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**Steel Furniture Industry Workers
A Case Study on Working Conditions of Steel Furniture Industries
at Bholanathpara, Siliguri**

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Department of Economics
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Preface

In 2008, something remarkable has happened in human history of habitats – of the total population of the world, the majority started living in urban areas – and the millennium can be regarded as the ‘urban’ one. India is also not an exception of the global trend. The census of 2011 revealed the higher rate of growth of urban population for the first time in the post-independence period along with the emergence of more than 2500 new towns. And West Bengal topped the list with more than 200 new towns.

Researches show that one of the major reason for the emergence of new urban areas is the occupational shift from agriculture. In the macro-level, the direction of shift is towards the tertiary sector, the secondary sector remaining almost stagnant over time. But in the micro-level, there is a splurge of small industries requiring smaller amounts of capital and semi-skilled labourforce. They generally produce consumption goods for the local market. This study is about steel furniture industry located around Siliguri.

Siliguri, a sleepy hamlet in colonial period, was famous as a transport junction for the toy-train (The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway) to Darjeeling. But it started to expand after independence, mainly because of refugee influx. Then, its strategic position – as the point of entry to north-eastern part of the country (popularly known as the Chicken’s Neck) and almost at the confluence of three international borders of Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan – led to unprecedented expansion of the small town to the largest city in North Bengal. This study is an attempt to understand the contribution of a small industrial sector in the growth of the city.

Gopal Biswas, a research scholar at CUES and originally from the city, had done this study with extensive primary survey in the area, backing up with data and researches from secondary sources.

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Abstract

Urbanisation is a common phenomena and one of the most debating aspect. Half of the world population are living in urban areas. According to the world urban prospects 2014, 53.6% of world's total population lives in urban areas and its growing with time. The trend of urbanisation in India is dynamic in nature. The unprecedented growth of urban centres can be observed throughout the country. About 377 million Indians which is comprising 31.14% of the country's population lived in urban areas (Census 2011). Those urban centres which are growing without any major industries are highly dependent on MSME sectors. The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) are playing big role to sustain urban centres in India, both in terms of creation of job and also in terms of products. Steel furniture industry is one of such MSMEs that are growing in urban areas. The population of Siliguri is growing many folds since last few decades. At present total population of Siliguri city is 513264 and total population of Siliguri Urban Agglomeration is 705,579. There are no major industry in this area, therefore micro and small scale enterprises emerged. Thakurtala small scale industries near Bholanathapara are one of the new emerged MSME clusters in this area. This cluster highly dominated by steel furniture industries. In this discussion paper, the aim was to observe and analyse various aspects of the workers. The study revealed the working condition of the steel furniture workers and also revealed various problems that are facing by the workers.

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Abbreviations

AFS: air force station

BSF: border security force

CT: Census Town

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

INR: Indian Rupees

MSE: Micro Small Enterprises

MSME: Micro Small Medium Enterprises

NAS: National Accounts Statistics

NSSO: National Sample Survey Office

Rs. Rupees

SSB: Sima Suraksha Bal

UA: Urban Agglomeration

Introduction

The present age is the age of urbanisation but at the same time it is the most controversial one because of different reasons. Half of the world population are living in urban areas. According to the world urban prospects 2014, 53.6% of world's total population lives in urban areas and its growing with time. Urban centres are the centre for attraction for various aspects. More and more people are moving from rural areas to towns, towns to cities and there is a continuous flow of population towards urban areas.

The trend of urbanisation in India is dynamic in nature. The unprecedented growth of urban centres can be observed throughout the country. In India, 377 million people (which is about 31.14% of the country's population) lives in urban areas (Census 2011). The urban population is projected to grow to about 600 million (40%) by 2031 and 850 million (50%) by 2051¹. The rise of existing urban centres in India can be observed in different ways. There is a large number of new towns had emerged during the last decade (2001-2011), that contributed a significant speed to urbanization in India. Number of towns jumped from 5161 to 7933 between 2001 and 2011. The number of statutory towns² in India increased from 3,799 to 4,041 during 2001-2011 on the other hand number of census towns³ have increased from 1,362 to 3,892 during the decade. Such increase in census towns also depicts that many more cities are to be came in existence. The process of urbanisation is not even throughout the country. Among the states, with 1097 towns Tamil Nadu had the largest number of towns, among them 721 statutory towns and 376 census towns (Census 2011). On the other hand, in terms of size of urban population Maharashtra has topped with 50.8m urban population and followed by Uttar Pradesh (44.5m). According to Census 2011, the number of urban agglomerations with population of 1 lakh or more is 298. With the growth of urban population many others aspects also needed to be grow. Among them job opportunity, health services and other services are notable. Rise in population in urban centres also creates huge demands for necessary products. Previously there was a trend of growing urban centres based on some certain criteria. But since late 20th century, urban centres are growing based on various reasons, such as educational centre, transport, tertiary sectors etc. Not every urban centre

¹Following prediction of urban population in India is According to Handbook of Urban Statistics 2016, Ministry Of Urban Development, Government Of India

²Statutory Towns: All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee etc.

³Census Towns: All other places satisfying the following three criteria simultaneously.

- i) A minimum population of 5,000;
- ii) At least 75 per cent of male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits;
- iii) A density of population of at least 400 per sq. km. (1,000 per sq. mile)

grows with big industries. To sustain growing demands in urban areas all sectors including MSME sectors need to act properly. Those urban centres which are growing without any major industries are highly dependent on MSME sectors. The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) are playing big role to sustain urban centres in India, both in terms of creation of job and also in terms of products.

MSME sectors in India

Since independence, the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector has acquired a prominent place in socio economic development of the country. In fact, the MSME sector has been playing crucial roles in the industrial growth of the country. In past few years the MSME sectors has been witnessing a higher growth rate compared to other industries in India. The productivity of this sector is relatively low compared to medium and large enterprises. Thus their contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) is comparatively small but not insignificant. However, the labour-intensive production of the MSME sectors means that the livelihood of the majority of non-agricultural workers depends on it. The MSME sector also helps in industrialization of rural & backward areas. Therefore it plays a crucial role for reducing regional imbalances, assuring more equitable distribution of national income and wealth. According to 4th census of MSMEs, Uttar Pradesh occupies top position followed by Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. On the other hand Uttar Pradesh ranks highest employment generation followed by West Bengal. In West Bengal nearly 2.52 million people are employed in MSME sectors. West Bengal is also considered one of the most anticipated industrial locations for setting industries.

Today the MSME Sector consisting of more than 36 million units and provides employment to over 80 million persons. The Sector produces more than 6,000 products that contribute about 8% to GDP. Beside these it also contribute to 45% of the total manufacturing output and 40% of the exports from the country. The MSME sector has huge potential to spread the industrial growth to the backward areas across the country. The sector can be a major partner in the process of inclusive growth of India (MSME at a glance, 2016). As per The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MSMED) Act 2006⁴, on the

⁴ MSMED Act 2006 provides first ever legal framework for recognition of concept of enterprise. Enterprises are broadly categorised in Manufacturing and service sectors. These categories are further classified into Micro, small and medium enterprise.

basis of investment for enterprises were classified as micro, small and medium enterprises. The classification is given below in table 1.

Table 1: Different categories of manufacturing sector on the basis of investment

| Manufacturing Sector | |
|---|--|
| Enterprise | Investment in Plant & Machinery (Rs.) |
| Micro | Not exceeding Rs. 25 lakh |
| Small | More than Rs. 25 lakh but not exceeding Rs. 5 crore |
| Medium | More than Rs. 5 crore but not exceeding Rs. 10 crore |
| Source: MSMED Act 2006, Government of India | |

Another parallel classification by National Accounts Statistics (NAS) can be found in that sub-divides manufacturing sector in to two broad categories, organised and unorganised sector.

"Generally, all enterprises which are either registered or come under the purview of any one of the acts like the Indian Factories Act 1948, Mines and Minerals (Regulation and Development) Act, 1957, the Company Law, the Central/State Sales Tax Acts, the Shops and Establishment Acts of the State governments, are defined as part of the organised sector. Also included are all government companies, departmental enterprises and public sector corporations.....Similarly, forestry, irrigation works, plantations, recognised educational institutions, and hospitals which are registered as non-profit making bodies are also classified as organised sector... all unincorporated enterprises and household industries which are not regulated by any acts of the above mentioned type and which do not maintain any annual reports presenting the profit and the loss and balance sheets are classified as unorganised" (National Accounts Statistics - NAS 1980: pp 69).

Indian furniture industry

This sector works in different materials and skill sets. Some of them purely craft based whereas few are completely working on contemporary designs and trends. Indian furniture industry as a whole is very large and about 80% unorganized. In global furniture

market India known for its majestic crafted wooden furniture. At present around 65 % of furniture industries are wooden furniture industry and 25% metal based furniture industry, rest of them (10%) plastic furniture and furnishing item. Most of the furniture industries are unorganised thus its contribution towards GDP is very less. But the furniture industry employs near about 6 million people that includes furniture manufacturing, furniture retailing and furnishing. Thus furniture industries are not insignificant. Indian furniture market is very large and the open market policy gives it more opportunity to grow. Furniture market in India was estimated at INR 720 billion in 2014-15 and is forecast to reach INR 1,510 billion by 2019-20 (Madras Consultancy Group, 2016).

With the growth of Indian economy, the market of furniture is expanding. Demand for furniture in India also rising. Growth in demand was at 12% annual rate over 2007-2012, and in 2013 it was increased at a rate of 15% (KPMG analysis). Bigger market pushes furniture industries towards organised segment. Nowadays customer gives more preference towards high-end products with low maintenance. Besides these quickly installable products are getting more attraction. Furniture with Simple, contemporary designs are preferred over heavy, complex traditional furniture. The modern Consumer also looks for customisation options in their furniture. It can be observed that Preference is tilting for readymade, branded furniture.

The furniture sectors workforce is near about 6 million, but not equally distributed throughout the country. Concentration of furniture workers can be found in different states of India. The NSSO 68th round data reveals that 50% of total employment in furniture manufacturing is concentrated in five states of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar and Gujarat.

Steel Furniture Industry

Steel furniture industry is totally based in urban areas, mostly located near to urban centres or inside it. In modern urban society steel furniture is becoming more popular than the conventional wooden furniture. Steel furniture industries are growing very fast and most of them are unorganised. Most of the steel furniture enterprises are owned and run by individuals. Such enterprises employ a small number of labourers. There are many reasons for rapid growth of steel furniture sectors, *firstly* furniture like chairs, sofas, tables and beds are made of fabricated steel comes in quite attractive models with different designs. Elegant appearance, durability and innovative designs, steel furniture is becoming popular in modern

society. *Second* reason is durability of steel furniture. Steel furniture needs low maintenance, light weight compared to the wooden furniture. Wooden furniture after some period is worn out due to defects in wood quality and normal wear and tear. *Third*, Steel furniture industry provides various types of readymade furniture as well as furniture with customisation options, which attract modern urban consumers. *Fourth*, as urban centres are growing rapidly, different sectors like education, hospital, hotel and office started to concentrate near or inside of the urban centre. These sectors are creating more demands and also make the market versatile. *Fifth*, Steel furniture comes with various price ranges. People from every economic condition can find steel furniture affordable.

Urbanisation in North Bengal

At present urbanisation is one of the most debated issues around the world. According to census 2011, 31.87% (29 million) of total population of West Bengal is urban population, which is slightly above of the national percentage (31.14%). The broader view seems to be a very good level of urbanisation can be seen in West Bengal. But regionally, urbanisation of west Bengal reflects a different view. Most of the major urban centres of West Bengal are located to the southern part of the state, i.e. South Bengal. In terms of area north Bengal covers about 25% of total area of the state. Total number of urban centres in North Bengal is 131, which is 14.41% of total urban centres in the state. There are only 23 statutory towns and 108 census towns (Census 2011). If we calculate the difference between North Bengal and South Bengal in terms of average number of number of urban centres. The view of uneven of urbanisation can be seen. Average number of urban centres (statutory + census towns) is 47.84 per district, where average in south Bengal is 59.84. On the other hand the average number of urban centres in north Bengal is 21.83, which is very less compared.

The urbanisation of north Bengal is highly dominated by Siliguri. Siliguri Municipal Corporation area accounts for 16% of total population of North Bengal. On the other hand, 22% of total urban population of North Bengal lives in Siliguri Urban Agglomeration which includes Binnaguri, Chakiabhita, Dabgram, Kalkut and Siliguri. The growth of Siliguri city is much higher compared to other town in North Bengal. Though towns like Kochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Maldah were in existence long before.

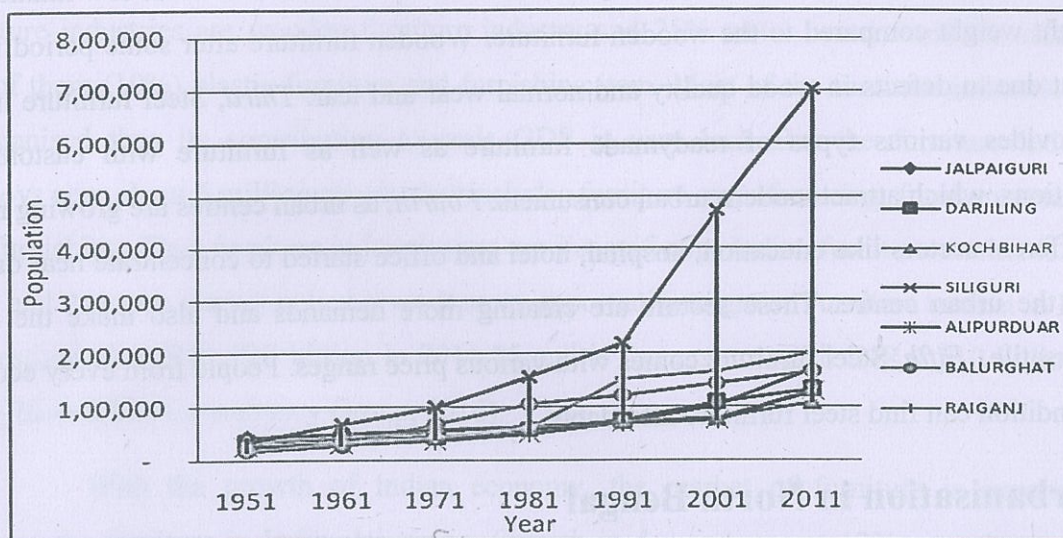


Figure 1: Trend of Urbanisation in North Bengal (1951 to 2011)

Siliguri - from 1880 to 2011

Siliguri is the most important and most urbanised city in North Bengal. It acts like a heart of north Bengal with its communication and connectivity system. The city is located at the foothills of the Himalayas by the side of River Mahananda. Siliguri situated at $26^{\circ}43'N$ latitude and $88^{\circ}26'E$ longitude and about 120Metre above sea level. Siliguri sub division is bounded by Kurseong on the north, Nepal on the west, Uttar Dinajpur, Bihar and Bangladesh on south and Jalpaiguri on the west.

On 23rd August, 1880, Siliguri Town station, the oldest station in Siliguri started by the British-India Government. It was served as terminus for the trains of Calcutta and the starting point of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway⁵ (A. Ghosh). In 1901, it was merely a village where population was approximately 700. From where, it became one of the most important city for North Eastern states and West Bengal. Siliguri got its sub divisional status in the year of 1907. According to census Data in 1931 Siliguri's population was 6067. At present total population of Siliguri city is 513264 and total population of Siliguri Urban Agglomeration is 705,579. Siliguri Urban Agglomeration is consists of Binnaguri (CT), Chakiabhita(CT), Dabgram P (CT), Kalkut P and Siliguri.

Before independence Siliguri was a sub-divisional town. The Siliguri Municipality was established in 1949. Siliguri Municipality had 30 wards under it. After the declaration of the Siliguri Municipal Corporation in 1994, 17 new wards were added to its

⁵ UNESCO World Heritage committee inscribed DHR as a World Heritage Site on 2nd December 1999. The DHR is popularly known as "Toy Train"

jurisdiction taking its total area to 41.9 sq. km. Siliguri Municipal Corporation falls in two districts, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri; 14 out of 47 wards of the SMC fall in the neighbouring Jalpaiguri district. From the above figure no 1, the jumps in urban population in the city can be observed. Sometimes it jumped more than double than the previous. In recent years the Siliguri have is witnessed a rapid expansion of its population. Siliguri is the most urbanised city in North Bengal and second most important city in West Bengal, having hosted the bulk of the immigrants. A Planning Commission document notes that the rapid increase in population of Siliguri is 'not the result of natural growth alone but because of significant migration' (institute of applied manpower research 2002:10). Diversified occupational pursuits and alternative ways of survival can be easily availed in Siliguri. As a result, people from adjacent districts and states migrate to Siliguri for permanent source of income and in search of common minimum livelihood.



Figure 2: Map of North Bengal

Why Siliguri is so important

Siliguri is the gateway of north-east Indian states as it connects north-east India with rest of India. Its geographical position, exactly between Bangladesh and Nepal made Siliguri very important urban centre of North Bengal. The nature of Siliguri is changing with growth and expansion. It became the commercial capital of North Bengal. Its service sectors

specially education, and health sectors growing rapidly and commercial activities getting more importance day by day. Siliguri's importance lies in its role as a commercial centre at the nodal point of East to West and North to South for connecting north eastern states with rest of the India. Through railways, Siliguri is communicated with almost all the prime urban centres of India. Countries like Nepal Bangladesh and Bhutan are very close from Siliguri and also well connected with road. The chicken neck position of Siliguri corridor also makes Siliguri more important in terms of defence. On which 50 million people of north eastern states depends. Siliguri has a massive military concentration in its surroundings. The North Bengal Frontier BSF headquartered in Kadamtala, one of the five frontier headquarters of SSB is also located in Siliguri. Eastern Air Command's two Air Force bases are located near to the city- the Hasimara AFS and Bagdogra AFS. The second largest military camp of Asia, Binnaguri, is not so far from Siliguri (A. Ghosh, 2016). By air, Siliguri connected to all major airports via Bagdogra air port. It is one of the most important airports in North Eastern India. Further more one of the Asian Highway⁶ roads, AH2⁷ which is connecting Nepal and Bangladesh via India, is running through Siliguri. Existence of Asian Highway will make the city more important in various aspects. For international trade and connectivity Siliguri will play a crucial role in near future. In terms of tourism Siliguri act as a nodal point. Darjeeling and Gantok is very much near to the city. Siliguri is getting more and importance as commercial sectors are also playing key role in this area.



Figure 3: Chicken Neck Position Of Siliguri Corridor (Source: Atig Ghosh)

⁶ A cooperative project among countries in Asia and Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), to improve the highway systems in Asia.

⁷ AH2: Asian Highway 2 will begin from Panitanki at Nepal border and crossing Bagdogra will reach Fulbari at Bangladesh border. (about 37.271km)

Economy of Siliguri

Siliguri is second most important city in west Bengal after Kolkata. It is also the commercial capital North Bengal. Primarily on the basis of tea industry of Darjeeling and Dooars, Siliguri have witnessed its growth. Since British era Siliguri was a terminal station for tea, transportation and to make communication with Kolkata. In north Bengal there were T-3 economic activities- Tea, Timber and Tourism. With development of road connectivity and partition of Bengal another 'T' came into existence as transport system. According to Atig Ghosh, "*The so-called four 'T's – tea, timber, tourism and transport – have for long been claimed to be the main businesses of Siliguri. While timber is languishing and tea has entered a complex career, a fifth 'T' has ominously reared its head in the area: trafficking.*" It is also important to understand its growing economic activities in different sectors. In terms of industrialisation, Siliguri have not seen any impressive growth over the decades. The combination of trans-border trade system and lack of industry Siliguri ultimately became a market town (Ghosh, 2016).

As there are no major industries in Siliguri, it has grown its strength and scope to encompass on MSMEs sectors. In such situation Siliguri's economic activities highly depended on its commercial activities and small scale enterprises. Headquarter of FOCIN is situated in Siliguri. FOCIN⁸ is the organisation that controls trade commerce and industries of north Bengal. As the population growing rapidly there are a continuous trend of growing in demand also found. One of the major growing demands found in terms of furniture and household accessories. To sustain such huge demand by only wooden furniture is near to the impossible. This is where steel furniture found its grip in this region.

Study area

The rapid growth of its population and commercial sectors, the city starts pushing its existing commercial and economic sectors to fulfil continuously growing demand. As there are no such big Industries, the MSME sector growing and strengthen its grip with the city. Steel furniture industries are one of those enterprises that got advantages for growing. If we can take a look to the outskirts of Siliguri city, patches of micro and small enterprises at different corner can be seen. There have been several patches of steel furniture industries that are located surroundings of the city.

⁸ FOCIN: Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of North Bengal

The study have done one of these patches, named as Thakurtala Small Scale Industry area located at Bholanathpara near Eastern Bypass side of Siliguri and bounded by Baikunthapure forest. Most of the furniture enterprises are small and locally known, but some well known furniture enterprises like Nilkamal, Max Furniture can be found in this area. The area is very suitable for setting up any kind of MSME industry because of many reasons.

Firstly, *Transport and Communication*, the area is about 800 metres from Eastern Bypass of Siliguri, which allows reaching any part of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri without any congestion. This bypass is very important for freight movement in Siliguri. Furniture that is produced in the area can be easily transported to the market.

Secondly *Market*, according to census 2011, total population of Siliguri UA is 705,579 and if the growth rate remains same then (+4.09%/year) then it will reach 1 million in next census. Therefore it's a large market for furniture industries of this region. The location of the patch of small scale steel furniture industries is about 1.5 km from the municipality area.

Thirdly *Demand*, the increase in population also leads to an increase in demand. At present people look for steel furniture rather than traditional wooden furniture, because of mainly durability as well as cost effectiveness. Nowadays steel furniture comes with various ranges of both price and designs. Low maintenance is another reason of growing demand for steel furniture. On the other hand, at present Siliguri is the educational, commercial and health related hub of north Bengal. Thus demands for hospital furniture, school furniture and institutional furniture are growing much higher than domestic furniture.

Forth *Availability of Worker*, as mentioned above Siliguri's population is growing very rapidly and also it is hosting a large number of immigrants. People from backward areas, different districts of North Bengal and from other states are migrated to the city in search of job opportunities and other basic facilities. Thus labourer for any kind of industry could easily be available. As these enterprises provide a job with consistency, workers from other work backgrounds are also attracted to steel furniture enterprises.

Fifth *Raw Materials*, fabricated metal sheets are the main raw material. Besides sheets, tubes, glasses, colour etc. essential materials for the steel furniture industry. In a city like Siliguri, these raw materials are easily available. Thus the steel furniture industry located on the outskirts of Siliguri.



Figure 4 : Study Area (Dot Shown East Of Siliguri)

Literature Review

There are many literatures can be found regarding small scale industries of different regions some of them about furniture industries. But there are no such literatures specifically about the steel furniture industries. Though the small scale industrial area is very new thus there is no recorded document available regarding this area.

Final report of Fourth All India Census of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) states that 60.22% of enterprises are operating in Rural Sector and rest of the enterprises in urban area. Total Number of Micro and Small Enterprises were estimated 198.74 lakh. Among them 52.58% were manufacturing enterprises, 6.19% were repairing and maintenance enterprises and 41.22% were service enterprises. In terms of number of enterprises Uttar Pradesh have highest number of MSME enterprises (11.24%) and West Bengal ranked second (10.47%) among the Indian states. In the MSME sectors on average per enterprise employment is 2.06 persons and employment per one lakh investment in fixed investment is 1.70 persons.

In Annual Report 2015-16 produced by Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India it was projected that in 2014-15 there will be approximately 51 million unites and the number of employment will reach 117 million. During 2012-13 only Manufacturing sectors under MSME alone contributed 7.04% to the GDP. Though the share in GDP is small but the number of employment that it provides is not insignificant.

In terms of wages, many workers of MSME sectors don't get minimum wage to sustain their livelihoods. Almost none of the workers are aware about the minimum wage act.

In many cases many MSME enterprises are also not aware of it. According to International Labour Organisation's *Labour Laws and Growth of Micro and Small Enterprises - India Country Report* found that "In Maharashtra, around half of the MSMEs (53 per cent) were not aware of the requirement to pay minimum wages. This behaviour was more widely observed among MSMEs working in the leather industry (99 per cent) and was almost non-existent among MSMEs in the automobile industry". Labour law is very crucial for the workers of any kind of industry. But there is a big difference about laws and reality. The above mentioned report concludes that most of the existing labour laws and business regulations were not perceived by the MSMEs. It also stated that there are avoidance strategies as well as a lack of proper awareness regarding both labour laws and business regulations.

According to the report Human Resource and Skill Requirements in the Furniture and Furnishing Sector, prepared by KPMG, in India demand for furniture surged at 12% annual growth during 2007-12 and in 2013 it increased at the rate of 15%. Nowadays customers are giving preference for readymade, branded furniture. High-end, low maintenance, quickly installable products, with customization options are very much liked by present customers. In Indian furniture market, Home furniture is the largest segment, accounting near about 65percent of sales.

A Design Awareness Program Report on some steel furniture industries of North 24 Parganas, west Bengal done by Kulveer Singh Bhati found that there was no proper platform for working. Workers were working on floor for marking cutting and welding. No protection for workers, their hands and other exposed body parts are exposed to sharp metal sheets. Lack of knowledge of using different machines causes various problems to the workers. During machine bending of metal sheets worker's odd postures creates extra pressure on body, also it can cause muscle problems. During welding, grinding and also painting Lack of protection gears like eye wear, gloves and mask, Exposed body parts while welding will lead toward various health related problems.

An Inter-District Analysis on Small Scale Industries of West Bengal, done by *K. Sen and S. Salim*, found that there exist regional variations among districts in West Bengal in case of MSME units, employment and investment. The particular complications face by the state is that lack of entree to global market, high cost of credit, problems of stuffing, planning and product display, inadequate infrastructure facilities etc.

Need for Study

Siliguri is one of the fastest growing urban centres in North Bengal with 7million plus UA population. Siliguri is the second most important city in West Bengal and the commercial capital of North Bengal. To continue its growth economic sectors have to play main role. As there are mainly MSME industries found. There for a large number of workforces depends on such enterprises. Demand for steel furniture is growing day by day as well as numbers of enterprises are also rising. Steel furniture industries are also taking place mainly in the fringe area of Siliguri. Thus the market is in huge competition. On the other hand, area of market also becoming large which includes districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Parts of North Dinajpur in West Bengal and Kisanganj of Bihar. As such enterprises playing an important role for growth of the city and also provides a huge number of employment. But early literature also suggested that there is lack of knowledge about labour laws and regulations. Workers are not getting proper safety accessories. It is very important and necessary to study about the working condition of the workers of these enterprises.

Objectives of Study

Markets for steel furniture are developing throughout the city. A huge number of labourers dedicated to these industries. The main objectives are mentioned below.

- To make a profile study on steel furniture workers.
- To observe and analyse their working conditions and problems related with their work.
- To understand owner-labourer relation as most of the enterprises are owned and run by individuals.

Methodology

Siliguri is the largest urban centre in North Bengal and its growing very fast. It is becoming one of the most important markets for any kind of industry. Steel furniture enterprises are concentrating in fringe area of Siliguri. The city acts both as the source of raw material and also a big market for steel furniture. The study area, Thakurtala small scale industrial area had 25 steel furniture enterprises at that time. It is a case study on workers of

steel furniture industries. A Questionnaire survey was conducted in the month of May of 2015.

These enterprises mainly have four sub-groups of workers Main mistri, welder, painter and helpers. Main mistri do marking, cutting and bending of the sheets. After that welders make a complete piece by welding and then grid uneven area. The painters paint the welded products and finish it with an elegant look. The helpers are mainly new comers, learning and helping other three workers. Each sub-group have their own jobs and different characteristics. Hence the survey was done by covering all the sub-groups. Though there were 25 enterprises, due to short span of time the survey was done on 10 enterprises. Primary data collected from field through questionnaire survey and were analysed as required for analysing various perspective of the study.

Workers of Steel Furniture Industries of Bholanathpara

Though MSME's contribution in GDP is very low but this sector provide a large number of employment. Steel furniture industries are highly dependent in large urban centres. These urban centres provide both the market and the source of raw materials. In Siliguri there are many such kind of steel furniture industry can be found. Thankurtala small scale industries located at Bholanathpara. Most of the enterprises are steel furniture industry.

Working Conditions

Thakurtala small scale industries are located at Bholanathpara near Eastern Bypass of Siliguri. A large number of people are working in this area. The study mainly focused the working conditions of the workers. Number of workers varies here from 6 to 40. A brief working profile has been done on the basis of primary data, collected by field survey.

Age Structure: Steel furniture industries are equipped with heavy machinery and the raw materials like sheet metal are also heavy. Heavy machines like the bending machine, drill press etc. needs strong hands and hard working worker. Thus it is obvious that majority of the workforce is dominated by the hardworking workforce i.e. 18-35years aged. From the primary survey it is found that the age of workers varies from 16 years to 60years. The workers with age between 18 to 35 years constitute maximum number, almost 80% of the total workforce. Only 15% workers are above 40 years. It is interesting but alarming to see that some of them were below 18years. Though such workers represent only 5% in the study but it is not ignorable. In depth interview also suggest that some of the workers started working at the age of 15. The choice of working at this age might not be easy but they had to work for surviving and sustaining their family.

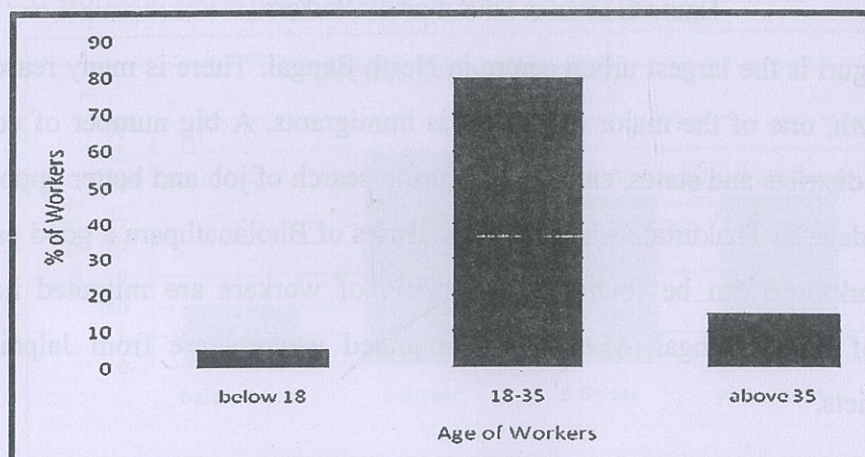


Figure 5: Age structure of the Workers

Education: In such enterprises highly educational qualified worker is impossible to find. On the basis of literacy, if workers sub-divided into two broad categories namely literate and illiterate. Then only 17.5% workers are illiterate and rest of them considered being literate. But the scenario is different from the generalised view. When the classification done on the basis of level of education. The reality of literacy of workers can be seen. 55% of total workers have studied up to 8th standard, 12.5% studied up to 10th and only 2.5% of workers have studied. Interesting fact is that rest 12.5% of worker are those who only can sign their name.

It is very interesting to see that in such MSME sectors where heavy machinery and electrical equipments are used. None of the workers have any kind of technical training. Due to this furniture production also gets affected. It is alarming that without any training it is very much prone to accident. It may cause severe injury to the workers.

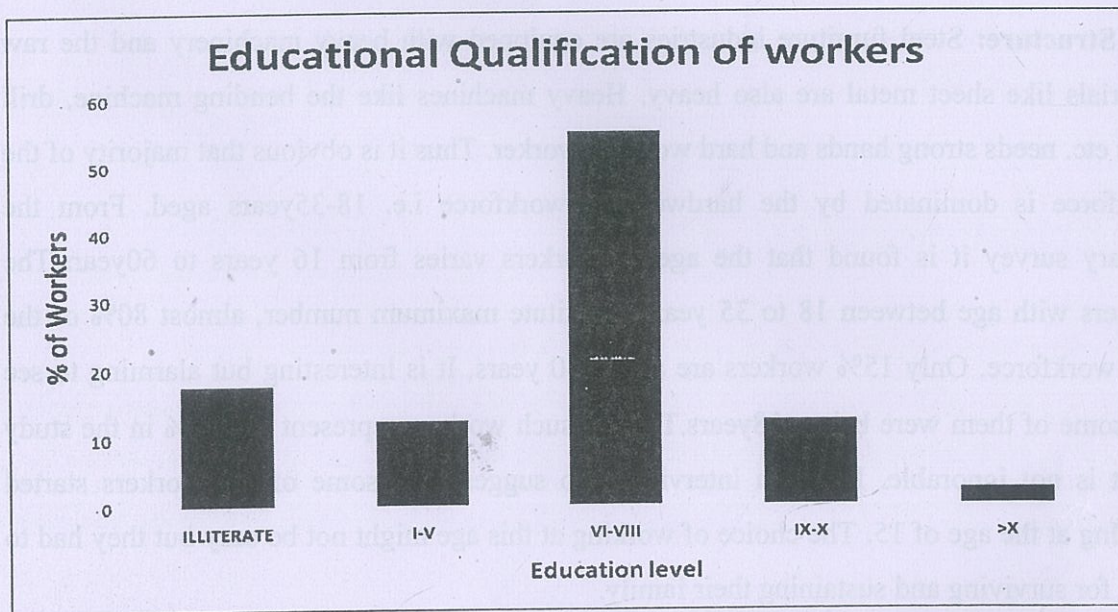


Figure 6: Level of Education of Workers

Migration: Siliguri is the largest urban centre in North Bengal. There is many reason for its population growth, one of the major reason for is immigrants. A big number of population from neighbour districts and states, came to Siliguri in search of job and better opportunities. As per primary data, in Thakurtala small scale industries of Bholanathpara a good proportion of migrated workforce can be found. Around 20% of workers are migrated here from different part of North Bengal. Most of the migrated workers are from Jalpaiguri and Kochbehar districts.

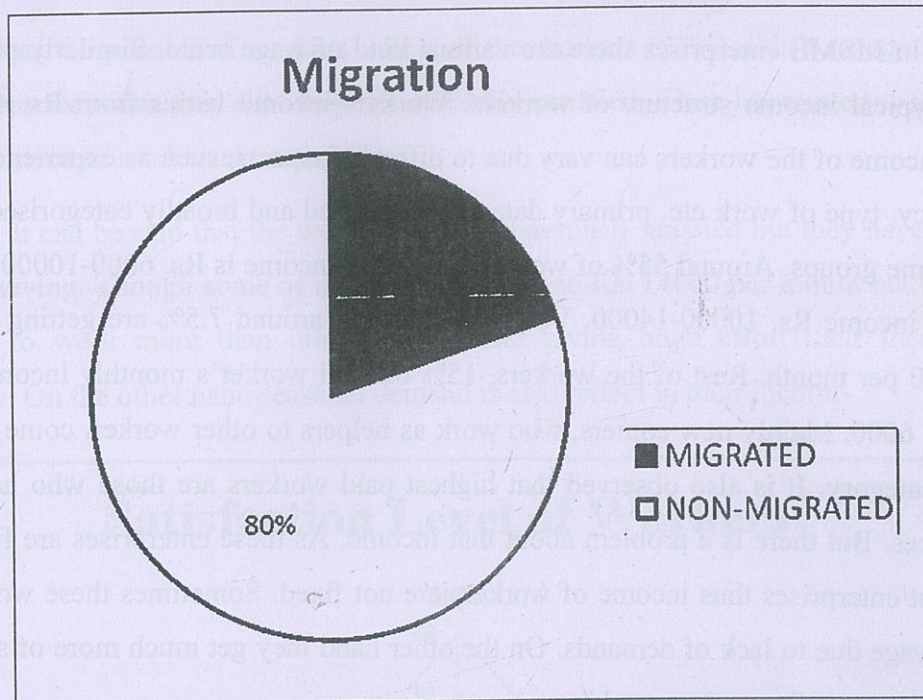


Figure7: Migration of the Workers

Work Experience: In steel furniture industries work experience makes big difference in production. Experience of a worker directly reflects on the production. A worker with experience of several years is good in the job compare to the new comer. Working experience can make a big difference in wage. It is observed that very few of the workers of these industries are stick in the same job. As per primary data analysis shows that around 27.5% of total workers are very experienced i.e. more than 6 years of experience. Another 27.5% workers have experience 3 to 6 years, 33% workers have experience of 1 to 3 years. But these 33% workers are still learning from other more experienced workers. Rest of the workers, around 10% are new comers. These new comers are working in these enterprises since 2-3months. New comers were working as helpers and they get lowest wage compared to other experienced workers. Experience directly reflects on income of workers.

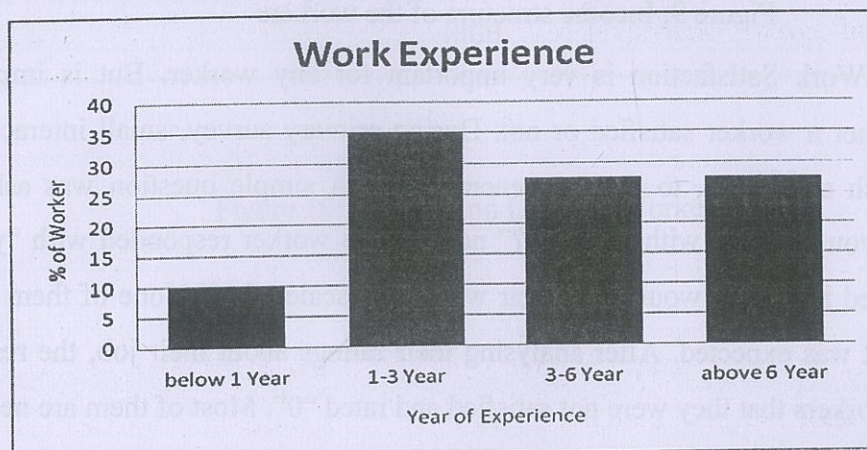


Figure 8: Experience of Workers of Steel Furniture Industries of Bholanathpara

Income: In MSME enterprises there are various kind of wage scale. Similarly primary data gives a typical income structure of workers. Workers income varies from Rs. 4000 to Rs. 15000. Income of the workers can vary due to different aspects, such as experience, working proficiency, type of work etc. primary data were analysed and broadly categorised them into four income groups. Around 55% of worker's monthly income is Rs. 6000-10000 and 22.5% worker's income Rs. 10000-14000. Very few workers, around 7.5% are getting paid above Rs. 14000 per month. Rest of the workers, 15% of total worker's monthly income does not cross Rs. 6000. Mainly new comers, who work as helpers to other worker, come under least income category. It is also observed that highest paid workers are those who have highest experiences. But there is a problem about that income. As these enterprises are fully market dependent enterprises thus income of workers are not fixed. Sometimes these workers don't get any wage due to lack of demands. On the other hand they get much more of said income but with the cost of over time working.

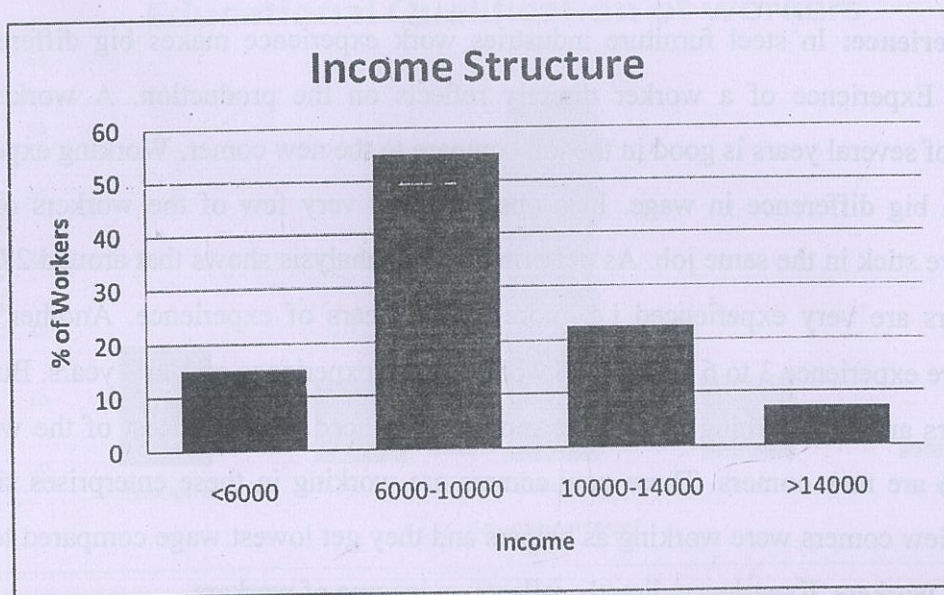


Figure 9: Income structure of the workers

Satisfaction: Work Satisfaction is very important for any worker. But is impossible to measure whether a worker satisfied or not. During primary survey, small interactions have done with each of worker, to draw a general view. A simple question was asked to the workers "are you satisfied with your job?" none of the worker responded with "yes". Then they were asked how they would rate their work on a scale of 10. None of them responded above 5 and it was expected. After analysing their ratings about their job, the result shows that 20% of workers that they were not satisfied and rated "0". Most of them are new recruits. 55% of total workers said also "no" but their rating was 1-3. After analysing they were

categorised as “low satisfied workers”. Rest of the workers (25%) didn’t responded as not satisfied. But they also said that they are not fully satisfied. They have rated 4-5 and they were categorised as moderately satisfied.

It can be said that the workers are not that much satisfied but they have to do the job for surviving. Though some of the workers get up to Rs. 14000 per month but to get this they have to work more than others. Thus after giving huge effort their income isn’t satisfactory. On the other hand seasonal demand is also reflect in their income.

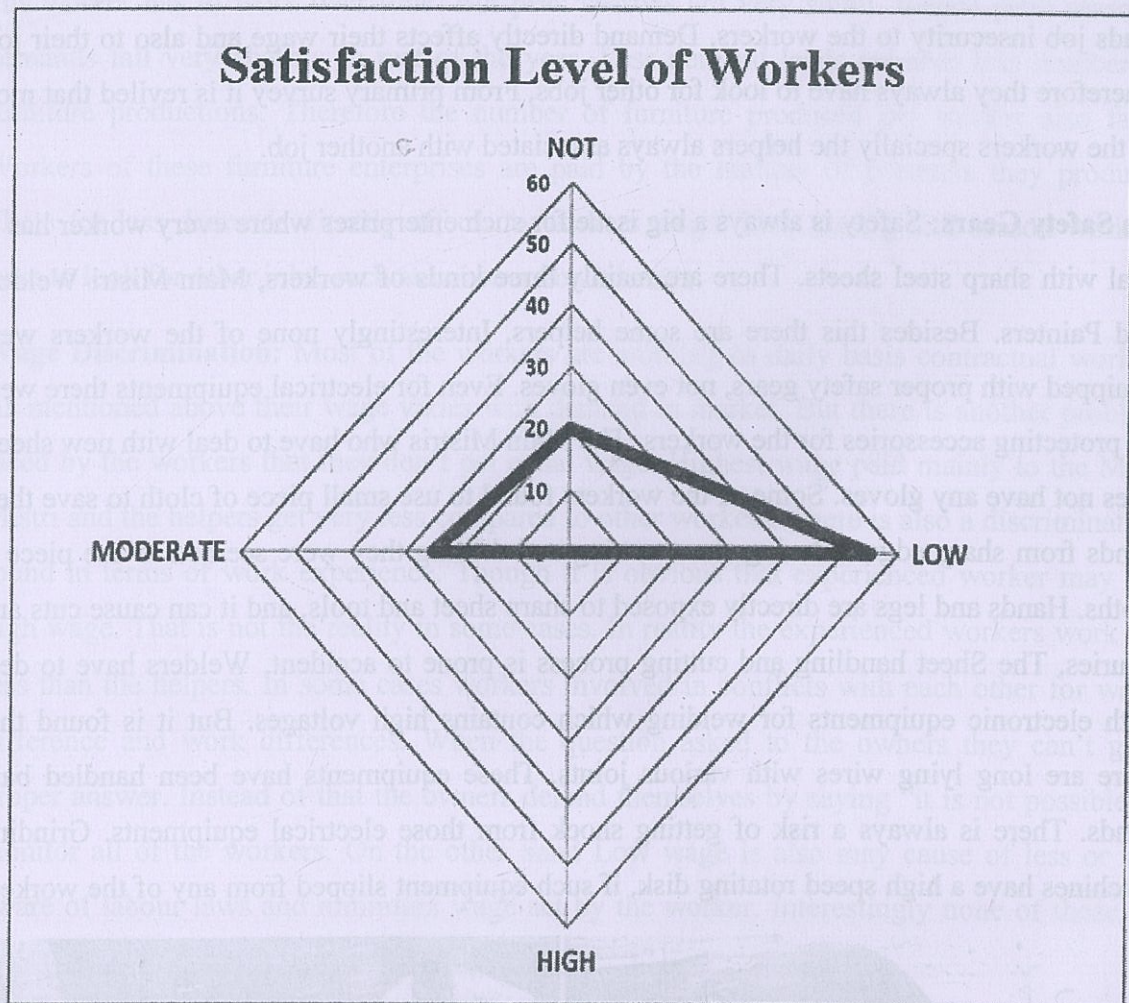


Figure 10: Satisfaction Level of Workers

Problem faced by the workers

Labours are facing various problems throughout the year. Sometimes the problems are faced due to availability of demands and fluctuation at market; sometimes they face health related problems. The major problems that are faced by the labourer are discussed below.

Seasonal Job: Workers of these enterprises are work under daily or weekly basis contract. Thus there is no permanent job. The fluctuating nature of market and demands for furniture leads job insecurity to the workers. Demand directly affects their wage and also to their job. Therefore they always have to look for other jobs. From primary survey it is reviled that most of the workers specially the helpers always associated with another job.

No Safety Gears: Safety is always a big issue for such enterprises where every worker has to deal with sharp steel sheets. There are mainly three kinds of workers, Main Mistri Welders and Painters. Besides this there are some helpers. Interestingly none of the workers were equipped with proper safety gears, not even gloves. Even for electrical equipments there were no protecting accessories for the workers. The Main Mistris who have to deal with new sheets does not have any gloves. Some of the workers found to use small piece of cloth to save their hands from sharp edges. During sheet cutting and drilling they were seemed to use piece if cloths. Hands and legs are directly exposed to sharp sheet and tools, and it can cause cuts and injuries. The Sheet handling and cutting process is prone to accident. Welders have to deal with electronic equipments for welding which contains high voltages. But it is found that there are long lying wires with various joints. These equipments have been handled bare hands. There is always a risk of getting shock from those electrical equipments. Grinding machines have a high speed rotating disk, if such equipment slipped from any of the workers

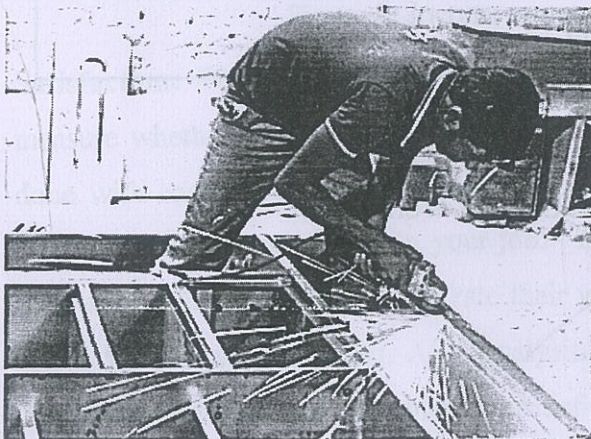


Figure 11: Grinding without Protection



Figure 12: sharp edges exposed to hands and feet

could lead severe injure. On the other hand painter mainly use paint spray to coat the finished products then design them with paint brushes. Painters don't even get any kind of masks or safety accessories for eyes. Few of them uses pieces of cloths tied in their faces to save them from the flying particles due to paint sprayer.

Fluctuation in Demand: Demand is a kind of phenomenon which is always in fluctuating mode throughout the year. For furniture kind of things there are some peak seasons like festive seasons and wedding seasons. During festive seasons demand goes very high, due to this worker has to work over time. But peak seasons are very small. Beside peak seasons, demands fall very sharply in rest of the year. Less demand leads towards less number of furniture productions. Therefore the number of furniture produced per worker also falls. Workers of these furniture enterprises are paid by the number of products they produce. There for less demands directly affects to workers wage. Thus during dull season workers have to look for other jobs, such as construction labourer.

Wage Discrimination: Most of the workers are working as daily basis contractual worker. As mentioned above their wage varies with demand in market. But there is another problem faced by the workers that they don't get equal wage. Highest wage paid mainly to the Main Mistri and the helpers get very less compared to other workers. There is also a discrimination found in terms of work experience. Though it is obvious that experienced worker may get high wage. That is not the reality in some cases. In reality the experienced workers work far less than the helpers. In some cases workers involved in conflicts with each other for wage difference and work differences. When the question asked to the owners they can't give proper answer. Instead of that the owners defend themselves by saying "it is not possible to monitor all of the workers. On the other hand Low wage is also may cause of less or not aware of labour laws and minimum wage act by the worker. Interestingly none of those 10 owners aware about labour laws and regulations.

Health Related Problem: Health related issues are very important. In this kind of work health related problems are very much neglected. As mentioned above there are no such safety measures for the workers. Handling sheets in bare hands are always danger. Beside this there are many health related problems can be seen. In such working conditions workers faces different types of problems. Problems related vision, hearing and breathing is very common. From the primary data analysis it is found that 57.5 % of the workers faced different kind of problems. Among them Main Mistries are facing more health related

problems and helpers are least. Helpers are facing less health problems as they are new recruits and also younger than other workers.

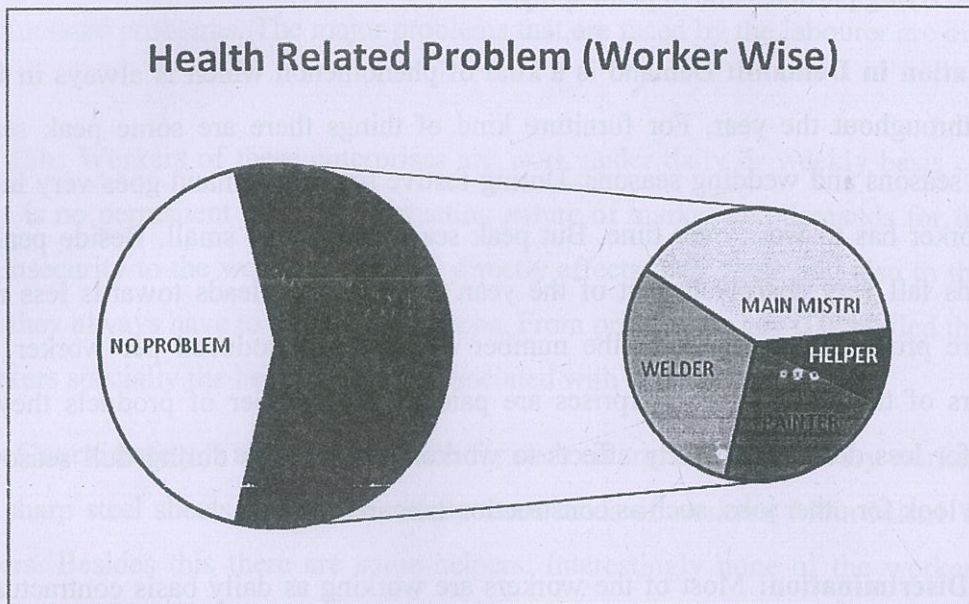


Figure 13: Health related problem of workers (sub-group wise)

When the health related problems of workers were analysed, it is found that problems related vision is highest compares to other issues, about 65% of workers who faces health related problems. Due to no or improper protection for eyes during welding and grinding, eyes of the workers got directly affected. Among the workers who faces problem with vision are mainly welders. In these enterprises the raw material is Steel sheet. There are

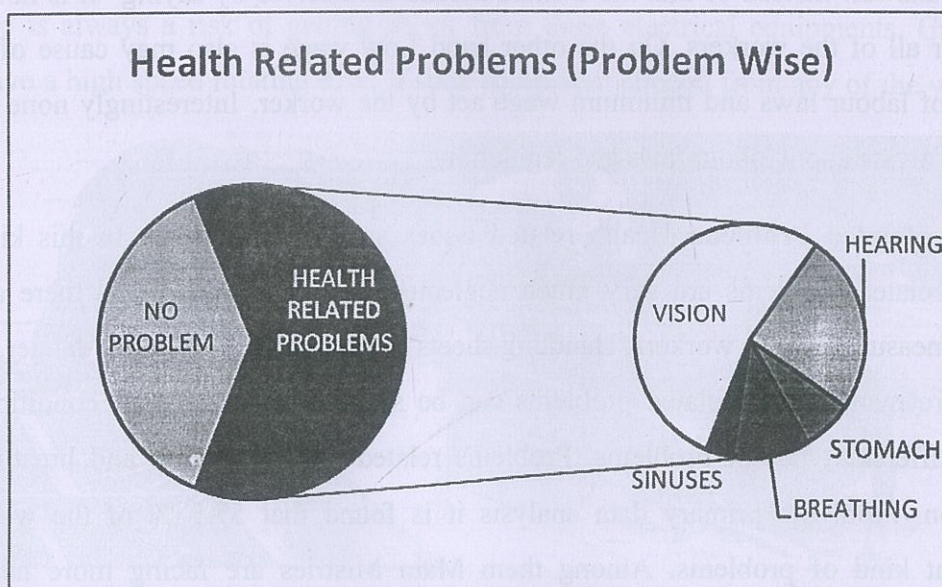


Figure 14: Health related problem of workers (health issue wise)

always noises due to beating metal sheets, welding and Grinding. In this kind of noisy working environment there are no accessories to protect ears. Thus the noisy environment affects on workers hearing and it consists 30% of workers who faces health related problems. Other problems like breathing problem, sinuses and issues in stomach are mainly due to paint works. Though there were no masks provided to the painters and the paint job mainly done in open areas.

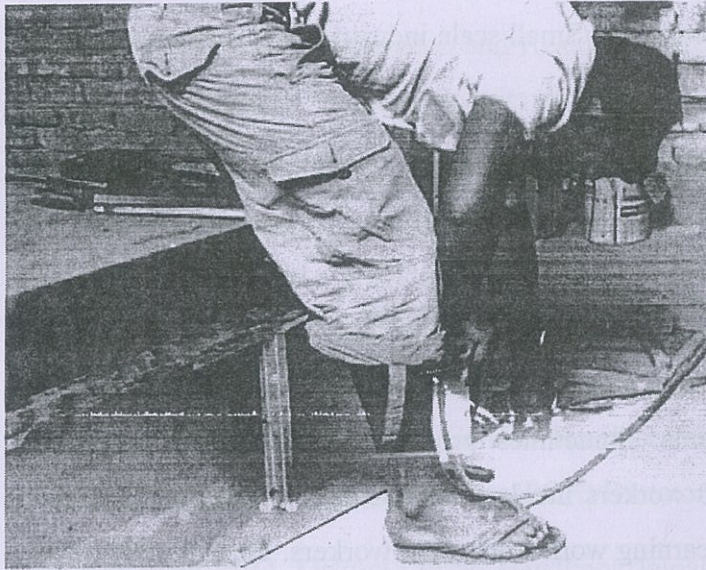


Figure 15: welding with bare hands



Figure 16: painting outside without proper protection

Unavailability of Basic Facilities: Steel furniture industries of this area are unorganized. The workers of are not defined as industrial workers. During primary interaction with workers it was also found that none of the workers were aware about any labour laws and regulations. Interestingly, the owners of surveyed enterprises were not much aware of such laws. As a result workers of these enterprises were not getting any direct government facilities as industrial workers. For any kind of these facilities they have to look towards the enterprise owners. There was a welfare association named as *Thakurtala Small Scale industrial welfare association*. But doors of this welfare association may found open occasionally. Workers of these enterprises are fully dependent on owners.

Conclusion

The steel furniture industry is highly fragmented and mostly unorganised. Around Eighty five per cent of national production comes from regionally small size firms falls into the unorganized sector and remaining comes from the organized sector comprising of leading manufacturer, importers and dealer or distributors. Though MSME sector's contribution on country's GDP is comparatively less than other major sectors. But the numberS of employment they generate are not insignificant. Small scale industries are very important for the growth of Indian economy.

Siliguri is second most important city in West Bengal as well as it is the commercial capital of North Bengal. Since last few decades Siliguri was mainly known for its transportation and connectivity. Now small scale industries playing a big role for its growth. There are many patches of steel furniture enterprises can be found in the fringe areas of Siliguri. Steel furniture enterprises of this area are growing rapidly. But workers of these enterprises are facing various problems. Sometimes problems related wage sometimes problems related to health. About 400 workers involved in this area. But none of them is getting proper training, most of them learning work from other workers. That directly effects on furniture production as well as to wage of workers. These problems may look small but cannot be neglected.

Exposed body parts can cause multiple burns and also may lead to severe injury. Inhaling of paint dust and smoke can lead to serious lung problems for the workers. Paint works were done in open area and also no protection given to the workers. Chemicals are directly exposed to environment and to the workers also. it may cause skin related problems. During Buffering and finishing the surface releases lot of metal dust, labourers needs to wear mask to protect themselves from hazardous metal dust. But it was said earlier no such facilities available for them. Workers of these enterprises are fully dependent on owners.

To mitigate the problems both the groups of labour and owner have to come under same roof. Local authorities and the Thakurtala small scale industries welfare association should take good initiatives for labours that they can secure their standard of living. Technical training, workshops for labour can also make an easy path of development of such small scale industries.

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