rate," Khalilur Rahaman, managing director of Nur Biri Works, explains.

Nur Biri Works produces about 10 million sticks a day.

Rahaman is a sitting Member of Parliament and a Trinamool Congress (TMC) candidate in the Jangipur constituency.

However, he says that the bipartite agreement between workers and companies for increased wages should be uniformly implemented across the district. "It is the responsibility of the trade unions to make it happen. I have already written to the merchants' association to do it after the election."

According to Citu's Banerjee, "It is difficult for unions to negotiate if the owners are part of the ruling dispensation. They no longer care what unions have to say."

Apart from Rahaman, there are TMC Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) who are bidi businessmen — Jakir Hossain, former labour minister of state and an MLA from Jangipur; Bayron Biswas, TMC MLA, Sagardighi.

Murshidabad district has three LS constituencies — Jangipur, Baharampur, and Murshidabad. Jangipur and Murshidabad will vote on May 7 while Baharampur will go to polls on May 13.

Rahaman says that he is sympathetic to the problems facing bidi workers.

"If re-elected, I assure you that the issues of bidi workers will be taken up in Parliament."