Last year, Khatoon, 13, dropped out of school to earn for her poor family. She now rolls bidis 12 to 14 hours a day, making ₹120. She places tobacco flakes inside a tendu leaf and cuts it into a small rectangular piece. Her tender fingers roll it down and tie it with a thread. She then tucks one end with a small iron rod, and a bidi is ready. Her daily output is 1,000 sticks. Khatoon has developed back pain, working seated for several hours together. To avoid taking a break, she skips meals and water.

This is the story of almost every young girl in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, India’s largest bidi-rolling centre. It was in the 1990s that the industry here moved from factories to homes, opening the door to child labour.

A survey carried out in 1999 by the office of the Deputy Labour Commissioner estimated three lakh to four lakh bidi workers in Murshidabad, a majority in the Jangipur sub-division, where 90% are women and children working from home.

Things have not changed much. Mothers teach their daughters how to roll a bidi from the age of five. Before they attain puberty, the girls have mastered the work. Most bidi workers admit their children to school, but a majority of the girls drop out after primary school to supplement their family’s meagre income. With constant exposure to tobacco, the girls contract tuberculosis and asthma and complain of frequent chest pain, cough, giddiness, eye infections and headaches. There is only one hospital in the district, which gives free treatment to workers with bidi cards.

Children in India 2012: A Statistical Appraisal reported that the pan, bidi or cigarette sectors employ most (21% or 2.66 million) of India’s 12.66 million child workers (Census 2001) in the age group of five to 14. No official estimates of child labour in the bidi industry are available at present. Unofficial estimates by trade unions and various researchers say children make up 25% to 40% of the bidi industry workforce. They estimate 1.5 lakh to 3 lakh child bidi workers in the Jangipur sub-division alone.

(Masood Sarwer is a freelance photographer based in Delhi)