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## Beedi units stop work

ALAMGIR HOSSAIN

**Dhulian, Nov. 22:** The currency crisis in the aftermath of the demonetisation drive has halted production in seven *beedi* factories in Murshidabad, affecting the livelihood of over 1 lakh people.

*Beedi* labourers are paid on a no work-no-pay basis.

The general secretary of the Aurangabad Bidi Merchants' Association, Rajkumar Jain, said: "There are 48 *beedi*-manufacturing units in Murshidabad. Of them, seven have stopped production over the past three or four days because of shortage of currency notes. If this trend continues, more factories will have to stop production."

Factories give contracts to villagers, both men and women, to roll *beedis*. On an average, a worker gets Rs 126 for rolling 1,000 *beedis*. The *beedis* are then processed and packaged in the factories. Half of the *beedi*-makers in Murshidabad are women.

*Beedi* factory owners said production had stopped because of two reasons. First, *beedi* dealers are not being able to collect stocks because of lack of currency notes. Second, *beedi* manufacturers are not in a position to pay weekly wages to the labourers. Such payments are made every Friday.

Srikanta Saha, the owner of Ashok Bidi Company that has two units in Raghunathganj and Aurangabad, said he stopped production on Saturday.

"On Friday, I paid nearly Rs 20 lakh to around 25,000 workers in old Rs 500 and Rs 100 notes. I am not in a position to pay my workers their wages again the coming Friday. The wholesalers have stopped buying *beedis* as they don't have enough cash," Saha said.

The minister of state for labour, Zakir Hossain, who owns Shiv Bidi Manufacturing Pvt Ltd in Aurangabad, warned of an increase in "anti-social activities" if the workers lose their

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livelihood.

"Murshidabad is known for its *beedi* industry. The demonetisation drive of the Narendra Modi government has created serious problems for the industry. I have kept my factory running but I don't know what I will do in the next few days."

Hossain said nearly 15 lakh people were involved in the *beedi* industry in Murshidabad. "There are 10 lakh beedi workers in Murshidabad, and five lakh in Malda and Birbhum. If they lose their employment, they might indulge in anti-social activities."

He added: "They might start earning money by making bombs and improvised guns. If there is a spurt in anti-social activities in Murshidabad in the wake of the halt in *beedi* production, the Modi government will have to take the blame for it. I have brought the problem to the notice of the chief minister."

Bomb-making and manufacturing of pipe guns are common in Murshidabad.

Most *beedi* workers said the wages they received last Friday included the scrapped Rs 500 notes. They said a section of local shop-keepers were giving provisions worth Rs 420 for every Rs 500 note.

Sultana Bibi, 22, a worker at Pataka Bidi Manufacturing Pvt Ltd, said: "I received Rs 1,200 as my weekly wage on Friday and got two Rs 500 notes. When I went to buy provisions, the shop-keeper gave me goods worth Rs 420. I don't have time to go to the bank as I would lose out on a day's wage."

Jahanara Bewa, 52, a worker at Ashok Bidi Company that has stopped production, said: "I have a son and four daughters. My son Usman has started working as a labourer and we are getting one meal a day. If the factory does not restart production soon, we will be in severe crisis."

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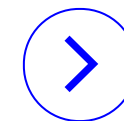
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