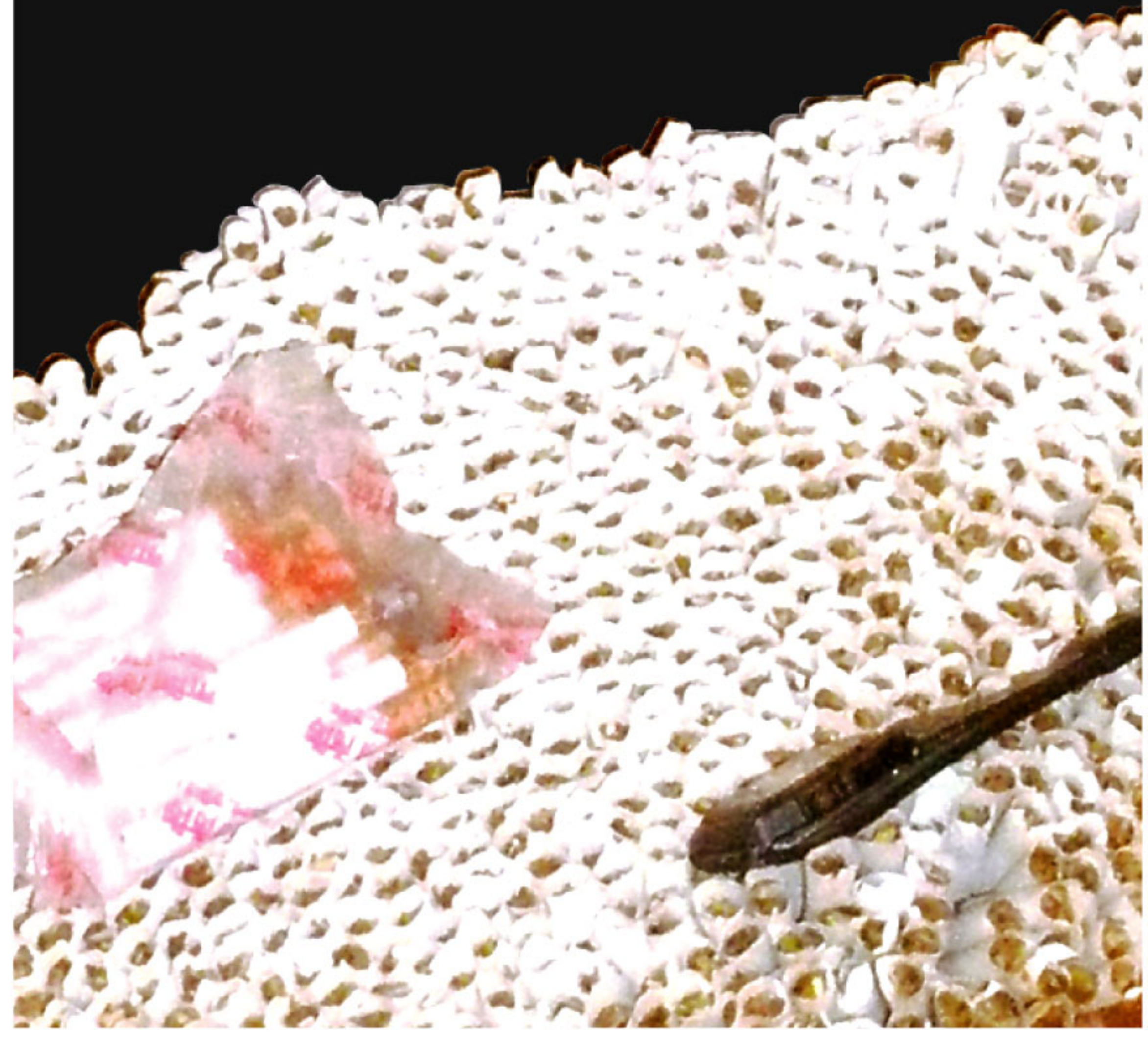


***Bidi* in Bangladesh: Myths and Reality**

THE *BIDI* PRODUCING SECTOR IN BANGLADESH

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Published by:

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (CTFK)

Editorial advices from the Research Team of CTFK is greatly acknowledged

April 2012



**Bloomberg Global Initiative
To Reduce Tobacco Use**

1. Introduction

Bidi is one of the major tobacco products consumed in Bangladesh. It has been one of the main sources of tobacco consumption in the rural Bangladesh for ages. *Bidi* has a significant market and almost half of all smokers consume *bidi*. According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey 2009 (GOB 2009), while prevalence of cigarette smoking among adult population (15+) in the country is 14.2%, that of *bidi* smoking is 11.2%.

Reliable data on *bidi* production is not available and this gap has always been utilized by the tobacco industry to create myths around the sector. This investigation was undertaken to fill this gap and examine the *bidi* producing sector by collecting information about it from all the *bidi* producing districts of the country. The findings are intended to contribute to informed policy making to curb the use of *bidi* along with cigarettes and other tobacco products.

1.1 Purpose of the investigation

The overall purpose of the investigation study is to map the *bidi* producing sector of the country. Specifically, the investigation aim: (first) to enumerate all the *bidi* factories in the country; (second) to make a reliable estimate of the number of direct and indirect workers associated with the *bidi* factories; and (third) to examine the conditions of employment in the *bidi* factories vis-à-vis wage earning, working condition, child labor and other related labor standard issues.

The study was conducted throughout the country in all the *bidi* producing regions.

1.2 Methodology

Collection of data from all districts of the country was done over three months: from December 2011 to February 2012. The main sources of data were the local correspondents of different news agencies working in the 64 districts. At the first stage, two correspondents from each district provided information regarding existence of *bidi* factories in the district (i.e. whether there was any *bidi* factory in the district during the data collection period). Thus, 128 correspondents informed the research team about the existence of *bidi* factories in the respective districts. Collection of information from two persons in each district helped cross checking of data in case of any discrepancy between the two. It was found that out of 64 districts, 31 had *bidi* factories.

The second stage of data collection was done by the local correspondents of media houses from those 31 districts. A data collection format was used by the local correspondents to send the required data to the research team based in Dhaka. This set of data constituted the main findings of the mapping. The correspondents were asked to collect data on: name of *bidi* produced; number of sticks of *bidi* produced each month; number of workers; name and background of the owner; price of *bidi* produced and spread of the market.



At the third stage, field investigation was conducted on the basis of data collected at the second stage. Considering the concentration of *bidi* factories and geographical representation, nine districts were selected for qualitative data collection on issues of wage, employment and health risks of the *bidi* workers. The nine districts were: Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Bogra, Sirajganj, Tangail, Jamalpur, Kushtia, Barisal and Jhalokathi. A total of 20 *bidi* factories and the associated communities were visited by the investigation team. Techniques of data collection at this stage included Focus Group Discussions with workers; case studies of individual workers; interviews of owners and managers; and observing the environment and activities inside the factories. Data were collected in detail on: wages earned by the workers; working condition; child labor; workload of the laborers; skills and productivity; the production process; health harms and other related issues.

While analyzing the data, some comparisons with the data available from the secondary sources were made. All such secondary sources are cited wherever used in the report. Apart from those having references of the sources, all other data presented in this report are generated from the investigation.

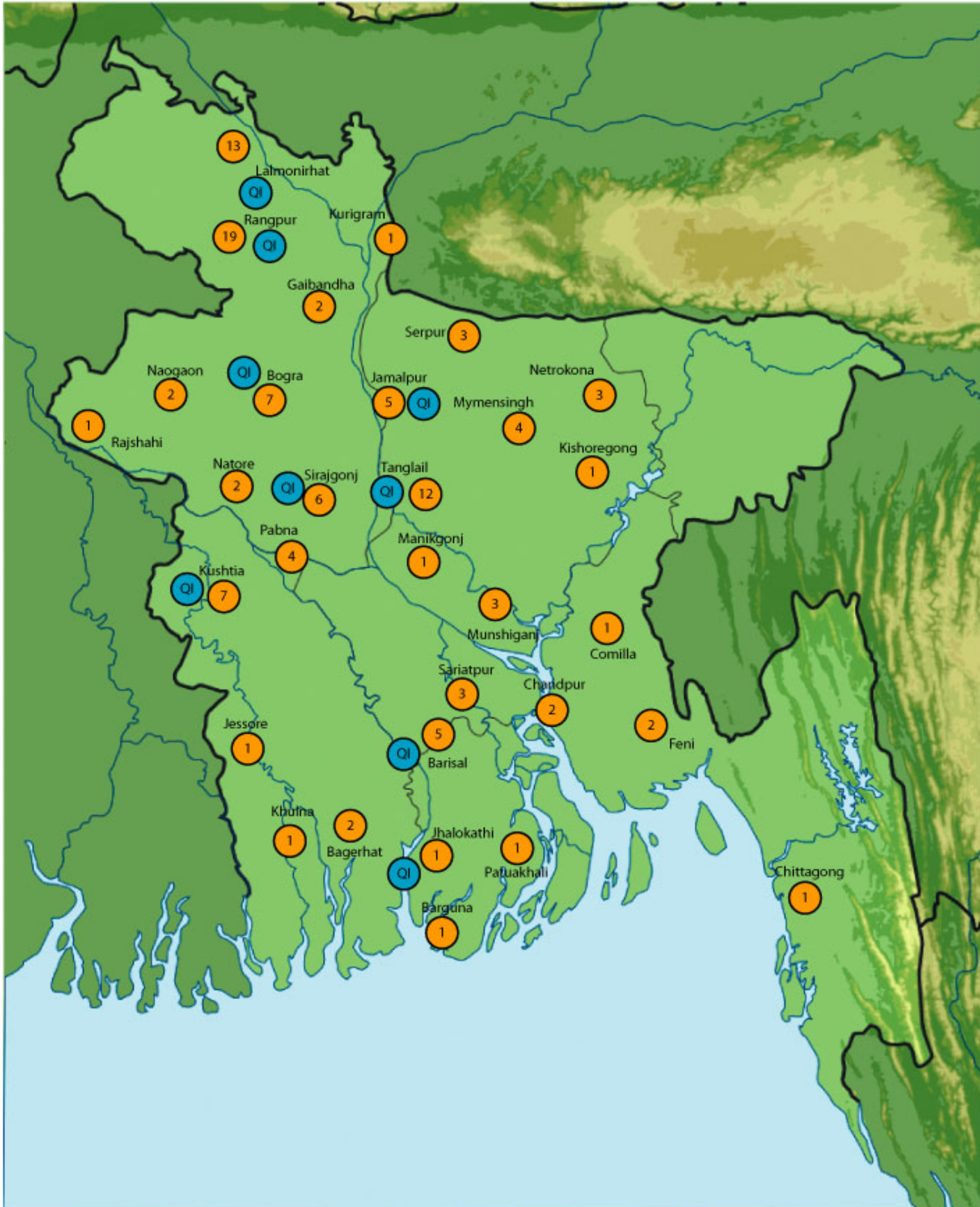
The investigation was conducted by journalists who were equipped with a standard data collection format and asked to collect consistent data from each factory.

A number of cross checking mechanisms were applied to make sure that the data were as accurate as possible. The mechanism included the following:

- ♦ At the first stage, information about presence of *bidi* factory was collected from two local journalists separately in each district. In case of any discrepancy between the two, both journalists were asked to investigate further and confirm the information they provided.
- ♦ The information collected in the second stage (e.g. the number of factories, number of sticks produced, and number of workers) were verified in the nine districts where qualitative investigation was conducted at the third stage.
- ♦ After entering the quantitative information in the database, calculations were done to check whether the numbers were realistic on the basis of qualitative information on productivity and skill of workers, number of working days in a week etc.



Map of Bangladesh: Spread of *Bidi* Factories and Study Locations



- Location of *bidi* factories. Number in the circle indicates number of factories in the district.
- QI Location of qualitative investigation.

2. Extent of *Bidi* Production in Bangladesh

Bidi factories are spread all over Bangladesh. However, some regions show greater concentration of factories than others (see map on the previous page). Only one of the seven divisions, i.e. Sylhet does not have any *bidi* factory. On the other hand, Rangpur Division shows highest concentration of *bidi* factories. **The investigation found 117 *bidi* factories located in 31 districts of the country.** Three of these 31 districts have 10 or more *bidi* factories. The 117 *bidi* factories produce 84 different brands of *bidis* sold across the country.



The local journalists collected information from each factory (asking the manager and cross-checking with the workers) the number of sticks produced in a month. **According to that information, these *bidi* factories together produce more than 4,052 million sticks of *bidis* per month implying an annual production of about 48,624 million sticks.**

The investigation found that all the *bidi* factories do not operate full time. In fact, most of the *bidi* factories operate 3-4 days a week. The calculations of the number of sticks have taken this aspect in consideration. The owners and managers of *bidi* factories claim that there was a time when factories would run 6 days a week.

Districts having *bidi* factories

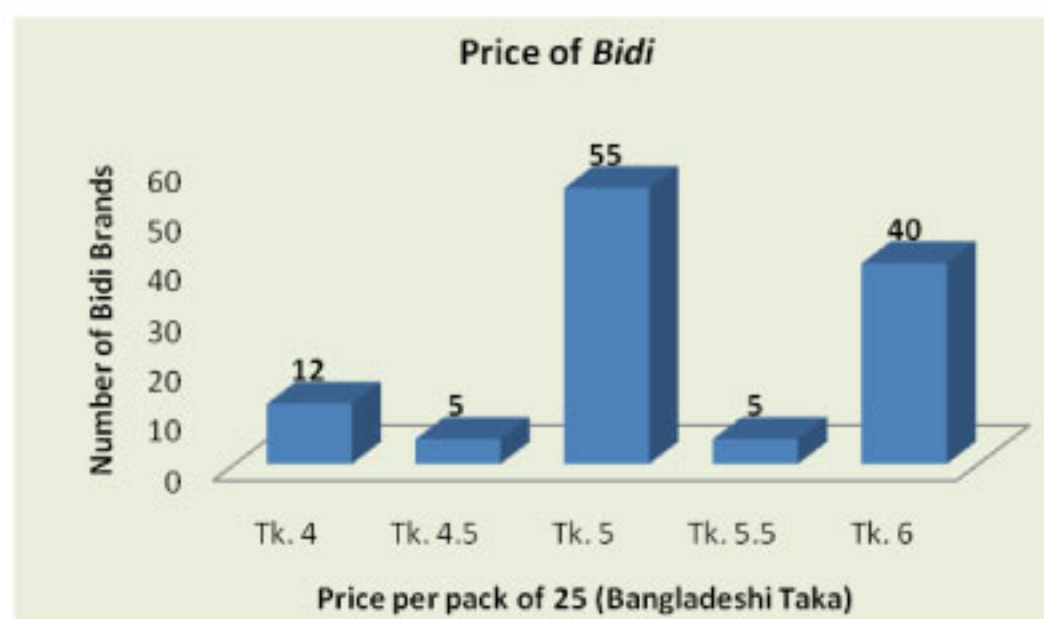
Lalmonirhat
Rangpur
Kurigram
Gaibandha
Bogra
Naogaon
Natore
Rajshahi
Pabna
Sirajganj
Tangail
Sherpur
Jamalpur
Netrokona
Mymensingh
Kishoreganj
Manikganj
Munshiganj
Shariatpur
Barisal
Jhalokathi
Barguna
Patuakhali
Bagerhat
Jessore
Khulna
Kushtia
Comilla
Chandpur
Feni
Chittagong

Table 2-A: *Bidi* Production in Bangladesh

Number of districts having <i>bidi</i> factories	31
Total number of <i>bidi</i> factories	117
Total number of <i>bidi</i> produced in a year (million sticks)	48,624
Number of <i>bidi</i> brands produced in the country	84

3. Prices and Marketing of Bidi

Bidi in Bangladesh is sold in a packet of 25 sticks and is one of the cheapest smoking products in the world. The price of a pack of 25 varies usually between 4 and 6 taka (1 USD = 83 taka). Almost half of the *bidi* brands are sold at 5 taka per pack and about one third are sold at 6 taka per pack. However, *bidis* are often sold in single sticks instead of packets. This means that 4 sticks of the most expensive *bidi* can be purchased with 1 taka only (about 1.2 cent).



The investigation found that marketing of most of the *bidi* factories are quite localized. About 40 percent of the *bidi* factories market their products only within their districts. Although the remaining 60 percent market outside the district, most of those do not go beyond the neighboring districts. Only a few of the famous *bidi* brands are sold almost nationwide.

Names of *Bidi* Produced in the Country

5 No. Bidi	Duani Bidi	Maya Bidi	Ratan Bidi
Abul Bidi	Entaz Bidi	Menaz Bidi	Ramna Bidi
Ajij Bidi	Full Bidi	Modhu Bidi	Sagor Bidi
Akij	Gafur Bidi	Mohini Bidi	Salam Bidi
Ali Bidi	Golden Bidi	Mohon Bidi	Samad Bidi
Amenda Bidi	Gopal Bidi	Mukut Bidi	Shadhin Bidi
Amin Bidi	Halim Bidi	Monmohon Bidi	Shah Ajij Bidi
Amjad Bidi	Haque Bidi	Montu Bidi	Shahi Bidi
Ansar Bidi	Harin Bidi	Mostan Bidi	Shahid Bidi
Asia Bidi	Jalil Bidi	Moti	Sharif Bidi
Bachchu Bidi	Jaman Bidi	Motor	Sathi Bidi
Badsha Bidi	Jamuna Bidi	Nabab Bidi	Sonali Bidi
Bak Bidi	Jobeda Bidi	Nasir Bidi	Sonar Chand Bidi
Banani Bidi	Joinal Bidi	Nishan Bidi	Sonar Bangla Bidi
Bangla Bidi	Kabir Bidi	Noor Bidi	Special Abul Bidi
Beauti Bidi	Kajal Bidi	Nurjahan Bidi	Subodh Bidi
Bengal Bidi	Karikar Bidi	Pakha Bidi	Suruj Bidi
Bhai Bhai Bidi	Kismat Bidi	Panga Bidi	Taj Bidi
Binod Bidi	Malek Bidi	Rahman Bidi	Tara Bidi
Bulu Bidi	Mamun Bidi	Raja Bidi	Ten Bidi
Didar Bidi	Master Bidi	Rashida Bidi	Uzzal Bidi



4. Working in Bidi Factories: Employment or Exploitation?

4.1 Number of workers

The investigation found that the total number of listed *bidi* workers in the country is about 65,000 which is 0.1% of the total workforce of the country. It is important to note that very few of these workers are employed full time since most of the factories do not operate six days a week. However, with each laborer listed with the factory usually a number of associate laborers work as well. Based on the information provided by the workers of different factories, is the investigation estimated that the total number of those associated workers is about 220,000. Thus, the total number of workers who depend on *bidi* production directly or indirectly does not exceed 0.3 million.

Even these numbers in fact overestimate the actual extent of employment in the *bidi* producing sector for two reasons. First, most of the direct workers are not employed full time as mentioned above. Second, the indirect laborers are not paid by the *bidi* factories. Instead, they get a part of the payment received by the direct laborers. In other words, the direct laborers pay the indirect laborers from their wage earning for helping them in rolling the sticks and other activities.





4.2 Workload and wages earned by *bidi* workers

The investigation found that most of the *bidi* workers have work on 3 or 4 days a week. At the end of each day, the workers are informed whether the factory will operate the next day or not. On the remaining days, the direct laborers of the *bidi* factories who work at the factory premises either do not work at all or work as day laborers or rickshaw pullers. Some of them work as agricultural laborers as well.

It was found in the investigation that work in *bidi* factories involves different types of activities. First the raw materials, i.e. tobacco leaves, are processed in a machine. This involves cutting of the leaves into smaller pieces of raw tobacco. The processed tobacco is then dried up and further crushed. Molasses and other chemicals are mixed with it and then dried again. A group of workers are engaged in these activities. Each worker is paid 100-150 taka (less than 2 dollars) per day for these activities. However, the majority of the workers are engaged after these activities to fill the empty sticks with the processed tobacco. The empty sticks are rolled and labeled by the associate workers (not listed with the factories but hired by the listed workers separately) at their households before they hand those over to the direct factory laborers. The direct laborers come to the factory with empty paper rolls and fill those with tobacco and seal the stick ends. Finally, 25 sticks are put into small polythene bag to make a pack of *bidi*. In this process, a skilled laborer can make 5,000 to 10,000 sticks. In some exceptional cases, one can make even 15,000 sticks a day. However, one person is usually not allowed to make more than 10,000 sticks.

The investigation found that wages are paid on the basis of quantity produced by a worker. One gets 21 to 30 taka (25-35 cents) per thousand sticks of *bidi*. However, the worker has to pay the associate workers who make the empty paper



rolls from this amount and thus the net payment is usually 14 to 23 taka (17-28 cents). Thus, even with the highest level of productivity, a *bidi* factory worker can earn 140 to 200 taka per day. This, however, represents the highest level of earning and the average falls below 100 taka. These estimations from the investigation are consistent with official statistics.



According to the Bangladesh

Bureau of Statistics (BBS 2011), the daily average wage rate (2009-10) of the *bidi* workers falls way behind the national average for all employment: 90 taka (1.1 dollar) for male against 133 for all employment, and 64 taka for female against 96 taka for all employment. In fact, the daily wage rate for tobacco workers (*bidi* and smokeless tobacco products) is the lowest among all employment opportunities available in Bangladesh.

The associate laborers are involved in making empty sticks of *bidis* prior to filling those with tobacco in the factory. The work of the associate laborers are usually done back home. Such workers generally include family members, relatives and neighbors of the direct factory workers. These indirect laborers

get only 6-7 taka per thousand empty sticks, which is paid by the direct laborers from their wage. Given the fact that about 3.5 associate workers are involved per direct worker (as estimated from the collected data), it is easily assessable how little the indirect workers receive as wages. It is estimated that an indirect worker earn only in the range of 9 taka to 20 taka per day, and thus the work of these 220,000 indirect *bidi* laborers can in no way be labeled as wage employment.

The above scenario regarding wages earned by the *bidi* workers gets even worse with the involvement of middlemen. In such cases, the

Table 4-A: Average Daily Nominal Wages of Male and Female Workers by Industry and Occupation, 2009-10

Name of Industry and Occupation	Daily Wage (Tk.)	
	Male	Female
Agriculture and Forestry	147.87	71.64
Mining and Quarrying	183.45	50
Food and Beverages	147.02	-
Edible Oil Mills	98.57	52.5
Rice/Wheat/Spice Mills	113.89	58.21
Bidi labor	90.33	63.89
Textiles	113.33	90
Readymade Garments	135.77	125
Jute Textiles	158.18	150
Manufacture of Wood and Products	152.54	130
Book Binding	146.17	100
Plastic Products	85.83	70
Metal, Machinery and Related Trades	136.45	120
Construction	176.62	105
Maintenance and Repair	166.08	-
Retail Trade	99.57	-
Hotels and Restaurants	105.57	58.57
Tea Stall	125.83	-
Transport, Godown and Communication	140.57	200
Social and community services	143.42	99.63
All Industry (Avg.)	133.12	96.03

Source: BBS (2011)



middlemen get the work from the factory and distribute among the direct workers and thus earning a commission from the wage of the *bidi* workers.

Like all other employments, wages for *bidi* workers have also increased over time as reported by workers involved in *bidi* production for long time. However, the rate of increase has been much lower compared to the national wage rate for all employments. While the wage index has almost tripled since 1990 (BBS 2010), the investigation found that the wage rate for *bidi* workers has not even doubled during this period. However, there are some variations across regions and factories in the rates and in some cases in the practices of payments.

The investigation revealed that the laborers have some other cost implications as well. A kerosene lamp is required for burning the polythene used as the inner side of *bidi* packet. The cost of that kerosene has to be managed by the laborer as the factory does not pay for that. Even the glue used for labeling *bidi* has to be bought by the laborers. Only in a few cases, the *bidi* factories bear these costs.

The sticks of *bidis* and the quantity of tobacco supplied to the laborers are returned with strict calculations. At times, there are shortfalls of tobacco as the *bidis* are filled manually and no measurement is done for that. The shortfall in the quantity of tobacco has to be paid by the laborer as well. Whatever extra tobacco is required to complete the 1,000 sticks is deducted from the wage of the laborers.

How can we run our families with this earning?

Khalil (40) works in a bidi factory of Jhalokathi district. This is a branch of the company; the main factory is in Barisal. While talking he was joined by his co-workers Asgar (52), Jalil (40), Chan Mia (65) and Quddus (35). All work in the same factory.

The factory runs three days a week. If a worker can produce even 6,000 bidis per day, which is normally the maximum here, s/he can earn no more than 90 taka a day. This means that the workers' weekly income is about 250 taka. Khalil asks, "How can we run the entire family with this income for the whole week?" He added with humor, "God runs the family. We don't know how we can describe the situation we are in!"

The workers inform, since they do not have work every day of the week, they have to borrow frequently each month. Thus all of them have got indebted more or less. When asked how they repay the debts, their answer was straight forward: borrowing from one and repaying another. And in some cases, they end up not repaying at all and the borrower just gives up. As Quddus explained, "Those who lend money also understand that we cannot repay. Then what can they do: either killing or leaving the debt. Ultimately, they leave it."

Discussions with *bidi* workers in several districts of the country provided details of their economic hardships. The workers acknowledge that the wage has increased to some extent over time, but that increase has been way less than the increase in the cost of living in the country. As a result, all the *bidi* workers are struggling in poverty. With only 3 or 4 days' work per week, the workers are not being able to come out of poverty. Thus, employment in the *bidi* factories years after years cannot bring about any visible improvement in their economic condition. They of course think that the owners continue to make profit. As one laborer in Barisal complained, "While the laborers remain hungry, the owners are building temples and donating money to mosques. They are getting richer in exchange of the sweat of our body. And it is we who are trapped in debts."



4.3 Health Harms of *Bidi*

The health harms of *bidi* have two aspects: harms to the *bidi* smokers and harms to the *bidi* workers. The health harms of smoking are well documented and do not need repetition in this report. Although there has been no estimation of deaths and illnesses caused by *bidi* only, it can be safely stated that a significant proportion of the annual tobacco-related deaths and disabilities, which are 57,000 and 382,000 respectively (Acharya 2007) are attributable to *bidi*.

On the other hand, the 65,000 laborers, and in many cases their family members are exposed to great health risks associated to their work in the *bidi* factories. The investigators observed that the inside of the *bidi* factories are filled with dust of tobacco which is continuously being inhaled by the workers that include child workers and the children coming with their mothers. The laborers do not normally use even a mask for protection. As reported by the workers at different places, illnesses like cough, tuberculosis, chest pain, vomiting, headache, and waist pain are common among the *bidi* factory workers. They also feel that the *bidi* workers become weak and inactive after working in the *bidi* factory for years. As a result, they often cannot opt for other activities that require relatively heavier physical work.

Rashida (35) of Jamalpur says, "There is no other work as bad as this. We have to work holding our breath. Dusts enter from nose and mouth. We don't like to do this work. Yet we do it for poverty." A number of physicians working at hospitals near *bidi* factories confirmed that they get more *bidi* workers than other patients with respiratory diseases in particular. They even get child patients who accompany their parents to the *bidi* factories."



4.4 Child Labor in *Bidi* Factories

While visiting factories the investigators observed that women and children dominate in numbers among the *bidi* workers. The reasons for employing women and children seem to be two-fold, as explained by several workers, managers and people of the communities around *bidi* factories: (one) they are much cheaper as laborers and (two) they are less capable in mobilizing any organized protests against the factory owners for higher wages or better working environment.

Employing children under 14 in the *bidi* factories is not permitted under the current law of Bangladesh. The *bidi* factory owners also are aware of this, which is manifested in the notices visible outside the *bidi* factories saying that children under 14 are not allowed inside the factory. However, it is a totally different picture inside almost every *bidi* factory as the journalists observed and the picture shows.

Children of the poor families start going to the factories with parents at a very early age, in some case even 6 years. They mainly do the work of sealing the *bidi* ends with their soft hands. Investigation reveals that the factory owners prefer children for this work in particular since the finishing of *bidi* is better if done with softer hands. Most of these children do not go to school although schooling is free and primary education is compulsory for everyone in the country.

The investigators met a number of these children. One of them is Rubel, a boy of about 10 years. He works in a factory in Kushtia district. He studied up to the second grade of the primary school. But the hardship of his family pushed him to working in *bidi* factory leaving the school behind. His mother rears a goat. The little income from that plus whatever Rubel earns from *bidi* factory is all what they have as income. Rubel likes to study, but he cannot. He works in a quite busy factory that runs 6 days most of the weeks. There are thousands of children like Rubel who do not go to school for working in *bidi* factories.



5. The *Bidi* Business

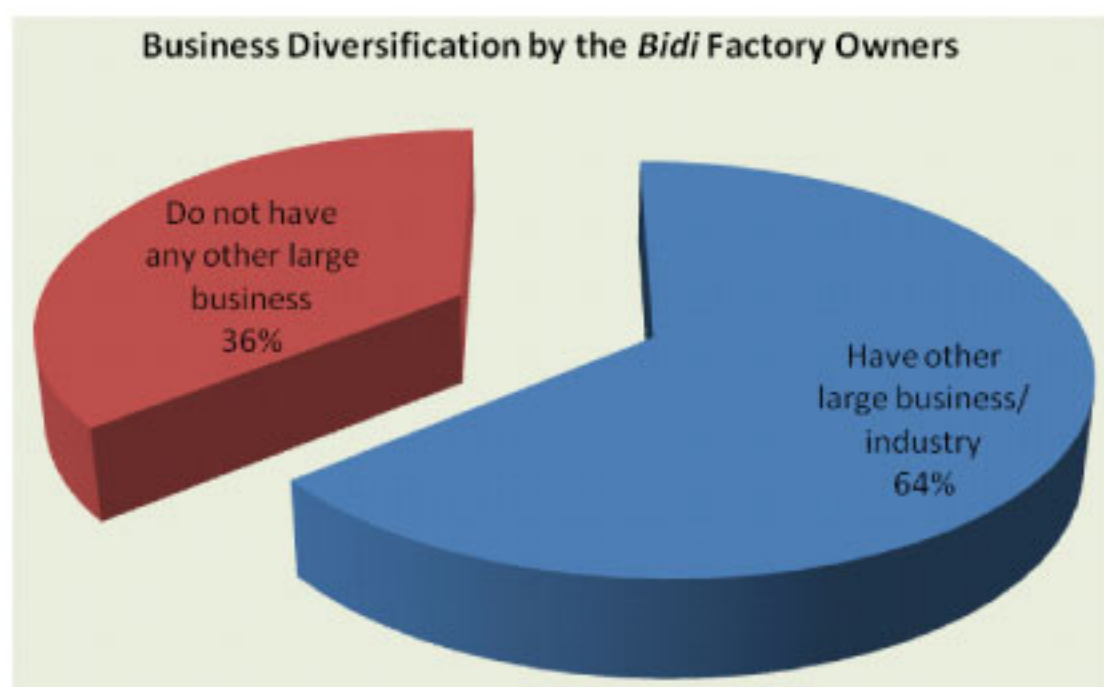
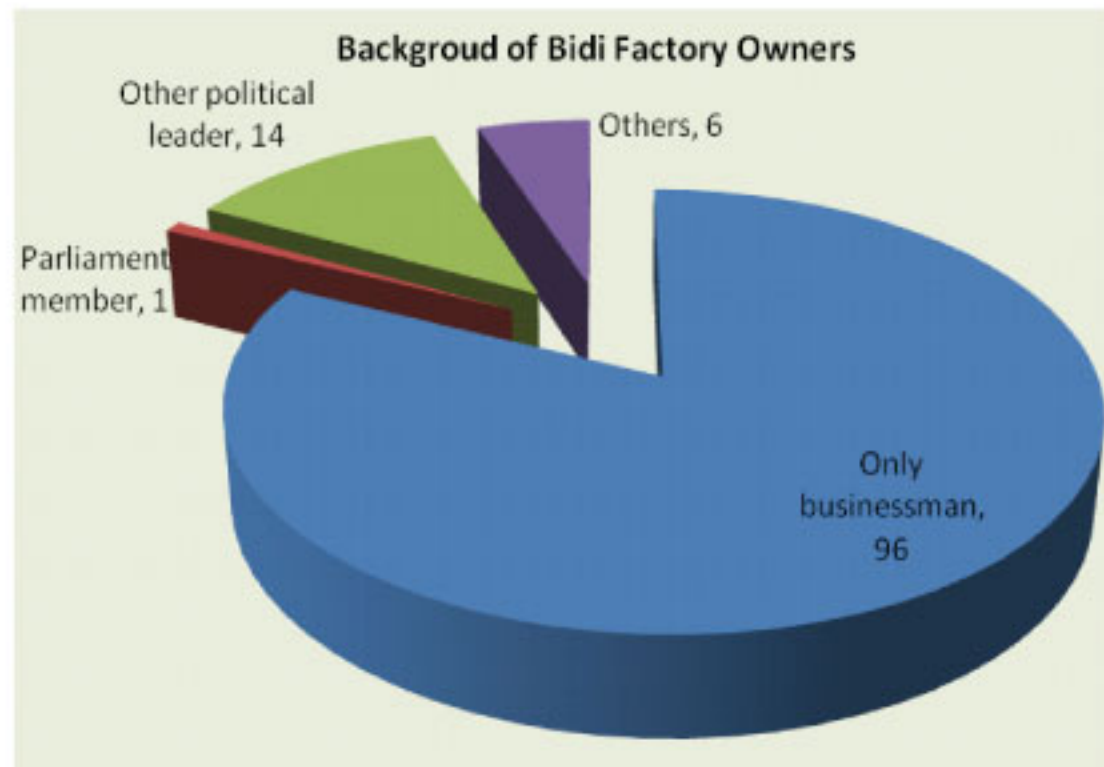
Although the *bidi* workers struggle to survive, *bidi* producing is still very profitable for the factory owners. A number of famous *bidi* factories in Bangladesh have now grown in financial strengths so much that they have been able to diversify their businesses with many different industries.

Most of the *bidi* factory owners are known as businessmen only; but they have strong political and/or personal ties, particularly with the local members of parliaments (MPs). One owner is a current MP and a few more are former MPs who will compete in the coming parliamentary election. These people are included in the category of political

leaders as shown in the chart. Although these figures do not manifest a lot of direct political influence of the factory owners, the nexus is implied mainly in the financial contributions that these owners make to local politics, particularly during parliamentary elections. The facts that most of the factory owners are noted businessmen of the respective districts and that they support the locals members of parliament particularly during elections were highlighted at a number of discussions with workers, factory

managers and local people during the investigation. It is this political influence of the *bidi* factory owners that resist any tobacco control measures to be effectively imposed on the *bidi* sector.

The financial strengths of the *bidi* factory owners are enormous as they diversified their businesses in a big way when the *bidi* sales were expanding fast and profits were high. The journalists found through the factory managers, owners and local people that two thirds of the owners have other large industry or business. In most cases, the enormous *bidi* profits led to most of these diversifications. These financial strengths give the factory owners the capability of exerting political pressure for resisting any tobacco control policy aimed at reducing use of *bidi* along with other tobacco products. However, this diversification also implies that any decay in *bidi* consumption will not hurt most of the factory owners as they have other business options already established. Instead they can invest additionally on other businesses creating more employment opportunities for the laborers who might lose their jobs in the *bidi* factories.



6. Conclusions

This report has tried to portray a picture of the *bidi* producing sector of Bangladesh. In doing so, the realities of the sector have been revealed much of which was not documented earlier. This revelation of the facts about the *bidi* producing sector may help in knowing the truth behind the myths that have been created over the last few years for protecting the sector from stringent tobacco control measures in the country.

It has become obvious from the findings presented in this report that the myths of millions of *bidi* workers and economic well being of the *bidi* workers have no real grounds. Instead, the extent of employment is negligible and the working condition is extremely exploitative. The tiny size of the *bidi* workforce implies that policy measures to curb the use of *bidi* will not hurt the livelihood of any significant portion of the population. Rather it is quite affordable for the government to arrange alternative livelihoods for this small number of workers or to bring them under the coverage of any social protection program.

Finally, considering the health harms of *bidi* smoking and working in *bidi* factories, strong tobacco control policies should include *bidi* along with cigarettes and all other tobacco products.

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