

## SHORT PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES AND TRANSCRIPT

**Name:** Jayprakash Bhilare :

**Occupation:** Mill Workers. He was employed with Morarji Mills. He was victimised and forced to resign in 1981.

**Occupation during the Strike:** General Secretary of Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union.

**Present Occupation:** A full time activist of the MGKU.

**Native Place - Bhilar, Mahabaleshwar - Satara district**

**Wages** Starting Wage Rs.225/- p.m. in the year 1972. His wages then went upto Rs.850/- to Rs.900/- p.m.

**History:** He was actively involved in leading the textile workers strike along with Dr. Datta Samant, in 1982. He started his apprenticeship in Morarji Mills, where his father worked and continued there for 3 years. Later he worked in Jam Mills in Lalnaug. He has been a mill worker since 1971.

### **Jayprakash Bhilare:**

The strike was preceded by the submission of a 36 point charter of demands put up by the Shiv Sena in October 1981. They campaigned in the mill area and promised to start an agitation on these demands. They threatened strike. They created an atmosphere of militancy and expectation amongst the workers. The workers wanted to go on strike. Then the Sena called a meeting in Kamgar Maidan. Balasaheb Thackeray announced that he has had talks with Chief Minister A.R. Antulay and he had secured an assurance that something would be done soon. So the threat of indefinite strike was withdrawn. The mill workers were by that time in no mood to go back. They have a history of struggle. They rarely withdraw. So when Thackeray said this the workers got up and walked out, right in the middle of his speech!

The Sena had won a wage hike in Madhusudan Mills and the mill workers were led to believe that Sena would provide a militant leadership for them to fight. But they backed down at the last minute and this angered the workers. Datta Samant had won an equally good wage hike in Empire Dyeing. The workers decided that if we have to fight a decisive battle they would need a leader like Doctor Samant. So they decided to get him into the textile industry. Workers went to Doctor, but he was not interested. The situation in the industry was complicated. He felt he could not be effective or solve the problem, given the BIR Act, the RMMS, the Congress government and the mill owners- there was a strong nexus amongst the three. So I am not coming he said. But workers were adamant, They gheraoed him the whole day and night. So he had to agree. So he came

to the mill area and thereby started a great battle. The workers of 7 mills were already on strike for bonus. Doctor said- first let us solve this problem and then we can go on to the issues of wage hike, etc. But the issue of these seven mills didn't seem anywhere near a solution and the mood of the workers was – do or die. The mills which were on strike included Standard, Shreeniwas, Prakash Cotton, Hindoostan, Crown.

A High-Power Commission was announced by Chief Minister Antulay. But the workers of these seven mills had decided that they would not go back to work until they won their bonus demand. The government and the millowners insisted that the strike should be withdrawn before a settlement could be reached. But the workers were adamant. There were disturbances in every mill. Workers gheraoed managers and did not allow them to go out for two whole days. There was violence. Workers kept pressurising Datta Samant to declare the date for indefinite strike. Finally Doctor gave the call on January 6 for indefinite strike from January 18. This was a historic action on the part of textile workers, that they forced the leadership to declare strike.

Antulay was then forced to resign due to the corruption charges in connection with the cement scam. Then Babasaheb Bhonsle became the Chief Minister. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of his term, he was asked by press reporters as to what he was going to do about the textile workers' strike. (The 13<sup>th</sup> day has the connotation related with the ritual on the 13<sup>th</sup> day after the death of a Hindu, when the soul is finally laid to rest). Babasaheb Bhonsle said – This is the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the strike (meaning- the strike was over as far as he was concerned). (**His offer**)

I was working in Jam Mills. In our Lalbag zone, we used to meet every day to review things.

Not a single worker went to work. The other textile strikes that I have seen there were always some workers who went to work. This time even the essential maintenance staff, like the boiler men etc. they too did not go to work. The first two months there was no move on the part of the mill owners. After that there were some incidents. In Century Mills there was an attempt to break the strike and other workers prevented it, leading to some clashes. Strike breakers were thrashed. The police arrested the workers and charged them under Section 151 and 144. False cases were foisted. The management of Century started getting workers in under police escort. The strike breakers were put into tempos and they were escorted by police vans travelling in front and at the back. The RMMs workers were trying to break the strike. This led to violence and two or three people were killed; one worker in Spring Mills was killed. We, that is me, Dada Samant and some other main activists from other mills, we were charged with this murder.

Actually two or three workers were involved, they were there too in the case; the rest of us were arrested because we were leaders of the strike. We were badly beaten for three days in the lock up. It had nothing to do with the murder. They kept telling us to stop the strike. They made their own statements and recorded them. When our families came to meet us, we would be beaten in front of them, so that this would create terror. To demoralise the others outside. They would bring us out of the lockup any time of the day or night and subject us to a beating. The High Court granted us bail, and later I was acquitted. They were others who were arrested, at least 70 to 80 under the National Security Act. They were all acquitted later.

The textile industry was almost the first in India. All the other industries came afterwards, engineering, chemical and pharmaceutical. They came up with the capital generated in the textile industry. But the workers in all these industries have more facilities, more wages than textile workers. Even something like canteens. There is a huge difference in their canteens and ours. The mill canteens are so bad, you would not drink even water there.

So the textile workers said- we were the first, we made the city, we sweated blood, we created the national wealth on the basis of which these other industries have come into being, and what did we get in exchange? Textile workers were getting only their basic wage and DA, no other allowance. We were getting only five days casual leave. Other workers in other industries had started getting allowances for travelling, health benefits, etc. and 10 to 12 days casual leave. This agitated the textile workers.

The textile workers have fought under the leadership of Com. Dange. I too participated in the 1974 strike although I was not in the leadership. I was just an ordinary worker.

Workers fought during that strike. There was an expectation that we would get something. But that didn't happen. Workers were disappointed when we got only a four-rupee hike and that too not in the basic wage. Dange's popularity waned. Then as I said, the Sena made the promise that textile workers would be able to win the facilities and wages on par with other industries. It was they who created this expectation. Then they withdrew. At that time Datta Samant was winning a lot for the workers of these workers in other industries. He had a militant image. So the workers went to him. He accepted the leadership.

During the strike period the workers of each area would meet in their own respective area- there were different spots. This kept the strike going. Then the police used to cordon these places so that the meetings could not take place, so then they had to gather elsewhere. But they met regularly. They would read the newspapers, the report of the previous day's committee meeting with Doctor in Ghatkopar would be conveyed, local decisions would be taken.

Doctor had warned right from the beginning that the strike would last for a minimum of 6 months. So many of the workers especially those from Western Maharashtra, i.e. Sangli, Satara, Pune, all went to their villages. So the workers who stayed back here had a problem- of how to survive. There were such a large number of workers, how could we sustain them? So we used to take 'prabhat pheri's (morning marches). Then Doctor took a tour of the rural areas and asked people there to collect grain and send it to the striking workers. The people of Western Maharashtra responded enthusiastically and thousands of bags of grain would come in daily into Bombay. This would be sent to each zone and it would be distributed from there. The other unions owing allegiance to Doctor in Bombay collected about Rs 3 crores for the textile workers. This was distributed for the children, for their fees and books and also for those who fell ill, for medical expenses. The strike went on well for about 6 to 7 months. In the 4 months after that, it started to break.

In September 1982 we started a Jail Bhara and thousands were arrested. Datta Samant was also arrested in October and sentenced to 15 days imprisonment. At that time, Indira Gandhi sent emissaries, Pratibha Patil and Pranab Mukerjee to meet Doctor in jail. A draft was prepared and Doctor approved it. But Vasantdada was Chief Minister by then and he warned that if the strike was settled with Doctor then nothing would be left of the Congress. He claimed he could settle it in 15 days. When Samant was released went to see Indira Gandhi but she refused to meet him. She put him off saying that she would give the matter thought later. So Doctor did try to settle the strike but the Congress leaders were more interested in their survival and politics.

Vasantdada set about breaking the strike. RMMS people were sent to the villages and with the help of local Congress leaders they started to pressurise and bribe and threaten the workers to return to the mills. State Transport buses were pressed into service and the workers were brought back.

The Left did not offer the kind of support that they should have given. None of their activists remained outside the gates at this point. Maybe they were angry with Doctor because the workers were with him now. This (textile mills) is used to be a stronghold of the Left before the Sena broke their domination. Krishna Desai was murdered. After the 1974 strike led by Dange, Left was not active amongst the mill workers.