

An Archaeology of Labour Movement: Tapping the Oral Sources

(A Study of the Origins and Evolution of the Movement in South India)

The labour movement in India is complex and spread over a wide spectrum of industries, trade unions and geographical areas. A considerable amount of literature is available on the issue, yet more than written material, there are personal experiences and inferences that appear to be subjective but serve as an instrument to resurrect historical evidences objectively.

The oral history has proved to be a source as well as tool for bringing into light the rich material hitherto unknown about the events and aspects of the labour movement, both at individual as well as collective levels. It could be labelled as extracting facts from grass roots and other levels by directly interacting with the source. It stimulates an interaction with the source, in particular the respondents themselves and the material provided by them about the context, not only in the form of literature but also through the recounting of experiences, the unique methods adopted by them to popularise their movement, and fight the numerous undercurrents of tension in the multi-layered fabric of the society.

For example trade union organisations had to solve social issues as well. Prabhakar Choudhary in Rajamundari was one such person who rebelled against the caste system and brought the sweepers (untouchables) from the municipality directly into temples to conduct literacy classes. He also brought together two warring communities together to fight against the common enemy of British rulers.

There are also instances when the workers had to fight for the marginal peasants as part of their own movement. In Chittivalsa, a small town near Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, the British owners of Indigo factory forced the workers who were also peasants to grow Indigo in their fields destroying the quality of soil to such an extent that no food crop could be cultivated. However, soon the Indigo cultivation was replaced by Jute and the factory was turned into a jute mill.

The worker-peasants were now forced to grow jute and sell the raw material to the factory owners at extremely low prices. At work, the same peasants were hired for only four annas a month for unlimited working hours. The harassed workers rebelled and two of them were shot dead inside the factory by the police. It was a signal to launch a prolonged struggle with several dimensions. It was for two anna increase in the salary, fixed working hours since the workers could not spare time for their fields and against atrocities on fellow workers committed by British police. The strike call was given to settle trade union as well as agrarian

issues. However the workers were also aware of the fact that their agitation was part of the mainstream national movement against British rule.

The forms of agitation were also unique and reflected their awareness of the process and the goal. For example the famous Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) functioned through the *Samities* formed in every textile mill in the fashion of Soviets and it was the leadership of these samities (or mill committees) that were elected by the workers. According to a woman textile worker Chandra Praba Ghaghare, when the workers were picketing at the gate stopping others from entering, their union leader Ushatai Dange placed her ten-day-old daughter at the gate and dared the workers to enter the mill only after stepping on her. She left the baby in the care of women workers who fed and fondled her irrespective of their caste and creed. Ushatai wanted the workers to realise that human values were above such differentiations and her message reached directly to her comrades.

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

material. These were the living material/sources and very little effort has been made till now to obtain them.

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

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

One example of the same is the account of Padala Ramarao, son of a poor hawker in Rajamundhry, who could not even manage to feed his family two square meals a day. Padala was illiterate and could not afford to get formal education, but learnt Hindi, English, Telugu and Sanskrit on his own when he was in prison. Padala wrote alongwith 103 other books, the biography of Alluri Sitaramaraju, a mass leader who fought for the cause of tribals and got killed by police. Padala wanted the

example of Alluri to be replicated by his people and the book was turned into a play enacted many times in the working class areas of the town.

Padala started organising the weavers in 1941 which was not included in AITUC till 1957. Padala and his friends launched a movement against scarcity of yarn in 1936 in which many weavers came with them and after few years their organisation was formed. At that time there were 1600 handlooms functional in the town out of which more than 16000 families sustained themselves. All over the country, there were one crore and twenty five lakh weavers and Padala helped to organise them.

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

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

Areas/states covered

The areas covered were mainly were Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. A few individuals from Surat, Mumbai and Delhi and elsewhere were also covered. For example, Namdeo Shenmare from Surat passed away two weeks after he talked to us. Similarly, there are still many others who should be immediately talked to.

Questionnaire

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

Methodology

It was basically the same as in the previous efforts. The questionnaire was sent to the respondents in advance as far as possible. An attempt was also made to ensure the time and place for the interview whenever feasible. However in most cases the interviews could be fixed

only after reaching the destination as the names of the possible but little known respondents were given by the local leaders only. Sometimes, last hour on the spot interviews were also conducted.

In this context it may be pointed out that we needed interpreters for regional languages especially when going to interiors and remote areas. The interviews were done on the basis of the same questionnaire but supplementary questions were also asked since there were unique industries and unions as well as leaders. Detailed replies were sought out from the respondents on various issues. For example, in Chittivalsa, a small town in Andhra Pradesh, it became impossible to talk to the respondents as they did not know either Hindi or English. One of the leaders had a smattering knowledge of English and an attempt was made to conduct the interviews with his help. However, later the concerned union managed to get an interpreter who was fluent in Telugu as well as English. The person himself was a veteran of the movement.

The recourse to the regional languages shows the richness of the movement, as also the fact that the important and the key leaders in the movements in interiors as well as outlying areas were not necessarily English educated. It was found to be a fact in all the states.

Respondents

The respondents were short listed out of the original list which had started getting longer as names continued to be added. Priority was given to the respondents who were veterans, old or ailing. Important activists

and leaders at various levels were also included as and when their names were suggested.

An attempt was also made to include activists and leaders much younger than the previous respondents as they represented the changing trends in the movement and were mentally and physically alert to be able to analyse and help to draw conclusions from their experiences.

Among the respondents, a large number of ordinary workers and activists were included. For example, the loaders or coolies that are called Jatlus or hammals and have a formidable union in Rajamundry and Kakinada, Jute workers in Chittivalsa, port and dock and harbour workers in Visakhapatnam and elsewhere, pulp and paper workers, steel workers, weavers of Kadapa region, Bayrite mine workers and many others were covered in this context.

It was found that women had taken part in considerable number in the local movements and often even led them. Hence, particular attention was paid to share their experiences.

Industries covered

Industry-wise or general or both the types of questionnaires were sent to the respondents where the addresses were available. Dates were finalised in advance, at least roughly. The respondents' interviews were tape recorded in detail with supplementary questions along with the prepared questionnaire. The tapes were preserved for digitalisation.

An attempt was made to cover important respondents from as many Trade Unions as possible, both at national as well as local levels.

Among the major industries covered was port, dock and harbour that form a distinguishing feature in the southern coastal parts. A number of respondents from Mumbai, Visakhapatnam, Chennai, Trichy, Madurai and elsewhere interviewed in the process. Ports, docks and harbours are old establishments originating from the British period and expanding rapidly in the post independence days. These units have undergone much change in character and accordingly the forms of struggle have also been revised.

The common feature of these units with other industries is growing tendency to hire contract workers instead of getting new appointments. The unions have to face challenges as there is no job guarantee for these temporary workers and therefore they feel hesitant to take part in the strikes. The introduction of new machines has also affected adversely as it has brought down the number of workers. However the unions have adjusted themselves according to changing needs and demands have been raised and fought for contract workers.

Another focus of the project was on Railways. Lot of material were collected and facts recorded on the formation of Golden Rock railway workshop, southern and MSM railways as well as other railways.

Textiles and handlooms formed an important segment in the process of trade union struggle in South. There were powerful organisations in Madurai, Trichy, Coimbatore, Mumbai, Surat, Kadapa and other areas. Mysore Textile Labour Union needs a special mention here as an eyewitness account was recorded about its formation in early 1940s and the process of its evolution through various struggles. They had taken part in the overthrow of the Mysore estate launching a “Mysore Chalo” movement in 1947.

Another segment to be mentioned here is that of toddy tappers who represent a considerable contingent of workers. They have proved to be quite industrious and have improved their lot by spreading over to other areas as and when they could manage with the cash earned. In the rural areas of Rajamundry, these toddy tappers have bought plots of land from the upper caste landlords and have flourished to such an extent that they have turned into money lenders. As the caste system is losing its hold, the Brahmin and non-Brahmin upper caste families, losing their land to these toddy tappers, are even taking loan from them.

The hammals or Jatlus as they are popularly called, have a long tradition of organising themselves and launching struggles for their demands. Vijayawada, Rajamundari and Kakinada represent rich

traditions of Jatlu movement and organisations. Not long ago, the Jatlus were highly disorganised, living in extreme deprivation and poor working conditions. Their work was decentralised and establishments they worked for kept changing. It was difficult to focus the struggle and organise them accordingly.

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

In Rajamunadhry, an experiment has been made to improve the lot of such workers. They have formed a cooperative and have a multi-storied office with several wholetimers working for the union. The cooperative pays the Jatlus gratuity, health services and emergency grants. Each of the constituent unit has been allotted an almirah to preserve their office records separately and a separate secretary is appointed for that. Everything is highly regularised and transparent. The Jatlus now bargain with the authorities from a position of strength that the union has given them. Each one of them is hard working and devoted

to their organisation. They are no more the most deprived of the society. The unity and commitment have given them a new definition of power.

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

Women workers

The women workers have played a pioneering role in the organisation of trade unions in many places. The women radio workers in BEL in Bangalore had a long struggle to their credit and formed the union at their own initiative in the late 1950s. Same is true about the textile workers of Bombay and Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh. Women workers, particularly young girl workers, have fought many a militant battles in prawn, fishery, packaging, textile and other industries in Tamilnadu. Especially, they have made a unique contribution in the women prisoners' movement in the latter state. Women municipal workers in AP, Tamilnadu and elsewhere, and their leaders as elected councillors have made notable contributions.

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

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

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

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

The workers themselves fought those elements who tried to harm the plant.

Labour organisations covered

A wide range of national, regional and local labour and trade union organisations were covered. They included AITUC, INTUC, CITU, HMS, AITUC-HMS, INTUC Congress-Khadi, Working People's Trade Union Council, AICTU/MCPI, East Coast Railway Shramik Union, National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFRI), AIRF, GKU, Jute Workers' Trade Union, Temple Workers' Union, Port, Dock and Harbour Workers' Union, VSP unions, independents, Loaders' Union, Road Transport Workers' Union, Electricity Workers' Union and Retired Electricity Workers' Association, Handloom Cooperatives, Sweepers' Union and several others.

Factors contributing to the uniqueness of the movement

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

Port, Dock and Harbour workers' movement played a pioneering role helping to create several organisations in other industries/trades in the coastal areas. Port and harbours are old establishments, originating generally in British times and expanding rapidly in post-independence phase. Some ports and harbours were private and owned by big businessmen, like in Vizag, which was later nationalised after

independence. The workers lived in deplorable conditions. They had usually migrated from other areas in search of jobs while the land for port and harbour was taken away from the fishermen who shifted to other places. In the period of British rule these workers had no rights and had to work for unlimited hours. In fact the port and docks usually have played a significant role in the development of the villages and towns on the coastal areas. Visakhapatnam provides an example of the same. The villages in the coastal areas here vanished as the port, dock and harbours were developed. However the trade union had a great role to play in improving the lot of workers here.

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

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

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

Textile and handloom cooperative workers' movement in Tamilnadu has been a revelation. Born in the early 1940s, the handloom cooperative workers' and weavers' movements and organisations have been since effective in combating the big business domination and getting some of their demands met. Tirunelveli, Tirupur, Madurai and many other centres are testimony to the unique experiments in movements and cooperatives. Women have played a particularly important role in these events.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The organisers had to travel without a crust of bread for the whole day. Most of the employees belonged to lower castes especially the gangmen were untouchables. They never allowed the high caste organisers to even touch their food as it would have amounted to

committing a sin. They even preferred to let their leaders starve as they did not want them to lose their high caste.

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

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

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

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

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

In all these narratives, a new trend in the trade union movement appears to be emerging where the gap between the management and the worker is slowly getting dim. The educated workers know their job and they have learnt to see it in larger perspective. They are aware of their

social responsibility and hence are reluctant to take any step that would hamper production.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historic movements have been organised in Tamilnadu, AP and Karnataka and in places therein by the toddy, temple, transport, beedi, sweepers, and other types of workers, as reflected in the interviews. These movements have brought consciousness and organisation into the working class, and at the same time means of creating a better place in the society have been invented. This is particularly apparent in the handloom cooperative movements and organisations. The coops were organised way back in the 1940s in Tamilnadu and Andhra regions as a weapon of struggle for better living and at the same time to oppose the monopolist control by the traders and owners. The coops provided strength and jobs to the weavers and workers at a time when they were on the verge of losing

the livelihood, in fact their very lives. The handloom weavers' coops have survived down the decades, becoming powerful force in the textile and handloom industry. Contribution of the freedom struggles and of the militant trade union movements cannot be underestimated. It is also an example of how fight in a creative way

Conclusion

The interviews and the discussions with the respondents bring out many unknown and lesser-known facts of the working class movement in the southern states. It has to be noted that the movement had many distinguishing features not be found elsewhere. At the same time, many important details and leads have come out that need to be worked out further. The struggles and organisations in the south had active life and vibrancy of their own. The coastal areas and the organisations of the workers therein have contributed a lot to the pre- and the post-independence Indian labour movements. Culture and language as well as distinct industries and business make their own contribution.

Krishna Jha,

Anil Rajimwale.