

Satya Narayan Thakur, Secretary, AITUC, Delhi

Name	Satya Narayan Thakur, Secretary, AITUC, (Unorganized, Sugar etc.)
Date of Interview	
Time	
Place	Ajoy Bhawan, Delhi
Context	He comes across as a committed and simple man who has a very good command over the trade union issues due to his activism. Though now he is old yet he has organized all sorts of unions from khadi, unorganized to sugar and then as a national leader he dealt with all types of trade unions and issues.
Interviewers	Anil Rajimwale & Krishna Jha

Biographical Sketches

Thakurji as he is popularly called was born in Darbhanga and studied upto 11th class. In those days the "Sarvodaya" movement was going on in Bihar. From his younger days itself he was against feudalism, religion and superstition. He joined Khadi Gramudyog and joined at Muzzarpur. From the beginning he started witnessing corruption and worked against it. In the process the management targeted him. He brought out a small bulletin "Karya Kartaon Ki Awaz" (Voice of the Workers) and sold it among the Khadi Gramudyog workers opposing the idea of class- collaboration advocated by Gandhi. In 1970 he was instrumental in organizing a one-day token strike of all Bihar khadi workers. For putting forward a demand charter he was removed from service. As a result he toured the whole of Bihar mobilizing the khadi workers and though the management tried to crush him but the movement spread. Vinobhaji and later JP himself intervened and tried to solve the problem but when the management saw they were beginning to favour the workers they broke off the arbitration. Then he worked in Bihar AITUC in various trade unions and finally moved to the center where he is currently a secretary.

Transcript Summary

He begins by saying – My name is Satya Narayan Thakur. I was born in January 1937. My father's name was Anuplal Thakur. My village was called Darra and it was in Darbhanga district formerly and now in Samastipur. I have studied upto 11th standard in school though never went to collect my certificate.

I was once asked to write an essay on “Sarvodaya” by my teacher in school. I followed the usual format we were taught and wrote down accordingly. But while summing up I wrote that Sarvodaya was no solution for the problems faced by our countrymen and it was only through bloody revolution that we could resolve them. The headmaster flared up though I tried to reason with him that the essay had not violated the format, and that I had every right to write my own observations. Similarly I tried to criticize the villagers' blind faith in supernatural forces and ritual taboos.

The first political event in my village took place on the occasion of Stalin's death in 1955. I did not have any idea about Marxism then but yet at my initiative the condolence meeting was organized with the participation of other political activists too.

Our village used to be flooded in rainy season. In 1955 when the floods came I was also taking part in the relief distribution that used to be brought by boat every week. One day the boat with ration capsized and the poor in the village had nothing to eat for a week resulting in several starvation deaths. Some villagers said that the grain could be obtained from the village landlord and the idea appealed to me. We talked to the landless and soon with a crowd of three hundred we approached the landlord. He agreed to donate grains to each one of them. I became a hero in the locality.

The rural labour began coming to me with their problems. I had heard that workers go on strike for their demands and asked these agricultural workers to strike. “Stop work”, I told them. As the workers refused to go to the fields, the village elders called a meeting and agreed to raise their wages by a fistful of grain. Within hours the deadlock was over.

My father wanted me to become a lawyer, but I had no intention of either to continue with my studies or to take up a job. One of my friends forced me to apply for a job in Khadi Gramudhyog in Muzaffarpur. I applied and agreed to appear for the interview on a condition that he would take me into a film. I got selected and was sent for training to Ranipatara in Purnea. It proved to be a long time involvement.

In Ranipatara I was given the charge of the mess where the teachers and the acharya himself was involved in corruption especially in milk distribution accounting. I exposed the scam through a handwritten wall newspaper. Consequently I was asked to appear before the authorities. However the initiative had its effect and those involved were chastened. At the end of the training a letter was sent to the authorities branding me as a

“trade unionist”. The result was delay in my appointment. At my new job, I was again given the charge of the mess dealing with 500 persons. Again I started exposing the corrupt practices. At this stage a worker came to me for help. He wanted me to write an application for him as he was injured while at work and wanted medical help. But instead he was abused because I had written his application and got even discharged. He was from Khadi hand paper mill. The injustice provoked the workers and when I asked them to go on strike they agreed unanimously without thinking about the consequences. The workers’ stand was vindicated and the injured worker got not only his job back but also some money as compensation.

Thus I was a trade union leader by the workers themselves. By this time I was bringing out a bulletin, “Karya karataon Ki Awaz” (Voice of the workers). I also opposed a circular asking the workers to read the Sarvodaya literature for which an amount of Rs. 2 was to be deducted for their salary every month. This step was to force the workers to go through a particular kind of literature.

It was a time when Khadi workers from other parts of the state also started seeking my help to solve their problems. Forming a trade union of Khadi workers was not an easy job. The concepts of relations between worker and management and the economic aspect of it was never considered here. Khadi for example was not seen as a commodity but as an idea.

The monthly bulletin that I brought out dealt with the issues that workers faced. Its contents had deep impact not only on workers but also on management and the movement itself. I tried to focus on the gap between the ideas of Gandhiji and practice of the same by his disciples. I never opposed Gandhiji’s ideas. My initiatives were to bring out their positive aspects that went in favour of the workers. Gandhiji had himself started a trade union of workers.

I tried to show that in the institutions established by him labour-management conflict and class-struggle had in fact taken shape, and it was no more a community based on brotherly relations.

Already in 1970 a one day all-Bihar token strike of khadi workers had taken place. I had been in the meantime removed from my job in Khadi Gramudhyog presenting workers demand charter and pressing for democratization of khadi institutions, so that workers could also be represented in management. I toured all the districts of Bihar organizing tens of thousands of khadi workers. The management even tried to implicate in a murder case within the Ashram premises, which was in fact committed by their own people. They failed and the trade union movement spread further.

At first Vinobhaji tried to mediate in the conflict. He himself came to Muzzaffarpur and I had the opportunity to meet him. “Baba” (Vinobhaji) asked whether we will accept his

mediation or arbitration. If both sides accepted only then he would act "Kazi". We accepted his proposals and suggestion in to. But at a later stage, the management backed out when it found that things were not going their way and Vinobhaji had begun displaying sympathies with the workers. Arbitration failed ultimately and Babaji asked us to act as we thought it fit, including legal action but without malice.

Later JP also tried to arbitrate. He reminded himself in talks with me that he was a trade union leader once. Initially he was reluctant even unsympathetic to workers and refused to take their memorandum. This led to great agitation and resentment among workers. The arbitration went ahead but as the management found that the union was accepting every suggestion of JP's it broke off, after agreeing initially. JP even asked them to reinstate me and to provide me an office space for the union. But two days later the management conveyed its non-acceptance and the arbitration broke off. JP was angry at this attitude of the management and told me of it in Patna to go ahead as we liked and expressed his sympathies with us. Consequently we began preparing for an indefinite strike beginning on 16th Nov. 1976.