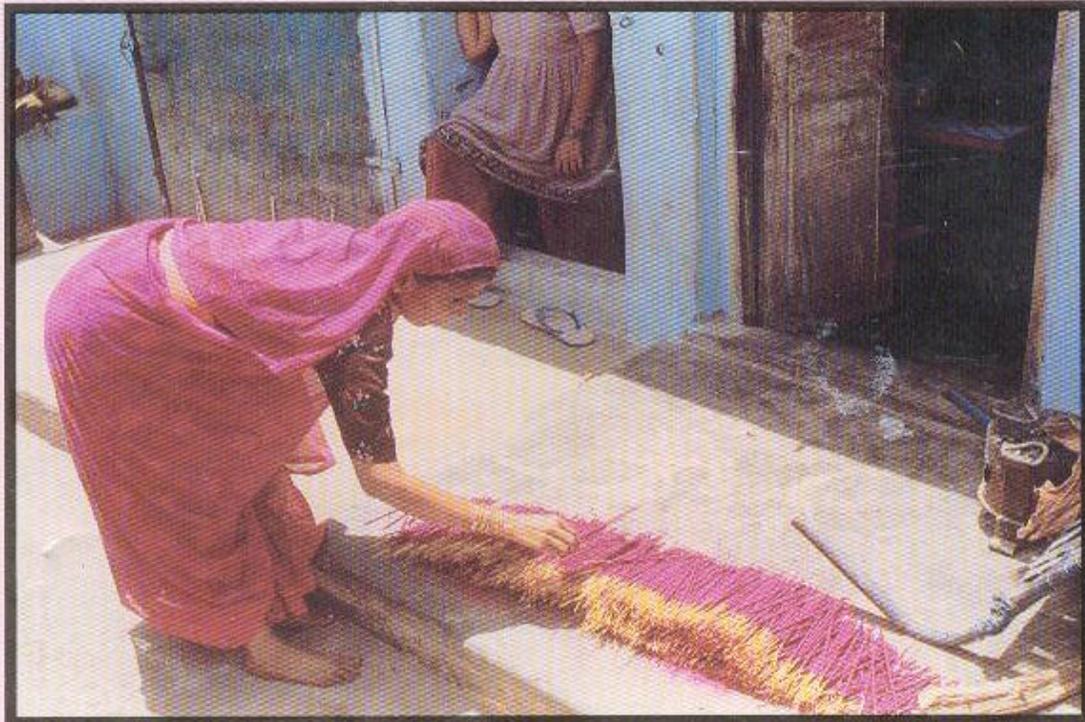


The Fragrance of Hard Work : Women Incense Stick Rollers of Gujarat



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Introduction

There is traditional relationship between prayers, rituals and agarbattis (incense sticks). In almost all the religions of the world, there is a special place and importance for agarbatti. It is used in temples, mosques and churches. It is used at the tombs of holy people, prayer meetings or other religious ceremonies and also in homes. Yet, no one knows who makes these agarbattis. How are they made? How much time does it take? What are the living and working conditions of the people who make them?

Ahmedabad's Agarbatti Makers

The city of Ahmedabad used to be known as a textile city with the textile mills employing over 150,000 workers. But during the past two decades, these mills started closing down and 40 % of Ahmedabad's workforce became unemployed. Many families turned towards the agarbatti industry to look for employment. Thus, unemployed families or those who wanted to supplement their otherwise meagre incomes joined this industry; those involved in agarbatti making range from a 6-year-old child to a 60 year old grandma. There are about 20,000 agarbatti rollers in Ahmedabad city. About 70 % of these are homebased workers. Particularly in the areas of Bapunagar, Odhav, Rakhial, Amraiwadi, Meghaninagar and Naroda, Agarbatti rolling is the main occupation of almost every house. In the Bapunagar area of Ahmedabad, there is hardly a single house where this work is not the main income source.

Sushilaben of Ramraja Nagar was studying I n the second standard when she started rolling agarbattis. From twelve in the afternoon to five in the evening she used to go to school. And before and after school hours, she rolled agarbattis.

The Manufacturing Process of Agarbattis

The production of agarbatti passes through three main stages:

1. Wholesale contractors buy the raw material. Then they give the sticks and chemicals for rolling, to the workers.
2. Workers roll the agarbattis, dry them and return them to the contractors.
3. Contractors package the finished incense sticks at the factory.
The main ingredients used in making an agarbatti are coal dust, bamboo sticks and scent essence.

There are three possible types of employer-employee relationships in the agarbatti manufacturing sector:

1. Agarbatti workers sit at the factory and work.
2. Traders / contractors give the raw materials directly to the workers to produce the agarbatti at their homes.
3. The trader gives the raw materials to the contractor who in turn gives it to the workers to be rolled at home.

The workers are given the raw materials, which include fine flour, coal dust, bamboo sticks and brown chemical powder, to make agarbattis. These raw materials are mixed

together and a dough is prepared using either oil or water. This dough is then kneaded. It has to be kept wrapped in a plastic bag so that it does not get dry. One cannot roll an agarbatti if the dough is not sufficiently sticky. A bit of dough is then rolled on to each stick. Agarbatti rolling is usually done on a standing wooden board outside the house, in a verandah or on the road. The rolled sticks are then spread on a cot or on the ground to dry. After drying, bundles of 200 are prepared and given to the traders or the contractors.

After this, the scenting process is done either at home or at the factory. During the scenting process, the sticks are dipped into a mixture made of one part fragrance and two parts oil. Then they are kept vertically to dry. After that they are packaged in gelatin paper and / or boxes and sold in the market through traders and agents.

Home-based Workers

Even though there are a few agarbatti factories, most agarbatti rolling work is done at home on a piece rate basis in Ahmedabad. These workers usually live in slum areas, in mud houses, with one or two small rooms. Their living space is also their workplace and is used to roll agarbattis. Since the space is very small, congested and dark with bad ventilation, they find it very difficult to roll and dry the agarbattis. In times of violence and riots in the city, their houses get damaged and their raw materials and finished goods also get destroyed.

The trader gives a card every month to the homebased workers, on which the number of agarbattis rolled everyday is recorded. The name of the worker is written on the card, but the trader's name is not written. There is no proof of an employer-employee relationship. The trader is owned finished goods of agarbattis of exactly the same weight as the raw material he had given to the worker. The money is paid to the worker on a piece rate for a thousand sticks. If the weight of finished goods is less or the quality not so good, he reduce the money to be paid to the worker, based on his own discretion. Rarely can a worker argue or protest against this because she will find it difficult to get any work the next day.

Factory Workers

Agarbatti rolling is also done in small sheds (factories) where there is very little ventilation. These 'factories' are usually housed in dilapidated, suffocating environment. In such illventilated sheds, small children, adults and young boys and girls all work from eight in the morning to seven at night. Out of all these workers, there are only one or two who are permanent employees. The rest are usually piece rate workers. The severely cramped working conditions, the flying sawdust and strong scent also damages the workers' health.

Income / Wages

The homebased agarbatti rollers get wages on a piece rate basis. About 25 years back, the rate for 1,000 agarbattis was 40 to 50 paise. This rate increased only after every five years. Since the workers organised themselves through SEWA, the rates have increased every year. The wages have gone up from Rs. 1.25 to Rs. 5.50 in six years. The rates usually increase around Diwali; after a negotiation conducted by SEWA organisers. At the time of

Diwali* , the owner/contractor gives a bonus to his workers, according to his own wish. Sometimes he gives utensils instead of cash. Sometimes he does not give any bonus for two Diwalis in a row and then grants an increase of 50 Paise in the rates. If we look at the wages of the past 10 years from 1989 to 1999, we can track the small, incremental wage increases per 1,000 incense sticks rolled:

Year	Rate (Rs.)
1988-89	1.25 to 1.50
1990-91	1.60 to 2.00
1992-93	2.00 to 2.25
1994-95	2.50 to 3.50
1996-97	3.50 to 4.00
1998-99	4.00 to 5.00

The Gujarat Government has not declared any minimum wage for agarbatti workers.

Women and Children are More Active in Agarbatti Rolling:

As the textile industry in Ahmedabad started closing down, more and more families of workers became unemployed and the children and women of these families were forced to become the wage earners. Many of them joined the agarbatti rolling industry.

As agarbatti rolling work is easily available and there is a great need for earning income, parents stop the schooling of their children and engage them in this work. There is a large workforce in this industry, between the age of 6 and 16. There are many reasons behind employing children. Children are faster than older people. They can be easily cheated in counting the agarbattis. They are easier to control. Besides, there is no special training required in rolling an agarbatti, so children learn this work very quickly. Thirty percent of all agarbatti workers are below 15 years of age in Ahmedabad.

The Stories of Agarbatti Rolling Women in their Own Words:

Hajrabbi is a resident of Bapunagar. Her husband became unemployed as the mill where he worked closed down. For Hajrabibi, a mother of three daughters and one son, her agarbatti rolling work was the only support. She is not interested in sending her children to school. She says, "Children go to school and spend 4-5 hours there. Instead, if they work, we get some income."

15 year old Rukmini has been rolling agarbattis all day long for the past five years. Her father is an auto rickshaw driver. Her large family consists of five sisters and two brothers who are wholly dependant on the income from rickshaw driving and

* Diwali : Annual festival of lights

her agarbatti rolling. When ten year old Rukmini was withdrawn from school, she had this question for her parents :

“Why am I not sent to school, when my brothers are sent to School?” The parents had replied, “First earn, and then talk about education.”

“I, prabhaben Tulsibhai live in Ramrajya Nagar. I am 45 years old have studied upto the second standard. I got married at the age of 17. I have three sons and three daughters. After my husband was diagnosed with having T.B., I started stitching clothes and bags. But the income was not good so I started learning this work from my neighbour. I used to get Rs. 1.10 per thousand agarbattis. My two daughters and three sons make agarbattis after their school hours. My eldest daughter goes to a trader’s shed to make agarbattis from 8 in the morning to 7 in the evening. I wake up at 5 in the morning, complete the household chores, involving cooking, washing clothes and utensils by 9 in the morning. From 10 in the morning to 8 in the evening I roll agarbattis At 7, my daughter returns from the factory and cooks food. At that time, I spread the agarbattis for drying. Then my younger son prepares them in bundles of 200. After the children go to sleep, I finish the household work (utensils) and go to sleep at 11 at night. I have been doing this work for the past 12 years. At the end of the day, I feel pain in my back, knees, hands, shoulders and abdomen. If the raw material is of poor quality, we also bruise our palms. This is my daily life.”

Shantaben Thakore of Rakhial has been doing agarbatti work for the past 15 years. Shantaben says, “After my marriage, my husband was working in a mill but as the mills closed down, he took up work in a factory. Most of our income was spent by him drinking alcohol. As it became difficult to support a family of two sons and two daughters, I started doing agarbatti work. Earlier we used to get Rs. 2.50 per thousand agarbattis, today we get Rs. 4.50.

The owners give us flour, bundles of sticks and the brown powder. We prepare dough from the raw materials given, but since the powder is very fine, it spreads in the air. From one kilogram of dough, we can make 2,000 agarbattis. All five members of my family start working at 8 in the morning, until 4 in the evening and we produce 5 to 6 thousand in a day. The owner checks the exact weight of the finished agarbattis against the raw material that he had given and calculates our wage on a per piece basis. If the weight is less, money is deducted at the rate of Rs. 20 for one kilogram from our due wages. Our wages are given every month. He gives us a card in which details regarding the raw material and ready product is noted down. Sometimes we get a bonus in the form of small gifts at the time of Diwali.

Due to sitting the whole day, we feel pain in our waist, hands, shoulders and abdomen. Sometimes our hands get bruised. The black powder goes into our nose, ears and throat. Our clothes turn black so we have to use more soap.

If one or two of us ask for an increase in wages, the owner says, “stop working”. There are many of us in this industry. There is a lot of hard labour in agarbatti work and the remuneration is very less, but what can we do? We have to do this to earn our livelihood.”

Occupational Health Problems

An agarbatti worker has to bend down and work on a wooden board for 8 to 10 hours a day in order to roll 5,000 agarbattis. This kind of hard labour leads to spinal pain, abdominal pain and pain in the hands and legs. The fine dust enters the nostrils and in the long term can damage the respiratory system and eyes. One feels suffocated due to the wooden dust and strong scenting process. Also, due to the constant friction occurring during the rolling process, the palms get bruised and the skin gets damaged.

During a workshop on occupational health held jointly by the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) and Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1997, issues regarding agarbatti workers' health, their workplace environment, working methods etc. were discussed. The Director of NIOH drew attention to three cases reported to their Poison Information Centre in 1996. She said, "The kidneys of two patients were destroyed. They were working in agarbatti packing. We were not able to save them. We could barely save a third patient. The adhesive used to stick P.V.C. paper in agarbatti packing is very harmful. There is a poisonous substance called Etholin in this adhesive. It is to be taken out in a bowl and applied with the hands. If only two spoonfuls are taken orally, a person may die. This poison enters the body through breathing and the skin and damages the kidneys, liver, brain and reproductive system. Some alternative method should be devised immediately."

In 1988, SEWA conducted a study on the health of 150 women agarbatti rollers. The main findings were:

- 88 % of the women were married. Out of these, 44 % of the women had 3 to 4 children.
- 37 % women were illiterate. 23 % of the women had studied up to the 7th standard and 19 % had studies beyond the 8th standard.
- 49 % women worked for 8 to 10 hours a day. Their husbands were casual labourers whose income was between Rs. 300 and 400/- per month.
- 78 % women suffered from pain in their hands and legs and 74 % suffered from backache.

SEWA began organising agarbatti workers in 1988. A large scale survey of 825 agarbatti workers was undertaken by SEWA in 1996. The survey found :

- ◆ The husbands of 50 % women were unemployed and 14 % women's husbands were doing casual labor or work in a factory.
- ◆ 94 % women work for 8 hours.
- ◆ 93 % women use a 3"x2" space in their house to roll agarbattis and 97 % women use 3"x 5" space in their house to dry the agarbattis.
- ◆ 92 % women complained of backache, pain in their hands and legs and abdominal pain, due to this work, 8 % women also suffered from headache and throat problems.
- ◆ 47 % women had to spend Rs. 50 to Rs. 100/- per month on their health / medicines.
- ◆ 100 % women got no social security benefits from any welfare schemes. 77 % women had a card in which details regarding raw material issued and finished product submitted was entered; only 3 % of workers received a bonus.

SEWA's Struggle for Minimum Wages and Social Security

1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A study on the occupational health hazards of agarbatti workers.
1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First price rise in piece rate of agarbattis. • Formation of agarbatti trade committee. • Workers education classes initiated.
1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A contractor had retrenched 40 agarbatti workers for giving an interview in a magazine. They were reinstated.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEWA gave information regarding agarbatti workers to the Delhi Welfare Board to obtain a Welfare Scheme for them.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A programme on Agarbatti Workers was telecast on national television.
1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEWA prepared a Welfare Scheme for Agarbatti Workers and submitted it to the government. • Representation before the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee to cover agarbatti workers under minimum wages legislation. • Representation before the Labour Commissioner to cover agarbatti workers under minimum wages.
1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaign to get legal protection for agarbatti workers. • Beginning of a signature campaign of the workers, after passing a resolution in SEWA for minimum wages and welfare schemes. • As a part of the campaign, a demand for an increase in wages was raised. 500 workers were stopped from working. Resettlement through negotiation with the owners.
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convention of 1,000 women with the Labour Secretary, for minimum wages and a welfare scheme. • The owners/contractors stopped the workers from attending the convention, resulting in a direct conflict between SEWA and agarbatti traders/contractors. • After the negotiations, SEWA was given assurance regarding the security of work, wage increase, permanent stoppage of work/resumption of work. • The Owners Association, during a meeting at SEWA, gave assurance of equal wages in all the areas. • A survey was conducted by SEWA, regarding the financial conditions of agarbatti workers. • Formation of a Wage Increase Committee by the Trade Committee. • Agarbatti workers again portrayed in a national television programme.
1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Convention of agarbatti workers was held with the Labour Minister as the chief guest and a memorandum regarding agarbatti workers was given to him.
1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation to the Ministry of Labour to declare a piece rate minimum wage for agarbatti work. • A meeting and negotiations between the president of the Agarbatti Owner Association of Gujarat including Ahmedabad City, was held, in which wage increase and insurance were discussed.

Recommendations

SEWA's agarbatti worker's campaign has identified the following changes, which would improve the conditions of agarbatti workers:

1. The agarbatti workers of Gujarat should be covered under a piece-rate Minimum Wage Legislation, which should be implemented throughout the State.
2. A census of agarbatti workers should be carried out and each worker should be given an identity card because they are neither registered nor counted anywhere at present.
3. They should be covered by the Provident Fund Act. They should get privilege leave and a bonus every year.
4. They should get the facilities of social security schemes like insurance, maternity benefit, scholarship, housing, crèches, dispensaries etc.
5. Like the government's Beedi Workers' Welfare Fund, a cess should be charged on agarbatti and from that cess fund, workers' welfare schemes should be provided. The management of this fund should be administered by a Tripartite Board involving workers' representations.
6. Since their home is their work place, they should be provided with loans and subsidies to improve their housing.
7. They should be provided with better working tools including gloves, aprons and masks.
8. There should be special educational schemes to reduce child labour within the agarbatti industry.

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SELF EMPLOYED WOMAN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a Trade union of poor, self-employed women workers, registered in 1972, SEWA members earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits, like workers in the organised sector. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in the unorganised sector. However, work is not counted and hence remains invisible.

SEWA's main goals are to organise women workers for full employment and self reliance, through the twin strategies of struggle and development

SEWA is both an organisation and a movement. The SEWA movement is a confluence of three movements: the labour movement, the co-operative movement and the women's movement. Most importantly, SEWA is a movement that is owned and developed by self employed women so that they may become stronger, more visible and gain due recognition for their tremendous economic and social contributions to the economy and society at large.

SEWA ACADEMY

The SEWA Academy was created in 1991 with the objective of providing the self employed women members of SEWA with training facilities of an international standard in order to build their capacities in the areas of skill development, education and leadership. The Academy is the focal point for co-ordinating and implementing SEWA's activities in member education, teaching, research, planning communication, advocacy and evaluation. SEWA Academy's training programs are tailor made to meet the needs of SEWA members and empower them through increased knowledge and self-confidence.

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