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# **Oral History Documentation of Indian Labour Movement**

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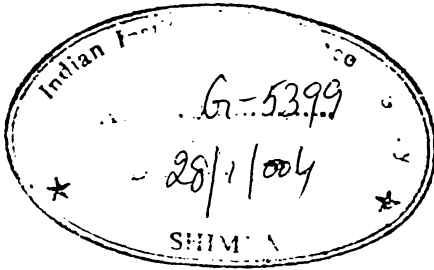
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## Preface

The essay, '*Oral History Documentation of Indian Labour Movement*', forms part of the output of an oral history documentation project, jointly carried out by the *Integrated Labour History Research Programme (ILHRP)* and the *N.M. Joshi Centre for Labour Research and Education, New Delhi*. The project, in two phases, documented the memoirs of more than 120 trade union activists and leaders who were part of the Indian labour movement, in its early phase. It also generated detailed biographical material on these activists.

Retrieval and preservation of the memoirs of the key actors of the working class movement, through specifically designed oral history documentation projects has been a core concern of the *Archives of Indian Labour*, which is the central component of ILHRP. The *Archives of Indian Labour* is designed as a *Digital Archive* and is perhaps the first of its kind in the country. The archive systematically preserves documents relating to labour movement, as well as historical documents generated by the state and the business enterprises. Contemporary documents and other materials like personal narratives; video and audio material related to labour are also preserved in the archive. The creation of oral history collections in the archive, not only provides valuable input to researchers and trade unionists to reconstruct the eventful past of the Indian labour movement, but also enriches the profile and content of the archives itself.

In the present essay, the authors who are the principal researchers of the aforesaid unique oral history project, make an attempt to highlight certain interesting findings from their effort of documenting the oral narratives of various interviewees. Many of these trade unionists have several decades of rich experience in organising, the details of which have not yet received much attention from mainstream researchers. It is heartening to note that the essay has been successful in lucidly and briefly explaining

the relevance and utility of oral historiography in reconstructing the lost worlds of working class movement.

While using the technique of oral history documentation, the authors have collected data through a combination of open-ended interviews and a structured questionnaire. The authors have taken special care in gaining methodological expertise to carry out this unique project, by holding consultations and workshops with experts and practitioners of oral history. The preliminary findings of the project were presented and discussed in an Internal Seminar of the Institute and also at the *III International Conference on Labour History* of the Association of Indian Labour Historians at the National Labour Institute in March 2002.

On the whole, the essay provides valuable material hitherto unexplored in the mainstream history of labour in India. I hope that the publication of the essay will provide a new dimension to the history of Indian working class and inspire further attempts of oral history documentation.



**Uday Kumar Varma**  
Director

# **Oral History Documentation of Indian Labour Movement**

## **Introduction**

A lot of history is hidden among the individual participants of the labour movement. A lot has been written about and by the individuals and organisations of labour on events, incidents, movements, lives, problems and various other aspects. Normally, history, individual as well collective, can be glimpsed in papers and periodicals and books. Not only the movements but the personal lives and habits of the individuals have been penned down. A huge amount of literature is available: resolutions, histories, journals, pamphlets/booklets, periodicals, books, even tapes of interviews, newspaper and other articles, proceedings of meetings, conferences, seminars and so on. Besides, there are doctoral theses available on the labour movement with lot of information. Biographies and autobiographies are there. Superficial writings as well as in-depth analyses are available. There are 'movement studies' from various points of view, as also descriptive works with no view at all. Some claim 'objectivity' in their writings, while others are simply 'subjective'. The subject/object dialectic is at play quite often. There are complaints that facts are suppressed and distorted in the description of the mainstream-movement studies. Well-known movements are studied and brought to light at the cost of the smaller movements and the role of common individuals. If at all the individual is focused upon, it is as part of the organised movements and organisations. Thus the role of the individual is predetermined, they complain. The dynamics of the individual are ignored. How does the person evolve, not only as labour but as a multi-faceted being? What about the non-movement, non-political, non-economic aspects of the individual, for example the cultural or family aspect? What is the position of the woman in the whole setting?

The movement of the labourers and the labourer himself/herself is often treated as an 'object' of study, draining the person of all the life. The study is often taken to the extent of 'guinea pig' for experiments. Consequently, the human beings are treated as devoid of feelings and life, as 'things', even though it may not be the intention of the researchers.

### **Relevance of Oral History Documentation**

The other major problem with the study of the labour movement is that though a big amount of printed and other tangible materials are available (for example in form of documents, much more remains hidden or unknown) these have never been put down at all. This part of history and life, the inner and outer self, is available only with the person concerned or those to whom he or she was closely known. Such persons were participants, activists and leaders of the work-places, organisations, movements, detached observers and so on. Their experiences are lost to us when they pass away. They are never able to share them with others or hardly much. Enough is not being done to retrieve and preserve this extremely material and to pay attention to the source of this information. This part of facts has not been put down in writing. There are tens of thousands of persons all over the country of all kinds at all the levels, who are mines of extremely valuable information, source of knowledge and experience, who have gone through much in their lives, have seen much in the activities known and unknown to us.

All these highlight the necessity to retrieve all that is still available in the memory of the persons connected with the labour movement. The present work/project is being done in several stages/phases. It proposes to get in touch with the individuals, stalwarts, activists, observers, leaders, cadres, and others. Many of them have in fact gone into obscurity, and serious and intricate efforts have to be made to find them out and to talk to them.

Much of the material is available only with these participants. Only a part of what they know has gone into the documents.



Documents and other materials are generally abstractions, while talks with the persons is live material reflecting not only bare facts but also feelings. They tell not only about movement/activity/organisations, but also about the individuals' inclinations, intentions, personal disposition and perceptions. They transmit through their individuality the very dialectic of the movement. We know nothing about the personal feelings of the participants, their emotions, agonies, moments of happiness, personal initiatives and contributions, observations and so on. In many cases, they did not intend to join the movement but were dragged against their will by combination of circumstances.

We have a tendency to look upon the respondents only as a finished product, a leader or activist and cadre, secretary or president or some other office-bearer, and often ignore their actual human development, the efforts that went to create the person, his or her own pre-history, the relatively independent effort that person put in during his/her own lifetime.

Besides, the oral history work has several interconnected purposes: to dig out or to know more about the movements and organisations, their unique features, unknown or obscure facts, unknown persons and more about the known persons, greater and indepth and wider information about the labour history, its origins, evolution, disappearance of activists and organisations, their feelings and perceptions, and so on.

In the course of the extensive work of the last two years or so, we have come across a large number unknown labour leaders and activists as well as movements/organisations. We also came across many absolutely unknown facts. In some cases, they alone are the depositories of important facts. It was also interesting to see them scaling and comparing their efforts with the actual results.

All this valuable information is likely to be lost if immediate efforts are not made to contact them. Some of the information will be lost irretrievably if contact with the prospective respondents is

delayed. Hence all the more necessity to emphasise this point.

### **Concerns of the Study**

In the course of work of collecting oral history, basically the period from the 1930s to 1980s, i.e. nearly half a century, has been covered. Talking to them, the whole history and events of the period comes alive. While the following carrying out the work concerns were kept in mind:

- Retrieve and preserve as much of information and experiences as possible, and as quickly. Contact as many of such persons as possible who are late into their lives, not keeping good health, and about to lose their faculties and memory. Many are not likely to live long, and some of them have already passed away just before and during the work. Delay would cause immense harm to the work of collecting materials of history of labour movement itself. Contacting such persons was the first priority. Contacting persons in better health and the younger persons was the next.
- Record personal history in the context of labour movement, their share in it, alongwith their own personal history, achievements, failures, experiences of cooperation and conflict, their own assessment/review of their lives and work past, review of the present, their vision of the future, etc. It was also important to know the purely personal experiences, problems, agonies, difficulties, moments of happiness, role, contributions, personal inhibitions, regrets and a host of other aspects and factors.
- Retrieve all possible information about the relatively better known facts/movements/organisations/individuals, etc.
- Retrieve maximum information about totally unknown or lesser known events and organisations and experiences thereof.

- Focus, in its phase, on railway workers' movements, organisations and individuals. This was particularly done keeping in view the 150th anniversary of the Indian railways. At the same time contact important respondents in the textile & jute, iron & steel, coal and non-coal mining, unorganised and other sectors of industries, so that other industries are not ignored. Thus, the work of oral history in the first phase was done, as far as possible, industry-wise, with focus on railway; at the same time, people doing around and mixed work, those working in the TUs in general, were also to be covered, and the facts and documents relating to them were not to be ignored.
- Provide more attention to the contribution of women activists to the labour movement.
- Highlight the unique forms of labour activities/organisations/movements e.g. palace employees in some princely states, soapstone, salt works, backwater workers' movement, cine workers, rickshaw pullers, bidi workers, railway staff, chaining of workers in the mines, temple workers and 'pujaries', pickle-making establishments, Gorakhpur Labour Office, worker-artists, khadi, household workers, mathadi, pharma/medical workers, railway stenographers, etc.
- Retrieve the details of the contributions, experiences and also about the life of the interviewee in the context of the labour/TU movement.
- Trace the origins and developments of various organisations related with labour and also their contributions towards the process. This would enable us research further in this field.
- Situate the roles of these activists in evolution of labour and industrial laws and legal labour machinery.

- Retrieve facts about underground life, movements and organisations. Quite often, date about such periods are not documented for fear of official or police action.
- Retrieve information about interconnections and spread of movements. More often they emerge or are formed at one place and then spread out to larger areas, industries with their own inherent logistics and individuals play a significant role.
- Understand the phases and problems of labour movement, mobilisation of labour and worker education.
- Gather the respondents' views on impact of new technology, socio-economic, financial structural changes, structure of labour and industry.
- Document the interviewee's experiences and views on relationship of past and present day workers.
- Understand the linkages between labour and social movements.

Keeping the above, a tentative list of over 300 (three hundred plus) respondents was prepared as the potential interviewees and then the more important names were short listed. In the course of work, the list has grown to 400-plus (four hundred plus). Two phases of work have been completed, covering more than 120 respondents. They were interviewed during 2001-02 and 2002-03 in two phases, each lasting, in actual practice, for a little more than six months. The present essay is a summary of the main experiences and observations, during the conduct of the study.

While preparing the list of potential interviewees, due attention has been given towards their advanced age and experience, state of health, geographical spread, unique trade union affiliations, contributions to trade union, movement and so on. Later the following criteria were adopted for short-listing the interviewees.

- *Advance age and fragile health:* Advanced age was the primary criterion as also was the state of their health. Most of the veteran participants and leaders would not live long, being well into advance age. In fact, some of them passed away unfortunately even before the project started. Besides, many of the respondents were in ill health and getting even worse though they were not so advanced in age. It was almost imperative to include them in the list. The preference was made according to age and state of health. We interviewed as many as possible but many are still left with valuable material at their disposal.
- *Unique Biography and Contribution:* The names were chosen also on the basis of the contributions made to the trade union/labour movement, in the way of novelty of methods and ideas, pioneering work under adverse conditions with steadiness and perseverance, knowledge and direct experience of unknown and lesser known pages of labour history, direct participation or knowledge and experience of participating in famous movements and organisations, and other factors. In other words, these names were very important in their own right and were often key links in the chain of labour activities. Those, who are left, have to be contacted in time, otherwise there is every danger that a valuable part of labour history would be lost alongwith them.
- *Industry-wise:* The Railways were given the primary attention, particularly in the initial stages. Besides, focus was concentrated on industries like textile/ jute, iron/steel, mining, unorganised, etc. At the same time, other industries were not ignored. Simultaneously, the mixed and general trade unionists were also included, who were not attached to any particular industry. Thus, the respondents in other industries and movements were not ignored. Railway unions were given more attention in the present phase.

- *Wide Range of Trade Union Organisations:* The lists also took into account the coverage of a wide range of trade union organisations. The names belonging to the AITUC, HMS, INTUC, CITU, BMS, regional, non-affiliated and independent organisations were included. Independent individuals, not attached to any organisation, were also interviewed. The list took into account the fact that it is the history, not of a particular trade union organisations, but of the labour movement as a whole. Railway unions were given more attention in the second phase.
- *Geographical spread:* The list covered all the important states from the point of view of labour movement: from Meghalaya to Gujarat, Himachal to Tamilnad, metropolises like Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Delhi, Nagpur, Hyderabad, Bangalore, central states like M.P. and others, a large number of coastal regions of Orissa, Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala, and so on. It covers all the corners of the country, and has left no important centre of the labour movement untouched. Details have been given further on. During the second phase of the work, the list covered basically three 'zones' e.g. Northern, Eastern and Western. As far as possible, all the important states/areas, from the point of view of labour movement, were covered. The Northern Zone included Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal, Rajasthan, etc. The Eastern: Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal. The Western Zone included Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, etc. This is in addition to the states covered in the first phase, the details of which are given elsewhere below.
- *Provision for new names:* It was foreseen while preparing the list that in the process, new names and new facts might crop up in course of interviews in various places. Therefore the list prepared and proposed was a tentative one. New and important names would come up. These leader had to be interviewed then or later in an opportune moment. It

may be possible that some of them have to be interviewed even before those who have been placed in the list submitted. As has been mentioned above, names continue to be added as the work proceeds and more information and experiences gather.

### **Methodology, and Scope**

A detailed questionnaire was prepared covering personal history of the respondent in connection with the labour movement. It also aimed to retrieve the important events, highlights and experience of the respondent. The questionnaire dealt with the reasons and circumstances in which the interviewee joined the movement/organisation, history of the organisation, main historical movements, information on obscure movements, underground movements etc. Another part of the questionnaire dealt with the views of the respondent on various aspects and problems of the labour movement, ongoing changes in industry, movement, organisation, working class structure, views on liberalisation, globalisation, privatisation etc. The questionnaire also listed queries about the views on the impact of world monopolies, market and science and technology on the TU movement. It was also sought to relate the differences between older and newer generations of the workers, unification and future of the trade union movement etc. The questionnaire was generally sent to the respondent in advance. But in some cases, particularly if some new names came up, it was given on the spot. The interviews were not confined to the questionnaire, which only served as a means of refreshing the interviewee's memory and systematise his/her thoughts. Once the narration began, it was generally allowed to go on except when intervention was necessary. Supplementary questions were asked to enrich the replies. The interviews generally went beyond the scope provided by the questionnaire. Many new and unforeseen, unexpected facts kept coming up after extending the interviews. Some respondents gave systematic accounts on their own. They came prepared, and did not need much prompting or additional/supplementary questions.

But many others had to be helped in various ways, including asking repeated and direct questions. Many respondents due to their advance age or sickness, physical/mental incapacities, partial loss of memories, needed prompting and repetition of questions and reminding of their own involvement in particular events. They would often tend to forget or mix up events, dates, incidents etc. They would often go into unnecessary details and be repetitive. Some of them were really difficult interviews.

Since it was decided that the work in the second phase would be industrywise, a workshop to discuss separate questionnaire for each of the industry was organised. This was in fact one of first tasks in the second phase. A lot of preparatory work was done in order to draft the questionnaires to be put for discussion by the participants. We studied the history of the labour movement in far greater depth and scope. We went into the details of the history of the labour movement in India, industry-wise workers' movement particularly in railways, as also in the textiles, engineering, mining, unorganised, general and so on. We collected more facts of the biographies and contributions of the various participants in the TU movement. We talked to many of them individually, and for this purpose went to their offices and venues of various meetings. We got lot of facts this way. We studied various documents and journals to gain more insight into the activities of the persons as well as into the movements and organisations. All this of course took lot of time, much more than expected. Besides, it also took time to coordinate the timings of the participants.

The workshop discussed the draft questionnaires in detail. A large number of valuable suggestions were given, on the basis of which the questionnaires could be improved. It was decided that the main focus of the work during this phase would be *the railways*, not to the exclusion of other industries and sectors. This approach was quite helpful in the work of the oral history, in most cases. At the same time we do have, on the basis of our experience, some suggestions regarding the questionnaires, which we mention towards the end.



The questionnaires, thus, covered personal history of the respondent in connection with the labour movement. They also aimed to retrieve the important events, highlights and experience of the respondent among the workers of the particular industry and in general too. The questionnaires were generally sent to the respondents in advance. But in some cases, particularly if some new names came up, it was given on the spot. In some cases, more than one questionnaire had to be sent because the respondent worked in the TUs of many industries or in the general TUs.

The interviews were tape recorded generally on 90-minute good quality tapes using good-quality tape-recorders. The recording generally lasted for four to five hours minimum spread over whole day. It was not always easy to interview the old and sick respondents, locating them, fixing up appointments with them, and yet be prepared for a last minute change in timings, postponements due to sudden attacks of sickness, in some cases even fatal. Some time the respondents were so feeble that their voices were not even audible. For fixing an appointment and then to make it materialise, quite often the stay in a particular village or town had to be extended beyond the time budget could permit. Some time even locating a person itself became a problem due to vague and contradictory informations since most of them were away from the mainstream. As a result, we lost some of them in the process. In some cases the respondents not quite clear about the oral history and wondered what it was all about despite being educated and enlightened otherwise.

In many cases, the respondents took time to prepare themselves, including recalling their memory. Their mental and physical handicaps interrupted the process. Some of them had to visit the doctor in between since they were under treatment. Thus the interviews that were scheduled to be over in one day, stretched over two to three or even more days. Usually one of us, on many occasions even two persons went to interview one respondent since it facilitated other arrangements like preparing the recorder,

changing cassettes, taking down extensive notes, checking up the recorder and accessories, asking additional questions etc. One person managing all these things alone and at the same time conducting the interview, tends to miss certain things leading to some mistakes that can be corrected only later. Thus, it is found beneficial to entrust at least two persons go to conduct one interview.

The study team visited almost the entire vast stretches of the country to locate and interview the respondents, including the remotest corners. While in certain cases the programme was fixed beforehand through phone calls and correspondence, in others it was not possible to contact and inform the respondents as either their address was not known or they did not have even a contact number.

The questionnaires were sent beforehand, in cases possible, if addresses were available or the person's location was known. In the Second Phase of the work (2002-03), industry-wise questionnaires were prepared and sent.

The states visited in course of the study include Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, and Delhi - making it a total of 23 states.

Within each state, one had to go to different places, many of them quite far from each other in terms of distances and involving lot of time. The time spent in each state depended on factors like number of interviews, contacting the new ones that cropped up in course of the interviews, the available transport facility to reach the respondents, local assistance, distance from Delhi and several others. Sometime one visit was not enough to cover the entire list of the available respondents scattered in the whole length and breadth of a large state which needed sometime not only one more but several visits, and still many of them are yet to be covered.

Several states and areas have been inadequately or hardly covered, or not covered at all. The Southern states, for example, need proper work and coverage; so also North-eastern states, U.P., Bihar, Orissa, Chattisgarh and some others. Jammu & Kashmir and the Andamans & Nicobar have not been covered at all. Many important big areas in other states have been left untouched.

In the second phase of the project, the preparation of the questionnaires took considerable time because of their industry-wise nature. It needed study of the labour movement in each of the industry, a check up on their leaders and activists, their contributions, on particular problems of each section, and so on. It took time to explain the nature and importance of work to many of the respondents, some of whom were wondering as to what it was all about. Of course, many others could at once understand and cooperate. It may be pointed out that the entire period of the project phase was highly packed, so much so that there was hardly any time left for rest even in the situations of sickness. We have continued working even when there was no formal project going on, though with a lot more difficulty. In fact the list was too demanding and schedule, as a result, too packed. There were other additional factors also, like spending more time with the respondent than originally planned in order to retrieve quantitatively and qualitatively more information, collecting documents, etc. Undoubtedly the work of almost one and half years, with formal gaps, was quite satisfying, because a lot of important respondents have been interviewed, considerable valuable material/information/history has been retrieved, which otherwise would have been lost, and lot of materials and papers and documents have been collected.

The team faced great difficulties in contacting and interviewing the respondents. The names in the list, both larger and that of the select few, are those of still active leaders. They appeared to be extremely busy and quite often complacent. It was almost impossible to fix time with them. Since the city itself was their work

place, they were found to be always in some meeting or movement. They were complacent in the sense that they would be “available any time”, and therefore the interviews would be postponed for the “next time”. Cancellation of fixed programmes were so often that an interview consisting of three to four hours dragged for over four months with a sprinkling of forty minutes to one hour in a sitting, upsetting our other schedules. The team wants to make a special mention of such problems especially faced in Delhi.

### ***Unique experiences and observations***

The interviews conducted and recorded under the Oral History Project have their own invaluable significance in the country's labour history as well as for the movement itself. The interviews may be used as primary source material for research into the history of the working class and the formation and functioning of their organisations in the country as a whole as well as in various regions. In the process of collecting such material, we have been able to get many of the veterans in time before it was too late. In the two phases of six-months each, we covered a large number of the veterans enlisted for interview, though a bigger portion remains uncovered. The work has been going even outside the prescribed project periods, before and after. Some respondents have passed away just before or immediately after we contacted them. We may mention here that at least three or four of very important respondents could not be contacted in spite of our best efforts, and passed away without our meeting them. Some others have been lost because of ill-health beyond repair. It is tragic to lose such valuable persons, and it underlines the need for further efforts in oral history documentation.

The respondents have provided invaluable even unique material and information for research into the labour history and movement in the country. The interviewees themselves often tended to understate or pass over their own contributions while talking about their experiences out of modesty. They had to be compelled by repeating the questions to talk about themselves

and about the trade union movement in their times. They provided several inside stories, unknown or little known facts, unique events, clues and missing links of the labour history. The interviews helped clarify several myths in the labour movement. The information provided by them may prove to be the starting points for the further and deeper research. Some of the features of labour movement brought out in the course of Oral History Project and interviews may be listed as follows:

### **Labour Movement in Princely States and British India**

A very important feature coming out of the interviews was the distinctive nature of the labour movement in the former princely states and their difference with that of British India. A number of interviews were conducted in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, etc, and many interesting features came to light in the process. A large number of princely states were concentrated in these areas, particularly in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Orissa. Jodhpur, Jaipur, Ajmer, Jamnagar, Porbandar, Kathiawad, Hyderabad, Travancore, Cochin, Kolhapur, Dhenkanal, Nilgiri, PEPFU areas, Bhopal etc were among those which provided much valuable historical material. To work and organise the working people in most of the princely states was hazardous, difficult and arduous job as there were almost no labour or civil rights of any kind. Even the rights granted in British India were absent there. It was in these extremely adverse conditions that the pioneers built the labour and trade union movement in these states before and just after independence (before their merger with India) facing severe persecution and expulsions. They could snatch some absolutely elementary rights, though that too only gradually and very tortuously. The ordinary activists and leaders we talked to, often narrated (Bamaiya, for example in Porbandar) how they could see their children only when they were “asleep”, as they had to leave early in the morning and came back late. Thus they never saw their children ‘vertical’, only ‘horizontal’, in bed. Praja Parishads, Lok Parishads and Praja Mandals often played important roles as the initiators of the labour

movement, guiding them through difficult times as other forums and rights to the workers were only marginally available. In Jodhpur and Baroda, even the employees of the royal palaces (described, among others, by A.K. Vyas) formed some sort of union among themselves to press for their rights. In many places railways acted as the main source to initiate and spread the trade union and labour movement in these areas. In princely states of Jodhpur, Nizam's Hyderabad state, state in Orissa region, etc also it was the same. In Jodhpur for example, the railway workers and their unions actively helped and guided the stone quarries workers in the formation of their union, and organising their movements. Same was true about municipal workers, nurses and compounders' movement, shop assistants' organisations and so on. Advent of railways was an important factor in the spread of trade union movement in Jodhpur state and the nearby places. The Saurashtra region (now part of Gujarat) presents some unique features of labour and people's movement not found elsewhere in India. Saurashtra alone had about 245 or so princely states out of 585 all over India, that is nearly half of them. They ranged from the smallest to some of the biggest in the country and posed serious difficulties in organising the mass movements though they also had their own advantages. The industries were in a formation stage and were scarce and scattered. They had only begun to strike roots, but largely remained at the elementary stages. The industrial development was stunted because of the twin oppression by the feudal princely rule and the British administration. It was reflected in both the nature of the industries and that of the labour movement. There were textile units in Jamnagar and a few other places, salt workers along the sea coast that is at Salaya etc., municipal, hospital, loading-unloading, transport, etc. These were scattered and largely unconnected due to feudal states' boundaries. There were other limitations also. Textile and every other category of workers had to battle very hard for even most elementary human and workers' rights. Here it has to be explained that this part of history of labour movement has in fact been hardly mentioned in the available literature, not to talk of their documentation. As a result, entire

initiative towards labour organisation, its struggles and achievements in these parts of the country remain hardly known to the outside world, only the participants and their close contacts have the facts. There were no labour and industrial laws, not even the basic human rights. Working under inhuman conditions, the workers had no fixed working hours, and wherever they had obtained it through pressure and struggles, the hours were very long, almost following the 'sun-rise-to sun set' traditions or even longer. Even small children were not spared from working hard and for long. The workers would be dismissed at will as their fate depended almost entirely in the hands of those in the palace. Any small crony from the royal palace could do anything to the workers and their families and go unpunished.

The story of the salt workers is also both unique and hair raising. They and their children worked deep in highly salted and brackish waters even without semblance of protection till their limbs were eaten away by or dissolved in the corroding waters. The workers and their children got wounds, injuries, fissures, deformities and suffered. Upon being dead at work, their bodies would just be thrown away into the deep sea. Now salt-works in many areas e.g. around Mumbai, are being reclaimed for construction, housing, industrial and other purposes. The workers there are having to migrate or to look for other jobs. The workers in other industries, if at all they could be so called, too had no social, political and trade union rights. Even writing and distributing handbills would invite the wrath of the rulers and the activists would be dumped into the royal dungeons. The example is Jodhpur state, where the entire families including small children were arrested and kept in captivity for months. The trade unions had to fight for the most elementary rights, and by the mid-40s, they got some of them conceded. They also brought semi-underground and underground newspapers. In case of search and persecution, they could escape into the neighbouring princely states, and in case of Rajasthan, into the 'democratic' non-princely British region of Beawar, which thus became a centre of labour movement and nationalist and

revolutionary activities. Orissa, Himachal, the former PEPSU areas, Maharashtra, etc, provided many additional features of the labour movement in the former princely states. The following were the princely states, to name only a few, where some labour activities took place with certain distinct characteristics: Adgad, Dhenkanal, Kolhapur, Nilgiri, Patiala, regions of PEPSU, Arki in Himachal and so on. The present-day Orissa had 26 big and small princely states, besides the usual British areas. Out of these 26, forced or bonded labour could be first eliminated due to pressure and movement including social reform movement, in Adgad state. There was powerful states' people's movement in Dhenkanal, Nilgiri, Adgad and other places. They contributed a lot to the building up of the workers' struggles, and vice-versa. When the Second World War broke out, the Japanese troops were planning to land in Paradeep port and then advance upon Adgad. Workers, along with students, did guard duty against the imminent Japanese attack.

There was big people's movement in Dhenkanal against one of the most oppressive states' rulers in India, named Shanker Pratap. In 1942, Murhee, a subdivision in Dhenkanal, was "captured" by the famous people's and workers' leader Baishtam Patnaik, and it was declared a "Free Republic". Another interesting development took place in a small princely state known as Nilgiri, in Orissa. Nilgiri was the first princely state to merge with India 13-14 November 1947. Young students, peasants and workers were the mainstay of this armed struggle, in which regular fight took place. The ruler ultimately surrendered. This movement contributed a lot to the workers' movement subsequently. Besides, many of its leaders later became prominent labour and trade union leaders. For example, Nand Kishore Patnaik was among the direct participants and organisers of the Nilgiri movement, who provided eye-witness account of the uprising and who himself was also a prominent working class leader. *Bhopal*: Bhopal also was a very oppressive princely state. It had to face mass upsurge led by the States' People's Conference, which had had Shakir Ali Khan among the most prominent leaders. He was also known as the 'Gandhi of



Madhya Pradesh'. The movement included active workers' and trade union contingent, and was sought to be brutally crushed. Shakir Ali had to undergo inhuman tortures at the hands of the rulers; for example, he was tied to huge ice cubes throughout the night and his back turned blue. He was later to become, among others, one of the most prominent TU leaders of Bhopal and Madhya Pradesh. BK Gupta was among those TU leaders who narrated his story. He is since deceased. During the interviews, the role of States' Peoples' conferences, variously known as Praja Parishad, Lok Parishad and others have particularly come to the fore in helping growth of the trade union movement in the princely states. States' Peoples' Conferences were the mass political organisations in the princely states during the British period. Since generally speaking, no other organisations or parties or trade unions were allowed to function, the Peoples' Conferences acted as the forum for the struggle against the feudal rule, and for voicing of demands of various sections of people. Consequently, in many states, like Hyderabad, areas of what is now known as Himachal Pradesh, Jamnagar, Porbandar, Marathwada, Jodhpur, Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, Adgad, Bhopal etc, the Lok or Praja Mandals (Parishads) helped to guide and build the trade union movement and even supplied cadres, literature, materials etc. This forms an important aspect of the history of the labour movement. Some of the trade union organisations even reached inside the royal palaces also like in Baroda, Jodhpur, Porbandar etc voicing the demands of the royal employees themselves. In Himachal areas, the borders of the princely states changed every few miles, e.g. from Kasauli to Shimla.

*Kolhapur* in Maharashtra contributed to the labour movement in its own peculiar way. It was one of the enlightened states in terms of education and social reforms. That helped give rise to a more open labour movement, industrial establishments and active leaderships. *Arki* in Himachal saw several mass assemblies of ordinary workers in front of the Palace gates in support of their

demands.

### ***Workers' Movement in Railways***

Among the major areas of the work was the one related with the workers' organisations and movements in the railways, both pre- and post-Independence. Those interviewed belonged to the various all-India as well as local level railway workers' union, e.g. AIRF, NFRU, WERU, GIP Rly Men's Union, BN Rly, BB & CI, Railway Mazdoor Sangh, and so on. Besides, the activities among the railway workers of many of the princely states was also covered. These included Jodhpur State Railway, Nizam Railway, various lines in the central, northern, southern, eastern and other areas, and so on. The organisations in the railways belonged to various present-day affiliations like the AITUC, HMS, BMS, INTUC, CITU and independent or non-affiliated ones as well as to the category-wise unions. We met some living legends and stalwarts of the railway workers' movement. The interviews reflect the fact that the railway workers' movement was all powerful in the pre-Independence days, and proved to be the lifeline for many other categories of workers/movements eg. Textiles. Mostly, illiterate gangmen were often the core of the railway workers' organisations. There were some memorable and important movements of the railway workers in the pre- and immediate post-Independence period. GIP Rly Men's Union fought some tough battles in 1940-46 period in Bombay and other western and central regions. Their support for 1942 movement, textile workers' strikes and for the RIN mutiny in 1946 played an important role. Achievement of DA for the railwaymen in the 1940s was a great victory won after long battles. Interesting facts came up about railway workers' movement in the Northern Zone and Rajasthan. There were militant movements in the early 1950s in Ambala-Kalka region in the early 1950s. Eyewitness account was heard from the respondents about the firings and killings of railway workers in Kalka firings of 1955. The organisations had a mixed and disparate character in the pre-Independence period, as there were some princely states e.g., in the Himachal and Punjab regions. Lot of facts about the

movements in the PEPSU region came to the fore.

During those days, it was not easy to present a Memorandum or charter of demands in the railways, as the managements were very tough. One of the respondents is a witness to the Memo having been sent to the management through a young boy, who then dashed back in fear to the apprehensive but cheering crowd of railwaymen standing at a distance. This incident took place in Delhi.

Another participant in the railwaymen's activities described the locomen helping general workers (sugar workers, cement workers, etc) strikes during winter, unloading hot coal to the agitating workers to keep warm while on vigil. Such incidents took place during the British times. Loco staff used to have tough time, both working and getting organised. Important aspects and facts came up about the strikes of 1960, 1968 and 1974. The first two were also participated in by the government employees and some other sections of the workers. Some of the respondents were themselves members of the various action committees including at all India level. Lot of inside stories could be had about the 1974 strike. As many various as possible versions about the 1974 strike were recorded, and it all makes an interesting story. Many lesser known and unknown facts about the railway workers' movements also came to the fore. Some inner details of the NCCRS (National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle) of 1974 were revealed by some of its members and other respondents. Viewpoints of various TUs like the BKS, HMS, AITUC, CITU, category-wise unions, and sections thereof were recorded. Interesting versions on the roles and contributions of Peter Alvares, George Fernandes, S. A. Dange and others were narrated by the respondents. The leaders of the category-wise unions, for example, were highly critical of the role of the national T.U.s in the 1974 railway strike, as also in other movements. They felt neglected by the national TU leaders. The category-wise unions had their own opinions and felt sidelined throughout. Among them, loco, stenographers, gangmen, etc were important segments. They were

of the opinion that the national railway workers' unions deliberately ignored them and took their help only to further their own interests, to the extent of forcing them to dissolve themselves and merge with the national ones against their wishes. The category-wise union leaders appeared to be against the whole course of the 1974 strike itself. The interviews of the independent and those nearer the CITU and BMS, as also some others, gave clear opinions against national unions in the railways. For example, the talk with Ved Prakash Kohli of All India Railway Stenographers' Association (AIRSA), later of BMS and BRMS, was unique in many respects, as also that of Bhangoo of loco running staff. Some other interviews were also important in this connection. According to one version, the 1974 strike was helpful furthering the cause of the railway workers' movement. But according to another version the strike did immense harm to the movement and destroyed it. Besides the 1974 railway strike, the 1968 and 1960 movements were dealt with in detail.

In the context of the 1968 strike, the concept of one-day token railway strike was considered by some as harmful for the workers. The 1960 movement was taken as a challenge by the government and dealt with severely. How could central government employees, railway workers and those in the infrastructure go on strike, it objected. The activists and the leaders had novel experiences during this movement.

An interesting aspect that came up was the fact of the AITUC and the BMS friends working in the same Baroda House Railway Headquarters in New Delhi in the 1960s organising their respective activities, and yet they remain on the best of personal terms to this day. They keep recommending each other for information on railway TU movement.

### ***Activities in Other Industries***

In course of the oral history recordings, labour activities in the entire gamut or wide range of industries and sections and sectors cover: textiles, railways, beedi, snuff, port and dock, road transport,

small and have industries, stone works, wide range of mining, child and woman labour, cinema, royal and princely estates and the palaces, rikshaw, temples, laundry, newspapers, toddy, cashew, tiles, hotel and tourism, tramways, British government employees, electricity, water, auto and tonga, tea and other plantations, public and private sectors, drugs/pharmaceuticals, medical representatives, gold, household helps, inland backwater and river transport, oil, steel, defence, shop assistants, municipal, construction, salt, and many other industries/sectors, areas and the workers employed in them. They all need further interviews and study.

Some of the important industries subsequent to the railways covered in the study were: Textiles, engineering and iron-steel, jute, bidi, unorganised, etc. Quite often it became difficult to categorise the respondents, as they have worked in a variety of unions. Their work is 'all-round' or mixed, particularly in the early pioneering stages and late stages when they occupy high positions, and in that capacity have to look after the workers of several industries and categories.

Lot of information could be gathered about the *Girni Kamgar Union (GKU)* of Bombay, and about Textile Workers' Organisations elsewhere in the country. A perusal of jute workers' activities in Calcutta and elsewhere shows their rise literally from the ground levels of no rights to acquiring several rights after prolonged and difficult battles.

The GKU was surprisingly well-organised union, which led many crucial battles alone and/or with organisations and workers' of other sectors. Women played an important role in the GKU activities.

Textile and other movements in the Bombay region, and all over India, are inextricably related with the name of S.A. Dange, the outstanding TU and workingclass leader. This was corroborated by every respondent concerned of all the shades, including his opponents.

In Amritsar and Punjab, textile workers helped growth of other organisations. Both AITUC and INTUC had strong unions in Amritsar region in the 1950s. Textile Mazdoor Union launched major strikes in the mid-1950s having implications for both Punjab as well as the country. Struggle for better deals in the piece-rated system was among the key points. Textile Mazdoor Ekta Committee was formed. Embroidery workers were an important segment. There was a historic strike in April 1955 in Amritsar region and Punjab, where A.K. Gopalan (M.P.) also came to help and address. Chhehera, near Amritsar, came up on the map of all India labour movement.

Lot of facts came to light about the oldest union in UP, the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha. This historic union was founded by such outstanding personalities of the freedom movement as Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and Maulana Hasrat Mohani. Suti Mill Mazdoor Sabha is another of the historic organisations, formed later on after the merger of several unions. The unions have conducted several momentous movements and strikes, eye-witness details of which were described by the respondents.

*Port and dock workers:* Interviews in Orissa, Bombay and Calcutta revealed several features about the strength, variety and distinctiveness of the port and dock workers' movement. We met people who began working in the pre-Independence period. The subsequent stages of problems and organisations present a kaleidoscopic, yet severe picture of the attempts to organise the ordinary seamen and associated workers. There was close cooperation between the port & dock workers and the naval mutiny of February 1946. For example, the union at the naval dockyard in Bombay helped the mutinners of the British Indian navy to occupy the yard and use its premises as a vantage point to fight the British troops. The workers also helped to locate the water supply points cut off by the British management, and thus ensured supply of water to the naval ratings. One of prominent figures of this movement at this particular place was Samuel Augustine, a unique and unusual personality.

In Mumbai, Puri/Bhubaneshwar, and elsewhere too, we talked to a number of pioneers of the port & dock workers movement belonging to the HMS, AITUC, independents, etc. Prominent among them were Dr Shanti Patel, Manohar Kotwal, Souribandhu Kar and some others. The various organisations/activities of the sea-farers, port mathadis, on-ship employees, wheat-loaders, port and dock hands, transporters, water-borne and foreign-lands centred workers (and their peculiar problems) and their aspects and features came up to enrich the information. Of particular note is the spontaneous and great movement of the Bombay port & dock workers in 1955, when a worker was beaten mercilessly with a lathi by the police simply because he drank water from a place objected by them. He got bloodied all over and there was a lightning strike.

The port and dock workers organisations provided a highly organised picture. They are a powerful force in the labour movement in the coastal regions.

In Calcutta as well as in Bombay, the port/dock workers' movement, railway workers' and the weavers' organisations are peculiarly interlocked e.g. in Khidderpore. They easily complement each other.

*Some other categories:* Respondents narrated experiences of their work among some other categories of workers eg. Khadi, Lab (Laboratory) assistants, medical and govt. staff, rickshaw, municipal, household workers (servants and maid-servants), teachers, and some others.

Big *Khadi employees'* movement took place in Bihar in the late 1950s and 1960s. In one of the interesting incidents of Khadi workers agitations, women workers collected huge amounts of sewage from septic tanks in buckets, and not only littered it on the floors of the establishments but threw it upon the faces of the policemen, who had come to arrest the leaders of the striking employees. This is a unique incident of its own kind.

*Lab assistants and medical staff* in Delhi and elsewhere were a neglected category. They struggled for their recognition in a tortuous manner, and there are many notable achievements to their credit. They are an educated and qualified lot, having detailed knowledge of chemical and biological processes. Therefore, they have a psychology of self-confidence, and their superiors cannot easily face or mislead them. The lab assistants often consider the more qualified as really less qualified in several fields, which is not entirely wrong. Doctors and professors have often to take the help of the empirical knowledge of the lab assistants. T. Sharma and others related interesting events and activities

Talking of medical employees, one must mention the great role played by the workers, employees and staff of the Sanatoria in Kasauli (present-day Himachal Pradesh) and few other nearby places. There used to be an important Sanatorium in Kasauli in the 1940s near the military base of the British army. It was mainly for the T.B. patients. Unionisation of the workers began in the 40s itself, before and after the independence. It was not easy, as at that time the entire area from Kasauli, Dharampur, Arki, Shimla, Kalka, etc was dotted with small and big princely states, while some other adjoining areas were British-ruled. It is interesting to note that the *patients* admitted in the Sanatorium became the main vehicle of spreading the message of forming TUs and of their importance. They used to receive handbills with aims and demands of the employees. The patients would spread the message when they went out. In fact, some of the future leaders and activists were influenced and trained there itself. A few even got themselves admitted or got their stay extended in order to work for the union. The Kasauli Sanatorium helped organise hospital and other employees/workers in the entire area mentioned above. That helped the labour movement in the regions around the Kalka-Shimla road and other areas, in particular Dharampur and Shimla. They contributed, in the subsequent years, the labour activities in the roadways, railways, small-scale industries, PWD, govt employees, defence and so on.



*Medical representatives* were an important segment of the medical/pharma workers' movement. They had to struggle hard to get themselves recognised as the 'workers'. Not only this; they had to explain to those concerned as to what exactly was this category of workers. Their movement/organisations began at state and local levels, leading ultimately to the formation of an all India organisation. D.A. Rajimwale was the initiator of this unique movement, and many others participated as pioneers.

The story of the salt workers is also both unique and thrilling. They and their children worked deep in highly salted and brackish waters even without semblance of protection. Now salt-works in many areas e.g. around Mumbai, are being reclaimed for construction, housing, industrial and other purposes. The workers there are having to migrate or to look for other jobs.

*Temple workers:* A few facts about Benaras, Puri and other places have been mentioned further on. Interviews brought to light fantastic facts about the temple workers' movements in these places and in the southern states like Kerala. Both the pandits and the sweepers were organised in unions, and organised area-wise long marches and slogan-shouting demonstrations as their conditions were too pathetic. They ultimately got regular salaries and social security.

### ***Regional Trade Union Movements***

Though the trade union movement all over the country has certain commonalities, each area has its own distinctive features also. The labour movement in the north east, regions of Bihar and Bengal and several other places have their own dominating features and tribal influence is one among them. The tea and plantation workers in the North-east, jute, oil, mines and other industries in Bengal and Bihar had tribal and local deprived sections employed and were oppressed economically as well as socially. The tribals in these parts were innocent about the money commodity exchange and labour value. But once they were

conscious of their rights, they got organised strongly and their tribal sense of unity played a great role.

The tea plantations in Assam and Meghalaya had a considerable supply of labour from Bihar and eastern UP. Jute and oil industries have been the fields of many historic battles. But introducing the idea of trade union in the north eastern regions have not been easy as is evident from the interviews.

Bihar has been the centre of several militant labour movements. The mine workers in coal, mica etc have formed important part of the trade union struggles in the region, as the respondents from the area informed. The mine workers from Jharia, Dhanbad, Jamshedpur, Hazaribagh conducted several struggles for their demands under the banner of various trade unions like AITUC, INTUC and others that have their own significance in the labour movement. Trade union rivalries have also been sharp including on caste lines.

Talking of mine workers' movements, a definite picture emerges from the interviews of the participants from Bihar, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, stone quarries in Rajasthan and Gujarat, mines in Goa and Karnataka, including that of gold. In Kolar Gold Fields (KGF), a strike took place in 1945-46 for nearly two months. The workers were treated as the domestic servants of the Britishers. They were mostly scheduled caste workers. They formed Sc Association and SC Federation.

The mine workers played a pioneering role in the formation and consolidation of the trade union movement in the country and even helped to organise workers in industries like iron and steel etc. Tile workers constitute an important segment of the working class and trade union movement in Karnataka, Kerala and few other places. The tile workers and factories originated during the British regime when construction activities in these areas gathered momentum, particularly to meet the colonial needs. The workers in these factories worked and lived in utterly appalling conditions. They formed powerful bases for the trade union

movement in the Dakshin Kannada and other districts. Even today the large number of workers are employed in these factories though their conditions have improved due to long struggles. Interviews of leaders as well as of ordinary participants have been recorded from these regions as well.

The trade union movement in what was the huge Madras Presidency, and later in its constituent parts was also very strong. This was because of the spread of railways, mining, textiles and some other industries and shipping.

Shipping and port and dock constituted an important and distinguishing feature in the industrial development process in the southern region. Consequently, port and dock workers' unions were very strong and important. Large proportions of the respondents who worked in trade union movement in south India, were connected with the trade unions of dock and port workers.

Besides, some distinct and interesting features in the trade union movement were found in these regions like temple workers union and their movement in Kerala and Tamilnadu, toddy tappers and inland water transport workers' union and the struggle launched by them. Number of respondents who worked in trade union movement in south India, were connected with the port and dock workers' movement. Besides some of the distinguishing features of the trade union movement have been found in the southern regions that have been reflected in the interviews granted and recorded.

Pondicherry and Goa represented two unique places ruled by the colonial powers other than the British. They were under French and the Portuguese rule respectively. Lot of trade union activities in Pondy were conducted from Madras province. Conditions in both the colonies were more difficult than in British India, with virtually no trade union rights. They remained under the foreign rule well after India attained freedom.

Conditions in Goa were particularly difficult. The labour movement there was organised with the help of those in Bombay and Karnataka. The trade union movement in Goa became stronger after liberation in 1961. There was tremendous growth in industrial and economic sector after liberation though the origins and development of the labour movement has been closely connected with the period under Portuguese rule, the liberation struggle and the post colonial days.

Labour movement in the region Bombay is wellknown and some of it has found reflection in the interviews. Marathwada and its border regions present some distinctive features because of its being part of Nizam state at one time, and by effects of the developments after independence. At one time, the mainstream trade union had to fight against the armed goons of the Nizam or the Razakar trade unions who operated as the so-called "Yellow Flag" trade unions.

Some sections of the trade union movement in Marathwada and other parts of Maharashtra have tried to combine the urban workers alongwith the rural workers especially in sugarcane and construction industries.

The labour movement in UP, Punjab and Haryana present a wide variety. UP and its regions have had trade union movement since pre-independence period and have centres like in railways, construction, transport, textile and many other industries. The historical aspects of the movement in Kanpur, Agra, Mussoorie, Dehradun etc have been reflected in the interviews.

About historic movements of textile, leather, railway etc in Kanpur, Benaras and other places, the respondents provided interesting details. The AITUC was able to eliminate the hand driven rikshaws in Mussoorie and replaced them by pedal driven ones.

Punjab has its own share in the process of development of the labour movement and the centres are still functional while Haryana being a relatively new state has only recently formed bases.

*Region-wise:* The work was conducted zone-wise in the second phase of the work: Northern, Eastern and Western. It brought out some important characteristics of the various areas, cities, provinces, princely-states, etc.

*Bombay and Calcutta:* The richness of the traditional working class and industrial centres was clearly brought out in the interviews, tales and documents. Several unknown facts of local nature were also brought to light.

In Calcutta, some interesting movements took place, wherein the rickshaw pullers and bullock carters played invigorating role. In the pre-independence days, during a general strike in the city, some enthusiastic leaders decided that the advancing troops would be blocked by the bullock carts! So, these carts began gathering in a semi-circle to prevent the armed men. Of course, they were beaten back and even shot at. Wife of Dr. Ranen Sen died thus.

Any movement or strike of the hand-pulled rickshaws in Calcutta was a very difficult task to accomplish. But this could be done in one of the movements in the pre-independence days. The pullers at that time used to be confined within a protected area. But Momin and others made it possible to contact them and set them on strike course. Bankim Mukherjee was one of the cool players during those difficult days.

*Tram workers* had to fight for such elementary facilities as putting up a glass window at the front of the tram they drove. Otherwise, it was very difficult in the conditions of hot and cold winds or during the storms etc. This, again, took place in Calcutta. Incidentally, K.L.Mahendra, the famous TU leader, began his labour movement career from Burnpur in Bengal.

*Benaras:* This religious and spiritual city comes alive during the interviews as a city of workers' struggles through the decades: weavers, temple workers, railway, sweepers, etc. Among the interesting persons talked to is the priest or *pandit* Kanhaiya Lal Tiwari, who owns a portion of the religious space but who participated in some unique activities including hiding of bombs

during the anti-British days. He did much to help the pandits get more facilities for their religious worship activities and for their better conditions.

*Orissa:* Despite being a backward region, the organisations and movements display their own features. Orissa had a rich and vibrant movement: press workers, the workers in the glass industry, mining, textiles, port and dock, and others. One of the features in Orissa was its initial division into several princely states. This feature deeply influenced the labor movement in the state. Orissa had some big princely states, as well as very small ones. T.U. movement and its leaders played no small role in their struggles. Activities in Barbil is another feature of Orissa. The T.U and labor leaders in Orissa have had close relationship with the literary activities.

It was narrated during the interviews that Oriya workers formed an important section in Calcutta, who mainly did the jobs related with cleaning of drainage, sewage, lanes and by-lanes and so on. Some of the leaders, particularly of Orissa, started their TU life by organising these very workers, who were among lowest rungs of their class working and living in the most degrading and despicable conditions imaginable.

*Bihar and Jharkhand:* Bihar has had a variety of activities of workers in mining, railways sugar, textile, engineering, etc. the movement there has been far richer than expected. One of the interesting movements that took place was that of Khadi Gramodyoga employees, which ultimately assumed state-wide proportions. Bihar Rajya Khadi Gramodyoga Karmachari Sangh played a leading role in the organised movements. It has been mentioned elsewhere.

Events of Jamshedpur struggles, including that of 1958, were brought alive by the respondents. Stories of the famous leader Kedar Das were narrated. Activities in Bokaro, Chaibasa, Dhanbad, and other places, and in various industries like iron/steel, mining, engineering, etc were described in detail.

The problems of organising workers in the tribal belts also came up, both in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. An important interview in this context was that of the woman TU leader Laro Jonko of Jharkhand. She gave lot of information about Purnendu Mazumdar, and about mine workers' struggles of the 1960s and other times. Laro Jonko is a celebrity of sorts with the famous Mahashweta Devi having interviewed her, and the film-makers approaching her. Tara Reddy in Maharashtra also worked among the tribals. Roza Deshpande was another formidable woman leader in Maharashtra.

*Central India:* Struggles of the central Indian region are well-reflected in the oral history work. The entire region from Indore and Bhopal to Raipur and Bailadilla (Kirandul) is full of activities of workers in engineering, textiles, mining, etc. Normally, this is considered a backward region; but contrary to the expectations it was found to be highly conscious, active and organised. Ordinary, illiterate masses have played some glorious part in the saga of the Indian labour movement. INTUC and AITUC leaders and others provided lot of information about BHEL, NMDC, as also about IMWF, SKMS, and such other unions.

In an interesting tradition established in Indore region is the badges given to the workers every year on the occasion of Vijaya Dashmi after a huge procession to the union office. These badges are pinned by Homi Daji, the former M.P. and prominent TU leader. Textiles were an important industry in the region. B.K. Gupta and others described their experiences of the struggles in central India before and after independence including under the princely state of Bhopal. Interviews in the Indore-Bhopal belt reflected highly vibrant workers' movement.

*Northern Region:* The oral history work for this region mainly covered the railway workers' organisations and movements. Besides, there was lot of handloom industry. The industrial growth and the consequent labor activity in this region is closely related with the demands of the second world war and the immediate

post-Independence needs. Reorganisation of states led to the emergence of new kinds of industries and labor activities.

### **Coverage of Trade Unions Organisations**

The respondents chosen belonged to the trade union organisations of various affiliations, like AITUC, INTUC, CITU, HMS, a section of Lohiaites, Shramik Sanghatanas of Lal Nishan Party and Lal Nishan Party (Leninist), Majoor Mahajan and independents and unaffiliated. From among the AITUC members, we had the largest number of respondents as it was the oldest organisation. Even some of the major trade union centres were, at one time or other, affiliated to the AITUC.

Interesting and unusual contributions have come from some of the smaller and non-mainstream organisations. The beginning of the trade union lives of these leaders were relatively independent and many of them had taken up fight against socio-economic discrimination and mobilised the local workers forming their unions. They had formed unions of laundry boys, gas leakage workers etc. They also launched fight against beating of workers, like of those who were known as Gorakhpur workers. However, these Gorakhpur workers were also used as hired goons to teach lessons to the rebelling workers and kept separately especially in Bihar and that too in the colliery areas. These leaders used to take up social/family problems of the workers in places like Kottagudem, and came up with organisations like those of temple workers in Kerala and of women and child workers, that of Royal Household Employees, workers in stone quarries etc.

The respondents from major trade union centres have provided huge amount of rich information on and their own analysis of, the various well known and not so known facts. These trade unions have different reasons and processes of emergence and evolution. They have certain distinctive characteristics, policies, methods, different bases in the industries, trends and contributions and also perspective. At the same time, they have a lot in common as trade union organisations. Some of the aspects are covered in the



interviews recorded. The united AITUC also had various political ideological and attitudinal trends as part of a broad and flexible mass organisation. The trade union centres do differ as to their mass bases within the working class like railways, textiles, engineering, cooperatives, public sector enterprises etc. They also display differences regarding greater or lesser emphasis on reforms, social improvements, mass struggles, long term and short term activities etc.

There was a wide variety among the wide range T.U. and labour organisations covered. The Shiv Sena-led Bhartiya Kamgar Sena (BKS) was an important addition. Talks with its leaders provided lot of insight into the functioning, structure, thinking and methods of the BKS and its relationship with the S.S. One point that came up was that its main functionaries were appointed directly by the Shiv Sena “Supremo” i.e. Balasaheb Thackeray. Many of their cases are referred to the local S.S. branches to deal with. The respondents denied carrying politics they practised in the S.S. to the BKS. The BKS has a well-ramified organisation under strict central control in the various industries. It is dealing with a section of engineering, textile, middle class employees, and other sections. It believes in keeping peace within the industry. It also claimed it not only believed but initiated joint actions with other trade union centres in actions like the Maharashtra Bandh and observance of all-India days. The BKS opposes what its leaders called the “LPG” i.e. liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, and expressed itself against the policies of the central govt. The BKS was relatively new organisation, formed a little more thirty years ago.

It is also interesting to note that all the respondents of the BMS too pointed out the fact that they were assigned by the RSS to work on the trade union front. They claimed that after being so appointed, they functioned freely.

The HMS leaders and activists were extremely useful in providing information about the evolution of labour movement and organisations in the railways. Similarly about movement in other industries. They provided a wide range of historical

information about various incidents, and about the role of the leaders like Peter Alvares, George Fernandes, Khedgikar, JP and others, about whom first-hand accounts could be had from them. Some of the HMS leaders, such as Dr Shanti Patel, Jagdish Ajmera and Manohar Kotwal, also others, described their experience and eye-witness account of the formation of the HMS. AITUC and HMS leaders in particular provided important leads to the history of the labour movement in railway, textile and other industries.

Important leads about an interesting organisation known as Navjeevan Sanghatana, little-known outside Maharashtra, were provided in some of the interviews. This organisation was established by a group of radical youth in January 1943 in certain areas of Maharashtra e.g. Bombay, Poona etc. It was a fallout of the 1942 movement. This group had differences with the CPI on the question of participation in the movement. Though an youth organisation, it worked actively among the industrial workers; their work ultimately led to the formation of several TUs among the textile and other workers. For example, they organised the silk workers of Bombay and led their strike lasting for several days. Not only this; the Sanghatana led also to the formation of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP), the Workers and Peasants Party (WPP), the Lal Nishan Party and groups of congressmen and communists, who did active work among the industrial workers. They have also done considerable work among the unorganised and decentralised workers. Its leaders like Yashwant Chavan were instrumental in organising All India Textile Engineering Workers' Conference.

Another interesting union is the *Kamgar Aghadi* run by Dada Samant, elder brother of Dutta Samant of the fame of the textile strike of Bombay in the 80s. Dada Samant was earlier a PSPer (activist of Praja Socialist Party), and worked as such in the railway employees union. Since then he worked in various unions, ultimately taking over his brother's TU. It has members among textile, stone quarries, unorganised, etc workers. His union also exists among the bus transport employees.

There are several other independent or small splinter groups of the TUs. Among them household-help workers (in Pune-Bombay), AICP/UCPI-led groups, and some others. Among the well-organised but unaffiliated ones, mention should be made of pharma workers, Crompton-Greaves, banks, GIC-LIC, govt-employees, etc.

A wide variety of TU and Labor organisations and centres have been covered in the course of the present phase of Oral History program. All the national TU centres were covered eg. AITUC, HMS, CITU, INTUC and BMS. Besides, in various zones, regions and states, several other labor and TU organisations were contacted. Notable among them are: the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, Lal Nishan Party-led Shramik Sangathana, various independent organisations led by CITU leaders in Eastern and Western zones eg. Crompton Greaves Workers Union led mainly by CITU but also by AITUC leaders, mixed organisations participated in by various TUs including the BMS, independent *sanghathanas*, *sanghas*, *associations*, etc, government employees organisations (non-affiliated), railway employees' TUs which did not attach themselves to any (loco, gangmen, station master, etc), railway employees' TU, led jointly by HMS and INTUC-oriented leaders, TU leaders owing allegiance to the UCPI, defence employees' TU organisation, railway leaders belonging to Samata Party, independent teachers' associations, and so on.

Besides, within each major TU organisation, conflicting and dissenting voices could be heard, who spoke openly against or differing from other leaders. This was particularly apparent in the railway segment. But not only in that. In other segments also. There were re-evaluations, re-appraisals, criticisms and even narration of inside stories in several narrations.

### **Labour Constituencies**

This subject has not found its due place in labour history. It has almost been forgotten. But it was one of the most glorious

achievements of the workingclass movement. The labour constituencies were created for the 1946 general elections, when the franchise was limited. They were a prelude and a training ground for the subsequent electoral and constitutional participation of the labouring masses in the post-independence India. S.A. Dange's election to the Bombay Legislative Assembly was a historic event in many senses. His subsequent marathon speech in the Assembly the same year, lasting several hours, is still remembered by many people including the respondents.

It is equally interesting to find out as to how exactly workers and unions organised the election campaign those days. The workers' constituencies were separate and several, e.g. textile, railway, etc constituencies. Members of the unions in each industry constituted the voters. Respondents in Mumbai, as elsewhere also, described as to how they would line up the workers much before the voting hours. Women were very active and enthusiastic. The workers and leaders would go through the chawls and bustees gathering the workers. They gathered in the Kamgar Maidan and other places in the night itself. They slept there and lined up early in the morning before the sunrise. Thus they ensured the victory of their favourite candidates. Preparatory meetings were held in the chawls, and at factories and the mill gates, in the maidans. Elaborate organisational preparations were made. Those days, it was not easy for the trade unionists to get elected. Hence the importance is all the greater.

We also learned interesting details of workers' constituency in Orissa. It is a little-known fact that Baidyanath Rath was elected from the this constituency in the 1946 elections. He had complicated battles with the opponents. The small meetings of activists in the jungles and villages outside Bhubaneshwar, formed the basis of this work. The areas today are transformed into urban outskirts, where Sh. Rath still lives recalling his olden days.

## ***The 1942 Movement and Workers***

The 1942 movement turned out to be an important landmark from the viewpoint of the history of the labour movement. AITUC leaders like Tara Reddy worked actively for the movement and mobilised the workers for the same. They also opposed those in the movement who did not agree with the 1942 'line'. The future HMS and INTUC leaders were among the most active in the workers' activities connected with the 1942 movement. Workers participated in this movement on a big scale in Bombay, UP, Orissa, Bihar and other regions.

Working class formed a huge mass of the people gathered at the Chowpatty Maidan in Bombay when 1942 Resolution was announced in August 1942. Workers struck work in several factories in Bombay and other places. The 'Satara govt' had active contacts with the labour organisations. Railway workers' unions in the GIP and other railways played an active role helping the 1942 movement, both underground and overground.

## **Naval Revolt of 1946 and Workers' Movement**

The workers' contribution to the RIN (Royal Indian Navy i.e. the British navy) revolt, also known as the sailors' revolt, of February 1946, is one of the obscure chapters of the labour movement. Among the concrete facts thrown up by the Oral History work is that of active day to day contacts of the textile and other workers' leaderships with the leaders of the Naval revolt. For example, several GKU leaders and activists (e.g. G.L. Reddy) used to conduct the leaders of the revolt to various meetings and then take them back to their hidings on the docks and the ships.

Naval Dockyard Employees' Union is another organisation that actively helped the naval ratings by helping the latter to set up a kind of base for their activities in the dockyards and by restoring the water supply that was cut off by the Britishers.

The GKU office at the Parel Naka in Bombay was a key centre, from where active contacts were kept up with the ships in revolt. It

was just nearby that two women textile workers were shot at by the marauding British troops; one of them died on the spot. The office and the bridge still stand as witness to history.

### **Labour Movement and Armed Struggle**

The wellknown Telangana and little known Salaya (Gujarat/Saurashtra), and several other struggles express the occasional pressures built up by the working masses to express their sentiments and articulate their demands. In Nanded, Sikka, Travancore-Cochin, Pondicherry, Himachal, W. Bengal, North-eastern regions, Marathwada, Nizam Hyderabad, Nilgiri, Dhenkanal and several other places in the country, the toiling masses had been organised in the trade unions and even armed struggles were launched to further the cause of their movement. Trade union movement, Praja Mandal and anti-Nizam struggles in Nizam's Hyderabad, particularly in Telengana in late 40s, were closely interwoven. The workers' movement in the railways, transport, mines, factories helped the anti-feudal mass armed struggles. In their turn, the anti-Nizam movement helped the growth of political/trade union consciousness of the industrial workers in the region. The interviews recorded bear testimony to this. The trade unions and workers of Hyderabad did a great deal of practical work to send and receive the help of the underground period. This imparted greater militancy to the trade union movement. The armed struggle for a limited purpose and for a short time helped the trade union movement to grow.

The militant, and to a limited extent, armed, movement of the workers of Salaya on the Gujarat sea coast was unique in several ways. The workers of ports, factories, salt workers and others alongwith rural population 'captured' the town for several hours and 'liberated' certain pockets. They had hopes to stretch further in the wider areas.

A little-known fact that came up in the course of the interviews is the *Valsura Camp Revolt*, near Jamnagar in 1946. The RIN revolt of Bombay is wellknown, but this one is hardly known. The leaders

including labour leaders like Vasa, Bhikubhai Vaghela and others from Saurashtra and several princely states worked in the military naval camps among the naval ratings and other personnel preparing an armed revolt against the British government. They planned a general strike.

The wellknown and little-known struggles express the occasional pressures built up by the working masses to express their grievances as well as points of view. In Himachal, W. Bengal, Marathwada, Nilgiri, Dhenkanal and several other places in the country, the toiling masses had been organised in the trade unions and even armed struggles were launched to further the cause of their movement. Trade union and Praja Mandal movements were closely interwoven. The workers' movement in the railways, transport, mines, factories helped the anti-feudal mass armed struggles. In their turn, they helped the growth of political/trade union consciousness of the industrial workers in the regions. The interviews recorded bear testimony to this. The trade unions and workers did a great deal of practical work to send and receive the help of the underground movement. This imparted greater militancy to the trade union movement. The armed struggle for a limited purpose and for a short time helped the trade union movement to grow, though in the long run, unnecessary stretching of it and its unrealistic use without taking into account the situation greatly harmed the TU movement. Armed periods often tended to ignore great potentials and possibilities of the open, legal, constitutional and democratic methods, which were more and more developing. Many unions/movements e.g. in the railways are still to fully recover from the damage done by this attitude.

The respondents, therefore, generally refused to glorify the long-drawn armed struggles and saw, in retrospect, the faults involved. They have also drawn lessons from such experiences.

### **Underground Trade Union Movement**

This is an important aspect that has come to light during the interviews. This is a period which is not well-recorded and

documented. Therefore, the importance of the oral history and recording of the personal and wider reminiscences becomes greater as they present several facts not available anywhere else.

The 1942 movement has already been mentioned. The movement was helped greatly, in many secret and open ways, by the labour organisations, including railway, textile, and other workers. The socialists belonging to the CSP and others played an active role in mobilising workers for the success of the movement. This was particularly clear in Maharashtra, C.P.-Berar, Northern regions, Orissa, etc.

In fact, 1948-51 was the period when the AITUC decided to take a more militant line and oppose the policies of the government in a more aggressive way, including through armed struggles. Even the establishment of a workers' state consequent upon the struggle was visualised. INTUC and HMS opposed this line. Later, AITUC withdrew this line.

During this period, the AITUC largely functioned semi-underground, yet it organised some important struggles in these conditions. The interviews provided a number of 'leads'.

Some underground activities were also part of the 1974 railway strike, as also of the 1960 and 1968 strikes. These movements faced severe repressions. As result, the leaders and activists of AIRF and other TUs had often to carry on their work secretly. NCCRS and the various organisations formed, wherever possible and necessary, a wide network of semi-underground groups and individuals to carry on the regular work contacting, exchange of messages and instructions, transport of literature and materials, organising meetings, keeping contacts with the Jail Committee and the NCCRS, organising defence against police attacks, keeping a check on the workers against police provocations, help workers tide over long period of strike, and other activities. The 1974 strike was a well organised effort mainly due to countrywide network of railwaymen's organisations.



Strikes and movements of cotton textile, jute, tramways, defence, engineering, port and dock, salt, municipal, mines, service sector and many took place during this period. Interviews have yielded important facts. For example, the railway and city workers of Hyderabad as also the bus employees of the state provided transport for taking arms, ammunitions, literature and other materials. They also helped the cadres and leaders to remain underground and function from their hideouts. The example of Kottagudiyam (Kottagudem), Calcutta, Asansol etc are great examples of how ordinary workers helped not only the trade union movement but also the entire society.

### **Public Sector Labour Movement**

Largely after independence, the emergence and growth of public/state sector provided a strong impetus to the growth of the modern workers and their trade union movement. Central and state government employees, defence, petroleum, steel, post and telegraph, railways, NCDC, nationalised banks, GIC, and other nationalised sectors, oil and numerous others emerge as actively new areas/bases of the largescale trade union movement often leading to broad based actions leaving a deep impact on the country as a whole. Modern working class emerges as an important factor. A number of interviews emphasise these facts and add new dimensions to the study of history of the trade union movement. Among the very important but little known or forgotten facts, is that the building of the Vishakhapattanam Steel Plant was the result of the huge mass movement in Andhra Pradesh, as a result of which the Central Government had to concede the demand.

### **Small Scale and Household Sector**

The interviews have yielded lot of information on the workers and their organisations in the household sector industries, often of a secondary and tertiary kind. They bring to light, for example, several facts about the beedi workers' organisations/movements in Rajasthan, Marathwada, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu,

Karnataka, Bihar, Haryana, M.P. and elsewhere. These workers, along with their leaders as well as their organisations launched and fought struggles for most elementary rights and demands, and ultimately spread around the country as a large scale movement. It matured to a point, where like in Aurangabad in Marathwada region, they formed a housing cooperative of their own, something unheard of till now. Pune and Mumbai, for example, have well-organised household workers' organisations.

### **Legal Machinery**

Among the major achievements of the labour movement in India has been the creation of a massive labour / industrial legal machinery to address, deal and channelise the problems/demands of the labour. This has mainly been a post-independence achievement due to both to the trade union struggles and the changed favourable conditions after the end of the colonial rule. Various acts, labour courts, tribunals, awards, wageboards, committees/commissions, consultative mechanisms, participation in government sponsored and government bodies, cooperating with ILO, workers' education, leadership training and so forth are now the part and parcel of the legal labour system.

Besides the government representatives, economists and scholars, various managements etc, the labour leaders and the trade unions have also made very important and historic contributions to this field. Some of the tallest leaders have been associated with it, who have left a deep and lasting impression with their scholarly as well as practical knowledge, study/research, suggestions, actual contributions to the formulation and articulation of the issues etc.

Some portions and aspects of these endeavours are to be found in the interviews, on rationalisation, questions of DA/bonus, formulation of the various bills and acts, laws and by-laws, suggestions on disposition of labour in the context of upgradation and expansion of technology and industry, and several others.

## **Gorakhpur Labour Office**

An important contribution of the Oral History Project has been some facts on the Gorakhpur Labour Office (GLO) that have come up during interviews. Otherwise too, very little has been said and written, and is known about the GLOs. But the interviews yielded some details, which need further study and elaboration. By themselves also, they are undoubtedly a contribution to the subject.

Incidents and facts about Gorakhpur Labour have been mentioned while interviewing respondents in Kottagudam, Hyderabad, Patna etc. These labourers were used as a different category in the mines, factories, and railways during the second world war, and were in existence till a few years after independence. They were kept in isolation in paramilitary form, were highly exploited, including physically as they were kept in chains at some places like in mines in Bihar and were often used to divide the workers and destroy the trade union movements. However they got assimilated in the mainstream trade union movement at the end.

## **Women Workers**

This time several women respondents were interviewed, common activists as well as leaders. They presented several facets and sides that normally are not brought to light.

Women workers and leaders constituted an important and militant contingent of textile, mining, railway, small scale industries workers' and other movements. For example, as some of the interviews showed, women workers were at the forefront in several textile workers' movement in Bombay and elsewhere. The Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) and other organisations owed a lot to them. It was stated that India's first 'Gherao' was organised in 1937 in the Bitiya Textile Mills of Bombay; and this was done by the women workers mainly. The women did not allow the owner to go out for almost a day. Even his food was arranged by the workers. It was only the next day when the negotiations started that the gherao was lifted.

The women workers contributed to the militancy of the struggle by keeping up the tempo and often forced the men workers to go into action. They were by means behind the menfolk in picketing, slogan shouting, strikes, demonstrations and so on. These mostly illiterate workers were a tremendous source behind the militant actions. Some of the outstanding leaders came out of them, including at worker-cadre levels. Their histories have generally been forgotten. The chawls of Parel, Prabhadevi, Girgam and innumerable other places were their centres of activities. They even fought off the police on several occasions. The chawls would reverberate with the sloganeering, meetings, processions and so on.

Besides, the women workers saw to it that their family duties did not come in the way of the movement. They would look after their children and families and took care of any disruptive activities. Thus, they functioned in double capacity. They also looked after the children and families of the leaders and activists, who could not spare time during struggles for their families.

During the textile struggles in Bombay in the '30s and '40s, for example, in the Bitiya Mills strike, the women workers refused to go home to look after their little children home, lest the gherao was weakened and the owner got an opportunity to escape! They had to be convinced that they should be going home in batches.

Women workers on the GIP and other railways were also very active in movements and could be counted upon for support. During the railway strikes of 1960, 1968 and 1974, the families of the workers had to bear the brunt of repression. The women members of the families and women workers themselves took an active part in the movement and organisation.

At one time, there were more than 60 textile mills in Bombay, before independence. Of the workforce, more than 40,000 were women. But they hardly sat in home, and were always on the move.

Women constituted overwhelming majority of the bidi workers in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Among the respondents were the leaders of the bidi workers. In one incident, the bidi workers stopped the motorcade of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi, and handed over a petition. Of course, a large number of women were arrested and their court cases dragged on for long years. This incident took place in Bombay near a place called Haji Ali.

One aspect that came up was that once decided, the women workers would not backtrack from the battle, in contrast to the men, who often hesitated. Women were more decisive and forthright in their resolve, and it was not easy to convince them to go back to work, once the situation had changed. They displayed more involvement than men.

In this context the information on pharma girl workers is important. They constituted the main segment in the unionisation of this section of workers. They were at the forefront of several militant struggles. Not only this; they did not hesitate to brave the lathicharges and police attacks on several occasions. It all shows that their militancy and energies could be channelised into the process of unionisation with right approach. These girls were also an educated and advanced section of workers, conscious of their responsibility.

This fact is important as it shows that even modern educated workers, including women workers, can take clear-cut decisions regarding TU activism and struggles. If needed, they are prepared to forego their family interests in favour of the primary interests in the factory.

Not only Laro Jonko, Roza Deshpande, Tara Reddy, Malini Tulpule, Mrs. Patnaik, Mrs. Vishwanathan and other women respondents but almost all the men respondents highlighted the tremendous contribution and fighting spirit of the women workers.

## **Trade Unionism among Artists**

In Bengal, Maharashtra and elsewhere, many *people's* or *worker-artists* came up out of the labor movement. They were ordinary workers, who in the course of time became artists and singers singing revolutionary songs, performing popular street corner and stage plays, and so on. They played particularly important role during the upsurge in the movements. They became so popular that they could match the professional stars in the appeal and performance. (Late) Amar Sheikh was the most typical of such a category; Narayan Surve is another, who also composes songs and poetry. Their very names could attract people in large numbers, which then would be a prelude to a huge meeting.

But their importance is not confined to only being exceedingly popular. An entire generation or two and large numbers of young artists and followers were produced all over Maharashtra, who still carry on and enrich the traditions established by these worker-artists. With the onset of the use of electronic methods, they have also entered the world of cassettes and albums. Besides, they cooperate with various other artists' groups, both formal and informal, in composing music and organising cultural programs on particular issues.

## **Trade Unionism during the Great Famine**

The role of the working masses cannot be forgotten in the great famine that engulfed Bengal and Bihar in the 40s. Grains were collected, food prepared and then distributed day and night in the food camps organised by the simple workers who worked either as coolies or otherwise. The contributions of these common workers in such moments of crisis empowered the labour movement itself. These experiences were narrated in great details by persons involved while recording their interviews.

Leaders and ordinary cadres and workers did great work during the 1943 famine. From Punjab to Bengal, and from South India to North, people flocked to help the victims. Leaders and activists

from as far as Punjab and Maharashtra went to Bengal for relief work. Respondents from Punjab (e.g. Parduman Singh, Satyapal Dang and others) related first-hand experiences in this field. Some of them actually went there to run relief kitchens and other kinds of work.

*Orissa famine:* One of the lesser known facts is that Orissa was badly affected by the Great Famine of 1942-43. More than 35000 people died due to the famine. Workers and trade unions, along with other sections, did lot of relief work for the affected people.

### **The Days of Partition**

The railway workers and trade unions played great role in providing relief and shelter for suffering people of all the communities during the communal holocaust in the wake of country's partition in 1947. They worked day and night salvaging and helping the victims of communal riots. In places like Panipat, Delhi, areas of Punjab, Calcutta, Bombay, etc, golden chapters were written in this work. The railway unions in the north-western and Bombay regions had to struggle hard to keep the communal unity of the workers and to see that their unions were not destroyed. Similarly, the port and dock workers were also seriously affected, and their organisations struggled tenaciously against divisions.

The days of partition can be cited in this connection when in Calcutta, the tramway depots were the shelter for suffering people of all the communities and the uniform of these workers was accepted as the symbol of peace. They worked day and night salvaging and helping the victims of communal riots. The leaders helped the workers to go to safe places. The TUs worked day and night to guard and protect the workers of various communities.

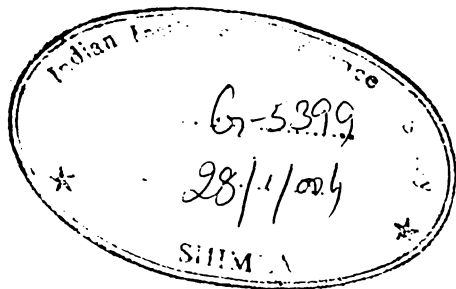
Places like Amritsar and others in Punjab had traumatic experiences. Partition brought about a change in the composition of the working class and deeply affected the TU movement and organisation. The leaders had to struggle hard to see that they did not kill each other in the communal frenzy, and that the workers of

the respective communities reach their assigned countries safely. The pre-partition workers in Amritsar were mainly Muslims, but after the partition, they were predominantly Hindus and Sikhs.

### To Sum up

The documentation of oral history of the labour movement has been a very satisfying experience. We have been able to uncover and salvage considerable history. There have been several important discoveries. The archaeology of labour is really taking shape, to which valuable information is being continuously added. It forms an important base for research in the field of labour history. Lot of important respondents have been interviewed, considerable material/information/history has been retrieved that has proved to be highly valuable, and otherwise would have been lost. The personalities interviewed include some of the most outstanding ones in the rich history of the labour movement. Besides, several new respondents could be located, who were not included in the original list. Many younger persons were also talked to.

The work needs to be carried forward. Many more important as well as not so well known names will keep on being added as the work proceeds and as we come across more facts. The spatial coverage of this effort also needs to be enhanced covering more states and regions. Further, this unique exercise of tapping the memories of activists cannot be postponed, as every delay would mean irretrievable loss of valuable data.





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