

Kachra Bhai S Baghela, (AITUC), Surat, Gujarat

A short transcriptive note on Kachra Bhai Baghela, President of Sudhrai Mazdoor Union of Surat Municipal Corporation, (AITUC) interviewed in Surat on July 23, 2004

I come from a very humble background as my name itself suggests. I do not remember the exact date of my birth but was born sometime in September, 1923 in a village called Mousa in Kheda district. My father had a small plot of land that never yielded enough to feed the entire family. It was at this time that great famine called "Chhappania Akaal" gripped the entire countryside. Entire families were getting wiped out turning the villages into graveyards. I was left in the care of my mother as my father came to Surat in search of a job. He joined as Safai Mazdoor in the Corporation and brought me and my mother to the city.

I was admitted in a school. Like all schools in Surat, Dalit children were not allowed to sit with other kids. "Savarna" or high caste children studied in a separate classroom as they refused to mix with the "Avarna" or Dalits. I hated the segregation and refused to attend classes after two years.

I joined the corporation which was then only municipality and there was no elected body to look after the administration. The British Government used to appoint the Management Committee.

I was a Safai Mazdoor and had to carry headloads of dirt and garbage for disposal. There were 150 such workers. More than half were women who were made to carry the most dirty loads and got one rupee more than their male counterparts, Rs 14 while me and others got Rs 13. There was no Dearness Allowance or other benefits.

It was at this time that one of the tallest trade union leader of Surat, Comrade Nanubhai Desai, got released from Nasik jail and organised these workers to agitate for their demands. It was 1942 and only a year later, Municipal Kamgar Union was formed and all permanent workers became its members.

In 1945, an agitation was launched for various rights, pension and many other demands. The strike was complete and the entire town turned into a foul smelling garbage dump. The administration had to yield and after four days negotiations started. Alongwith the union members, we got the demand for DA accepted at the fixed rate of Rs 4 under the leadership of Nanubhai.

However, the British management did not spare the leaders of the strike. Nanubhai was sent "Tari Par", to Billimora, away from the boundaries of district administration. It was in the Gaekwadi estate and Nanubhai got himself busy in organising trade unions there.

On August 15, 1947, when the country was declared free, all the workers celebrated the day and did not attend to their duties. The management refused to grant them leave. The wages for the day remains pending even today.

In 1956, the union got formally registered though the struggle was initiated in 1943 itself.

Kamdar Union got split and a new union was formed called Sudhrai Mazdoor Union under the leadership of me and Namdeo Shenmare. The Kamdar union was led by Bhikhubhai Kalidas Bhagat and Yashwant Rao Chouhan was general secretary. Both the unions were led by the communists only and after two years, differences were sorted out and Kamdar union merged in Sudhrai Mazdoor Union that is still functional.

I am also the president of the union of organised safai workers who lived at subsistence level. We used to visit the shacks of the workers and share their problems. The first victory that the union had won was the emptying of headload only once a day instead of twice as was the practice.

I always remained very close to the masses. To collect the workers for meetings, we adopted a tribal practice, drumming the plates. Alongwith my comrades, I used to work the whole night as the shifts varied. We used to have meeting even at 4 am in the morning and the women workers also used to attend them. They were also active participants of the movement. In 1981, when the strike was announced in a meeting attended by a large gathering and addressed by various leaders, police came with arrest warrants for twenty two of them. The women workers fought against the police and did not allow them to take away their leaders. The police went back and came only when the meeting was over.

We organised struggles not only for the interests of the safai mazdoors of the corporation but also joined hands with other workers whenever they launched a struggle. In 1974, the safai mazdoors joined the railway strike and helped the railwaymen to continue their struggle.

In 1994 when the plague attacked the residents of Surat, the safai mazdoors offered their services in keeping the city clean and look after the living and pay services tot he dead. Their role is still remembered by the people as legendary.

Even at the age of eighty, I still feel active and move around and organise the workers.

Kachra Bhai S Baghela (AITUC), Surat, Gujarat

A short biographical note on Kachra Bhai Baghela, President of Sudhrai Mazdoor Union of Surat Municipal Corporation, (AITUC) interviewed in Surat on July 23, 2004

Kachra Bhai Baghela comes from a very humble background as his name itself suggests. He said he was born in September, 1923 but does not know the exact date in a village called Mousa in Kheda district. His father had a small plot of land that never yielded enough to feed the entire family. It was at this time that great famine called "Chhappania Akaal" gripped the entire countryside. Entire families were getting wiped out turning the villages into graveyards. Kachra Bhai was left in the care of his mother as his father came to Surat in search of a job. He joined as Safai Mazdoor in the Corporation and brought his family.

Kachra Bhai was admitted in a school. Like all schools in Surat, Dalit children were not allowed to sit with other kids. "Savarna" or high caste children studied in a separate classroom as they refused to mix with the "Avarna" or Dalits. Kachra Bhai hated the segregation and refused to attend classes after two years.

Kachra Bhai joined the corporation which was then only municipality and there was no elected body to look after the administration. The British Government used to appoint the Management Committee.

Kachra Bhai was a Safai Mazdoor and had to carry headloads of dirt and garbage for disposal. There were 150 such workers. More than half were women who were made to carry the most dirty loads and got one rupee more than their male counterparts, Rs 14 while Kachra Bhai and others got Rs 13. There was no Dearness Allowance or other benefits.

It was at this time that one of the tallest trade union leader of Surat, Comrade Nanubhai Desai, got released from Nasik jail and organised these workers to agitate for their demands. It was 1942 and only a year later, Municipal Kamgar Union was formed and all permanent workers became its members.

In 1945, an agitation was launched for various rights, pension and many other demands. The strike was complete and the entire town turned into a foul smelling garbage dump. The administration had to yield and after four days negotiations started. Kachra Bhai and the union got the demand for DA accepted at the fixed rate of Rs 4 under the leadership of Nanubhai.

However, the British management did not spare the leaders of the strike. Nanubhai was sent "Tari Par", to Billimora, away from the boundaries of district administration. It was in the Gaekwadi estate and Nanubhai got himself busy in organising trade unions there.

On August 15, 1947, when the country was declared free, all the workers celebrated the day and did not attend to their duties. The management refused to grant them leave. The wages for the day remains pending even to-

day.

In 1956, the union got formally registered though the struggle was initiated in 1943 itself.

Kamdar Union got split and a new union was formed called Sudhrai Mazdoor Union under the leadership of Kachra Bhai and Namdeo Shenmare. The Kamdar union was led by Bhikhubhai Kalidas Bhagat and Yashwant Rao Chouhan was general secretary. Both the unions were led by the communists only and after two years, differences were sorted out and Kamdar union merged in Sudhrai Mazdoor Union that is still functional.

Kachra Bhai, who is the president of the union organised safai workers who lived at subsistence level. These leaders used to visit the shacks of the workers and share their problems. The first victory that the union had won was the emptying of headload only once a day instead of twice as was the practice.

Kachra Bhai always remained very close to the masses. To collect the workers for meetings, they adopted a tribal practice, drumming the plates. Kachra Bhai and his comrades used to work the whole night as the shifts varied. They used to have meeting even at 4 am in the morning and the women workers also used to attend them. They were also active participants of the movement. In 1981, when the strike was announced in a meeting attended by a large gathering and addressed by various leaders, police came with arrest warrants for twenty two of them. The women workers fought against the police and did not allow them to take away their leaders. The police went back and came only when the meeting was over.

Under the leadership of Kachra Bhai, the safai mazdoors of the corporation fought not only for their own interests but also joined hands with other workers whenever they launched a struggle. In 1974, the safai mazdoors joined the railway strike and helped the railwaymen to continue their struggle.

Under the leadership of Kachrabhai, in 1994 when the plague attacked the residents of Surat, the safai mazdoors offered their services in keeping the city clean and look after the living and pay services to the dead. Their role is still remembered by the people as legendary.

At the age of eighty, Kachra Bhai is still undaunted, moves around and organises the workers tirelessly.