

## Today, all Solapur beedi workers' eyes on Supreme Court



Government wants the warnings to take up 85 per cent of a packet. The industry is up in arms — the beedi industry more so. People of Solapur district in Maharashtra aren't new to water scarcity. But this summer, besides the drought, there's a bigger source of despair for more than 1 lakh households in the district. The beedi factories, which employ nearly 70,000 registered workers, and many more working without cards —most of them women, and most of them also the primary earning members of their families — had downed shutters for entire April.

The results have been tragic. At Godutai Parulekar Nagar in Solapur city, home to hundreds of beedi workers, two women have committed suicide. Eight other suicide bids were thwarted.

The 15 factories in the district, which together roll out nearly 4 crore beedis each day — approximately 6.5 per cent of the country's total production — reopened April 31, but the workers' fate lies undecided. For now, all eyes are on the Apex Court, which, Wednesday, is slated to hear the industry's petition on the size of pictorial warnings on packets of tobacco products.

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Balasaheb Jagdale, spokesperson for Solapur Beedi Udyog Sangh, says the industry will take a decision on another round of closure based on the apex court's decision. "We know our employees are mainly women, who primarily work from home. But this demand (pictorial warning size) is not practical for us," Jagdale says.

A prime source of livelihood for nearly 125 years in Solapur district, the beedi industry, has never seen a month-long closure.

At Godutai Parulekar Nagar, Shriyasha Awar (14) knows that all too well. Her mother, Padma Awar, was a beedi factory worker with a work card. Unable to run the family of six after her factory closed, she took a loan from a self-help group. When she couldn't repay it, she committed suicide.

Storing water in every possible container at home, and taking over responsibilities of looking after her ailing grandparents and father, who works off and on, Shriyasha says, "Neighbours are helping us with our meals for now, but for how long?"

Former Solapur city MLA Narsayya Adam of the CPI(M), who has taken the issue to Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, says Maharashtra has nearly 3 lakh beedi workers, and the country nearly 80 lakh. Of them, almost 90 per cent are women. "If there's another round of closure it would mean... more grave consequences," he says.

So why are beedi manufacturers up in arms? "It would mean the women will have to roll another paper on the beedi roll," Balasaheb Jagdale says. Sunil Kshatriya, a working committee member of All-India Beedi Industry Federation, explains that with the little margin available, they cannot afford it. "For cigarettes manufactured in factories, it is fine. But for beedis, where it is all done manually, it's practically not possible."

Local MLA Praniti Shinde of the [Congress](#), who has given a memorandum to the Centre, says: "The government should find an alternative profession for them."

For Nagmani Ganta, that, too, sounds like a dream. "Nobody wants to keep us for any other work. We are illiterate and have spent half of our lives rolling beedis. There's no road ahead."