

Final Report

Oral History of Labour Movement in South India (2004-05)

In the study conducted in the period of July 2004 and going into initial months of 2005, it was sought to trace the origins and evolution of the trade union movement in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and a few names from Mumbai, Surat and other areas through oral interviews, getting recorded their personal experiences, hitherto largely untapped. The respondents revealed enriching facts that were often between the lines that were generally not available till now as printed and written material. These were the living material/sources and very little effort has been made till now to obtain them.

Keeping these facts in view, the project was taken up to retrieve and preserve the material evidences and experiences of labour history by talking to the leaders, cadres and ordinary participants in the known and unknown events of history.

These living participants are witness to the changing trends and focus of the movement in the period before and after independence. The various phases of the movement and the connected material is yet to see the light of the day treasured by these historical figures who not only organised the movement in their own respective fields but were also pioneers in the various labour organisations. They have much more information than has ever been put on paper. The rich traditions of labour organisations and movements in South India cannot be comprehended fully without the oral accounts of the living participants.

It may be pointed out here that the movement in South India has their own distinguishing features due to the geographical characteristics, nature of industries, social features, cultural distinctions, crop patterns like cashewnuts and toddy etc, vicinity to the sea coast and the ports and docks, backwaters, railways, textiles and many others influencing the course of the building up of the trade union organisations in these parts.

It was absolutely essential to contact and talk to the participants in the process without any delay as they could be lost for ever. Many of them are already in an advanced age, with failing health. Those who are relatively younger also have to be talked to before it is too late as they have better memory.

Areas/states covered

In this phase the areas covered mainly were Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. A few names from Surat, Mumbai and Delhi were also added as they were too old and could not be covered earlier. For example, Namdeo Shenmare from Surat passed away two weeks after he talked to us.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the interview was discussed in detail with Babu P Remesh, Prabhu Mahapatra, Chitra Joshi, K L Mahendra and other experts including some other prominent persons from the NLI, ILHRP, NM Joshi Centre and the AITUC, and also among the team itself. There were enriching suggestions and accordingly the questionnaire was revised to make space for taking into account the experiences of the ordinary workers and women and also trade union movement among the port and dock as well as harbour workers. There are/were trends in the movement and organisations little known, which came to light during the process which were exclusive in the southern parts.

Methodology

It was basically the same as in the previous efforts. The questionnaire was sent to the respondents in advance as far as possible. An attempt was also made to ensure the time and place for the interview whenever feasible. However in most cases the interviews could be fixed only after reaching the destination as the names of the possible respondents not known earlier were given by the local leaders only or cropped up during the work. Sometimes, last hour on the spot interviews were also conducted.

In this context it may be pointed out that we needed interpreters for regional languages especially when going to interiors and remote areas. The interviews were done on the basis of the same questionnaire but supplementary questions were also asked since there were unique industries and unions as well as leaders. Detailed replies were sought out from the respondents on various issues. For example, in Chittivalsa,

ing conditions. Their work was decentralised and establishments they worked for kept changing. It was difficult to focus the struggle and organise them accordingly.

However, in parts of Andhra Pradesh, for example in Rajamahendravaram, the picture has been drastically revised. Many of them when interviewed described the details of how they came to the small towns in search of jobs living in utter penury with families and children and how over the years they were guided gradually to get organised. There were number of agitations, long drawn and memorable for the courage and tact shown in the process. The confidence in their cause has grown over the years and is evident in their bearing and talks.

In Rajamahendravaram, an experiment has been made to improve the lot of such workers. They have formed a cooperative and have a multi-storied office with several fulltimers working for the union. The cooperative pays the workers gratuity, health services and emergency grants. Each of the constituent unit has been allotted an almirah to preserve their office records separately and a separate secretary is appointed for that. Everything is highly regularised and transparent. The workers now bargain with the authorities from a position of strength that the union has given them. Each one of them is hard working and devoted to their organisation. They are no more the most deprived of the society. The unity and commitment have given them a new definition of power.

Jute industry and the workers involved present rich traditions of trade union organisation and struggles. The militant movements launched by them in Andhra Pradesh have their own significance in the process.

Women workers

The women workers have played a pioneering role in the organisation of trade unions in many places. The women radio workers in BEL in Bangalore had a long struggle to their credit and formed the union at their own initiative in the late 1950s. Same is true about the textile workers of Bombay and Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh.

There were also respondents interviewed from organisations such as *Temple Workers' Union*, covering from priest to the sweeper.

A special mention may be made about the *Vizag Steel Plant* (VSP) and the rich contributions made by the workers' union here. The VSP has completely transformed the city and its environments. From a small town to a giant city of three million population today, Vizag has made

significant contributions to the development of the state itself.

The respondents told us here that before the factory came up, the area was dotted with 64 villages. The famous movement launched in the state to get a steel plant in 1964-65 took several lives before the demand was conceded. The steel plant was established and the family members of the displaced persons were given employment. The workers and their organisations have not only served and protected VSP but also turned it into profit earning establishment. Three major trade unions are active in this plant including AITUC, INTUC and HMS. They have their own offices allotted to them by the VSP. For the protection of environment, there are thirty lakh trees planted at the initiative of the authorities and workers. The trade and various other industries in the city of Vizag itself are dependent on the customers from the plant like hotels, various appliances and provisions, garment and many others.

There have been demands for wage hike and other facilities but without stopping the work. At no time the workers damaged any of the machinery. Even at the time when they were forced to stop work, the crucial areas like furnaces where the melting takes place by a sophisticated system, were guarded by the workers who were on duty. The workers themselves fought those elements who tried to harm the plant.

Labour organisations covered

A wide range of national, regional and local labour and trade union organisations were covered. They included AITUC, INTUC, CITU, HMS, INTUC Congress-Khadi, Working People's Trade Union Council, All India Centre of Trade Unions-AICTU/MCP, East Coast Railway Shramik Union, National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFRI), AIRF, GKU, Jute Workers' Trade Union, Temple Workers' Union, Port, Dock and Harbour Workers' Union, VSP unions, independents, Loaders' Union, Road Transport Workers' Union, Electricity Workers' Union and Retired Electricity Workers' Association, Handloom Cooperatives, Sweepers' Union, Glass Workers unions, prawn growers' in Tamilnadu, girl workers in Madurai, Trichy etc, Soothsayers' Union in Tamilnadu, Municipal workers and sweepers in north Tamilnadu, Women prisoners, Rameswaram Temple Canteen Workers' Union, and warders in Tamilnadu, and several others.

Factors contributing to the uniqueness of the movement

Some unique and special features of the labour movement may be mentioned in brief as reflected in the interviews.

Port, Dock and Harbour workers' movement played a pioneering role helping to create several organisations in other industries/trades in the coastal areas. Port and harbours are old establishments, originating generally in British times and expanding rapidly in post-independence phase. Some ports and harbours were private and owned by big businessmen, like in Vizag, which was later nationalised after independence. The workers lived in deplorable conditions. They had usually migrated from other areas in search of jobs while the land for port and harbour was taken away from the fishermen who shifted to other places. In the period of British rule these workers had no rights and had to work for unlimited hours. In fact the port and docks usually have played a significant role in the development of the villages and towns on the coastal areas. Vishakhapatnam provides an example of the same. The villages in the coastal areas here vanished as the port, dock and harbours were developed. However the trade union had a great role to play in improving the lot of workers here.

A number of ordinary workers related their stories of hardships in the work field. The process of development could be traced out properly through their recounting of the situation and served as tools for documentation. From the smallest boats and steamers to giant ships and oil tankers, the process got reflected in the lives and the history of working people here.

At present the movement has become well organised and institutionalised. It has become a force to reckon with. In fact the nature of official authority regarding the functioning of the units here and their relation with the workers and their trade unions is different compared to other industries, a fact little realised,

Important findings have been made about Golden Rock Railway workers' movement.

Girni Kamgaar Union expresses many important features in the interviews of ordinary workers active in the pre-independence days launching heroic and unique struggles. One of them was an experiment with the women Dhaba workers who used to sell food to the workers. These workers used to live in chawls where not less than twenty five workers used to occupy one room that had tiers of beds and workers used to sleep and vacate the berth according to their shifts. Cooking was impossible and hence the dhaba food. However when the workers' wages were cut and they could not pay for their food, these women also lost their jobs. On Bombay streets, They came out with Belan in their hands and revolutionary songs on their lips in solidarity with the victimised

workers. British police tried to stop them but the women turned aggressive and started throwing chilli powder into their eyes. The strike continued for three days, with women sitting on the pavement day and night with the children clinging to them.

In the course of talking to the ordinary workers from GKU, many interesting facts about their participation in struggles came out which included providing relief to striking and victimised mill workers, resolving conflicts within chawls, building up of the union (GKU) itself and sometimes even being shot at by the British police. The great heroic acts committed by these workers even inspired the leaders themselves. However, the workers themselves remained ordinary, unsung, obscure.

In the context of GKU, picture cannot be complete without mentioning the names of Jagtap, Mirajkar, Patkar, Chandrabhaga Ghaghare, Ushatai Dange and lastly D N Yelkar, who looked after S A Dange the famous leader and founder of GKU in the turbulent days of 1930 and '40s. Yelkar was the child of a landless worker and since parents could not feed him, he was sent to work to Bombay when he was only seven. He lived on footpath, worked in dhabas since factories refused to employ him as he was too young for any job. Yelkar learnt to read and write and came in touch with the trade union leaders. By the time he was sixteen, he had educated himself properly and was taken as a clerk and not as a worker. While organising workers' strike, he was shot but survived. He was on permanent night shift in the mill as in the day time he used to be treasurer of the union. Many like him are yet to be found and contacted as story of Bombay working class cannot be complete without them.

Some unique organisations also came to light in course of the project work, like the union of Soothsayers and that of women prisoners and the jail warders.

Militant and historic features of the jute, textile and handloom workers' are narrated. It is found that the formation of handloom cooperatives goes back to pre-independence days especially in Kadapa district where a Gandhian turned Communist led the weavers in their struggle for yarn and remunerative prices. At the age of eighty and a limp, today he carries a threat on his life but undeterred, he goes on, though unknown, unsung.

Hammals or Jatlus as they are called popularly have come out as highly organised and powerful lot in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere.

The quest into railway workers' movement also provided some interesting facts and astonishing results. For example the movement of railway workers where the great leaders like VV Giri joined the railways as waterman as the outsiders were not allowed in the union.

The railway workers in the southern parts are closely interwoven with the port and dock workers in western coast. They provided strength to the labour movement as a whole and momentum too. On the east coast, the industrial activities are interwoven with the railway unions. Almost nothing can move without them. These railway unions here have become tough and flexible bargainers in the process.

Among the other novel features, it has been noticed that the participation by women workers has increased considerably in the trade union activities and also in railway unions. They are getting important both as work force and union wise. In some unions, they have even got separate bodies to handle their problems at the country level.

Railways in the coastal areas have been closely associated with ports, docks and road transport too. In earlier days, many ports even operated through railways. It has its own influence on the union activities too.

In fact the quest into railway workers' movement still continues as they help to concretise the cause of the labour movement itself. Interesting facts have come up about the Madras and Southern Maratha (MSM) Railways, Eats Coast Railways, Nizam State Railways, BN Railways, GIP Railways, etc.

In the early years, the fact that many ports were under the railways helped organising the unions in many ways. Activities in one helped to spread into other. The interviews brought out stories as to how in those early days food was not available along the track as there were no dhabas or hotels there.

The organisers had to travel without a crust of bread for the whole day. Most of the employees belonged to lower castes especially the gangmen were untouchables. They never allowed the high caste organisers to even touch their food as it would have amounted to committing a sin. They even preferred to let their leaders starve as they did not want them to lose their high caste.

The 1974 Railway strike was a watershed in history of the railway workers movement. The respondents were generally of the opinion that

it was the outcome of a personal and political conflict between Indira Gandhi and George Fernandes. However each one of them accepted the fact that the strike itself was a historic one and enriched the railway workers as well as workers in other areas as well. The bargaining capacities of the railway workers increased as never before. The post-1974 nature of the railway workers' movement and its methods have undergone drastic change. Since then no large scale agitation has been launched at the national level.

The respondents explained that workers and unions have become participatory in the affairs of decision making as well as management itself. All issues, irrespective of their level of significance, are raised in the joint employee-management bodies that are organised at every level, leaving little scope for conflicts and then agitations. The management-union interaction has been playing a crucial role. The experiences and functioning of the ECoRSU has proved the same. There has been a noticeable absence of any major discontent and agitations launched by the railway workers in the post 1974 phase and the fact has its own significance in the context.

In course of the project work, several new factors have emerged that add a new dimension to the trade union movement itself. The union representing the workers' cause in a unit may not serve the purpose always and a search for alternative ways may be observed in the process.

Production process and the consequent nature of various categories of workers in paper and pulp industries have their own significance in the context. In Rajamundhry Paper and Pulp factory, the movement has been given a new dimension irrespective of the official union that represents the plant. Stanley Chowdhary, a young worker in the factory has organised the workers category wise and raises their specific demands. These workers cannot go on strike even for a single day as that would mean stopping the furnace, electricity and other emergency departments that could harm the factory for days on end, which in turn would mean loss of work for the workers themselves. Hence they have opted for category wise groups that meets the management and resolves any crisis that hinders their work. Usually their demands are taken by the establishment seriously.

Steel workers are also highlighted as conscious defenders of their plant.

In all these narratives, a new trend in the trade union movement

appears to be emerging where the gap between the management and the worker is slowly getting dim. The educated workers know their job and they have learnt to see it in larger perspective. They are aware of their social responsibility and hence are reluctant to take any step that would hamper production.

The attitude of the management has also undergone a change in many units where they do not force the workers to slog at any cost since they have realised that force cannot produce quality goods. However, such experiences are still rare.

Unknown or little known struggles and incidents in the process of the formation of VSP, the obscure struggles for the construction of the rail-cum-road bridge in Rajamundhry in 1965 are also recorded.

Mysore Textile Labour Union (MTLU), MSM (Madras and South Maratha) Railway Workers' union, Weavers' Congress, Temple Workers' Union, Soothsayers' Union (Tamilnadu), Prawn Culture Workers' Union, Organisation of Women Prisoners, Temple canteen workers' union have also been highlighted as unique labour organisations.

The interviews with ordinary workers have provided substance to the heroic struggles launched by them. They might not have been the leaders of the movement but their experiences provide an insight since they kept the flame alive through their courage and perseverance.

A clearer picture also has emerged through talking to the respondents about the relations between the liberation struggle and the trade union movement.

Many of these respondents had taken part personally in both pre-independence labour agitations, as well as in the popular mass upsurge at the call of the leaders of the national liberation struggle like Quit India Movement of 1942, Civil Disobedience movement and many others. In fact most of these respondents came from the mainstream movement for national independence and could give a clearer picture of both.

Time Frame

The three states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Karnataka were covered in a period of a little more than 6 (six) months. This appears to be the minimum considering the distance of the remote places in these

states and Delhi. Time span could not be less as any short cut would have affected the number of respondents.

Priorities

Priorities depended on the availability of the respondents, the state of their health, age and the industries they were concerned with. The states were covered depending on these factors.

Work done in this phase

1. Questionnaire improved and finalised
2. Mid term review paper presented in the NLI review meeting
3. More than 60 (sixt) interviews processed
4. The biographical and transcriptive notes of each of the respon-
dents submitted
5. Tapes ready
6. Two-monthly as well as final report presented
7. Detailed report in booklet form ready for publication
8. For the purpose of interviews, tours undertaken of Surat, Mumbai,
Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Karnataka plus some interviews in Delhi
itself
9. Metadata prepared
10. Work quote as per the MoU over fulfilled

Suggestions and requests

1. Though the quota of work has been over fulfilled, and many more persons have been covered than required, it is felt that much remains to be done in AP, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Some of the geographical areas within these states remain untouched. Many new informations and names have cropped up.

Some more visits may be necessary and be permitted for these states.

2. We feel that the AITUC leaders, workers and participants in Kerala are not being covered at all. We, therefore, request you to permit us to do the same.

3. Therefore, few more months for the southern states be permitted.

Conclusion

The phase work of Oral History for the southern states has been highly productive and informative, bringing into focus unknown or less known aspects and events buried in anonymity till now.

The project work has also opened new areas as well as wider scope that has generated need for further work.

Hope the points raised would be duly considered.

With thanks,

Anil Rajimwale (Coordinator, Oral History work, N.M. Joshi Centre)
Krishna Jha

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