

Name: Sindhutai Marhne :

Occupation during the Strike An ex-mill worker in Phoenix mills.

Native Place - Malegaon, Born in Mumbai

Wages: Starting Wage Rs.750/- p.m. She earned an additional Rs.350/- to Rs.400/ for extra work.

History: She was an active participant in the textile strike led by Dr. Datta Samant in 1982. She studied in a municipal school till the ninth standard, in the Delisle Road area of Curry Road. Her father was a worker in Poddar Mills and her uncle in Phoenix Mills. Her mother ran a khandani (homely restaurant) business in which Sindhutai since her childhood helped her mother in her business. She went to Pune after marriage. She returned three years later and was recruited in the place of her mother-in-law at Phoenix Mills, in the Reeling department. She continues to fight a legal case to regain her job. Due to acute and prolonged financial crisis, she had to vacate her rented accommodation in the mill area and shift to live with her mother in Kalyan, an extended suburb of Mumbai.

Sindhutai Marhane:

' My entire family was in the mills. My father, my mother in law, my cousins everyone. I joined Phoenix Mills in 1972 in place of my mother in law. I was in the reeling department. There was a period of three months of training and then I became a badli¹ worker. There were many women then in the mills. There were 50- 60 women in my department, and there were women in other departments too- reeling, winding, waste department.

I was educated till ninth standard. I could not complete my Matriculation because I was married off.

My father was in Dange's Lal Bawta² union. He used to go for the public meetings. I used to be interested in the Lal Bawta ; in their gate meetings and other related activities. I used to go and listen to speeches even as a child. I used to take my father's lunch to the mill. This was not far from where we stayed and would hang around and listen to the speeches when there were gate meetings. I heard all of them, the Congress RMMS, the Lal Bawta, the Shiv Sena- though that came later.

I used to be influenced by the communists but in the mill, we were forced to become members of the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh³. They are the representative union and we had to go to them for everything. So we had no choice, and we then would all become members of both unions. The RMMS would favour those who were close to

¹ Explain Badli Kamgar

² Red Flag

them, do their work and ignore the demands of those they who were not with them. If someone didn't listen to them, they would say- you'll get a slap, but there was no *dadagiri* like there is now. Amongst the women the '*nayikins*'⁴ used to be the RMMS leaders and they would put pressure on the women. All were not like that. Some of them were good too.

The millowners never gave the workers anything unless they went on strike.

I was active in the 1973 strike led by Dange. Women were very active during that strike. We would sit outside the Phoenix Mill gate all night to see to it that no one tried to go inside to work. The leaders would also be there with us. At that time, there were Ahilya Rangnekar⁵ and Mrinal Gore⁶. The workers were dissatisfied after the withdrawal of the Dange strike. Then the Sena came. The RMMS began to pressurize us even further, saying join the union. The mill workers were poorly paid compared to other industries. That is why they turned to Doctor Samant.

The workers went and brought Doctor Datta Samant. He was not willing to come and lead us. He had warned the workers. He did not really call the strike. The mill workers made him call it. Doctor Samant called a meeting in Jamboree Maidan⁷. There was a lot of enthusiasm. The younger workers were clamoring for a strike. Then he called another meeting, and he gave the call for indefinite strike. I became active in the 1982 strike. He had warned all of us. He said he would not call off the strike until he felt there was a fair settlement. He said we should not ask him to withdraw the strike afterwards. There was no settlement so the strike has never been called off. Even today. The strike was total. All the mills were closed. For six months not a single worker went to work. Then the RMMS started bringing outsiders in closed vans into the mills to break the strike. This slowly led to the demoralization of the workers. They could not hold out for longer. They had to go back to work in spite of themselves. The RMMS and *goondas* would come in to the chawls and drag workers out to get them to go back to work. They came for me too. But I refused to go. My father and my cousins also asked me not to go. There were rumors going around as to what happened to women who went to stay and work in the mills. Some women who lived near my house went to work in India United mills. The RMMS used to make provision for them to stay there, eat etc.. There were incidents of rape and two women were even killed. In Century Mills too women were harassed. There were many women in the initial period of the strike. You can see this in the

³ RMMS

⁴ Women Supervisor

⁵ Ahilya Rangnekar (CPM)

⁶ Socialist Party

⁷ Historic place for working class movement

photographs of the strike. But later when the mills started running there were very few women who were taken back to work.

When 13 mills were nationalised the workers went to work.

The workers suffered terribly during the long drawn out strike. There was no sign of the end of the strike. In many families, both parents were mill workers. Children had to leave school. Or take up small jobs, and mill workers' wives would go out to work as domestic workers here and there. The union helped. They gathered grain and money and they would distribute it. Lal Nishan was supporting the strike, so they helped us.

I never went back to work. Because the strike never ended. When I tried to go back to the mill, they never took me back. The case is still in court.

There was a difference between the workers who came from the Konkan and those who were from Western Maharashtra- from *desh*⁸. They all went back to their villages, because they had land there. But we, who were from Kokan, we had to stay here.

The Left was still there in the area. The Lal Nishan group. They were not finished. They supported the strike.

⁸ Regional Background