

Interview Summary & Biographical Sketch

Name : Nuteneswar Khobragade, (Manganese & Iron Ore mines, Industrial Workers & Beedi) AITUC, Chattisgarh.

Date:- June 24, 2003.

Time:- 6.15 pm to 8.25 pm.

Venue:- Party office, Raipur.

Interviewer:- Bobby Poulouse

Context:- N. Khobraghde came across as slightly impatient person who was in a hurry and looked at the main point at issue and worked on it. He was not a complicated man, but a direct person.

Interview Summary

Nuteneshwar Khobragade began by saying that he was born on March 2nd 1937 at Wardha in Maharastra to a farmer family. In 1954 he passed matric. His family was not leftist. His attraction to politics began with seeing his uncle who was leader of SC Federation. He used to see all political leaders coming to him. He was a Nagar Palika Chairman two times. Khobragade said his initiation to labour field came from the fact that the Wardha area had lots of beedi mazdoors and naturally he became close to them and used to often stay with them so he from childhood knew a lot about them. In 1956 his family shifted to Nagpur and there he came into contact with left people and joined them. After two years in 1958 he became a whole timer working with SKMS in Thirudi mines (in Balaghat zilla) under the tutelege of senior leaders. He started his trade union work with Krishna Modi who was working in Thirudi mines which were manganese ore mines. He worked with Prakash Rai, Shisthidhar Mukherjee, P.K. Thakur and he was made one of the secretaries of SKMS in Balaghat region. Also in those days he used to go to Rajandgaon to organize the beedi workers. He also started working in the Bhilai steel mines and dolomite mines. From 1982 he moved to Raipur and since has been working in Raipur among a whole range of workers - unorganized sector, beedi, PWD, industrial workers, forest workers, etc.

Then he narrated in detail about his trade union work in each of these places and areas. Thirudi managanese ore mines was Khobragade's training ground and he worked there from 1958 till 1980. Mrs. Gandhi nationalized manganese ore mines in 1970 after there was a major slump in manganese industry worldwide and so lot of private companies too gave up their mines to the government. INTUC was he said the recognized union in the govt. company i.e. Manganese Ore Ltd. Here too in the 50s the conditions of workers was very bad as in those days all were private. Their wages were daily -based and very low. He said organizing a union in the 60s itself was such a difficult task. You stood in direct confrontation with the big 'contractors'. He said the results of the SKMS struggles over the decades has been that today they get Rs. 70/- to Rs. 807- per day and some social security benifits. All this got a boost actually only after nationalization in 1970. In the private mines only in the pre-1970s SKMS developed strong organisations and he Krishna Modi, A.B. Bardhan, Sanyal were the leaders.

The struggles were good. It was a result of the struggles of the workers that the Bindra Award came and gave some benefits to the workers. 1974 was a crucial date according to Khobragade as then an agreement signed by AITUC and INTUC with Manganese Ore India Ltd. was not accepted by about 8000 workers who left the union and thus for the first time Shankar Guha Niyogi who was helped and given shelter by SKMS leaders opened a new union in Dalli Rajharra mines and it was encouraged by the management and even contractors as in those days SKMS was very strong and the authorities wanted to somehow weaken it. So when this opportunity came they encouraged Shankar Guha Niyogi to grow. So there was conflict between CMM and AITUC. Khobragade said they felt Niyogi had used their good offices and union to get into the workers and then formed his own union to cut their base. Of course Khobragade said Niyogi's launched a lot of hartals and took extreme measures which he said the contractors and management liked as the more the extremism the more the excuse to crush the workers brutally. And Khobragade says that is what finally happened and today CMM stands divided and destroyed in two groups as the moment Niyogi died the organisation collapsed as he ran it as an individual organization. So as far as manganese mines is concerned 1974 was a turning point as it marked the entry of CMM and Shankar Guha Niyogi in direct confrontation with SKMS / AITUC.

As regards work among beedi worker the issues were - getting good leaves; no arbitrariness in leaf selection; wage. In this sector he work mainly in Rajnandgaon. He was Secretary AITUC from 1975-1979. In beedi workers he narrated how in 1993-94 he was along with his beedi union organizing a historic struggle in Raipur of both beedi workers and PWD workers and in the case of beedi workers they took a march to Circuit House in Bhopal and forced the CM who called the beedi maliks, Labour Sec. Chief Secretary and an agreement was reached whereby before they were given Rs. 187- for every 1000 beedis made. That itself was got with such struggle. Now after the agreement they got Rs. 22.507- plus D.A. and 1 pisa more after every 1000 beedis made.

Then he narrated about his trade union work in Raipur since 1982. Here he worked in all the private sector small and medium scale industries. He gave examples like Advani Orlikens which makes welding rods. Here his union is the recognized union and the worker get a good pay scale.

Then he narrated how many hundreds of worker were regularized in the PWD department. Then he works among the Nagar Nigam employees where he made 600 workers who were daily wagers to work charge. Similar was the case in Raipur Vikas Pradhikaran where he made 150 daily wagers into work charge. In all these places there had to be long struggles and negotiations to get these demands met. His other trade union works have been in the area of organizing in Raipur the Plywood Udyog Kamgar Union, then Laghu (Small Scale Industry) Udyog Kamgar Sabha, then forest workers under Van Mazdoor Union. Then cement unions, engineering, sugar,. In all these they are fighting to force the private managements to implement minimum wages. Then Rice Mill Workers- they had no facilities - now due to their struggles they have got PF facility. In Heera Steel Works Ltd. an engineering concern Khobragade's union ran a struggle for 2 years as the company locked-out seeing struggle deliberately. There also issue of minimum wage and some social security. These are broadly the struggles he talked about and areas covered.

Biographical Sketch

Nutneshwar Khobragade

Nutneshwar Khobragade was born on March 2nd 1937 at Wardha in Maharashtra to a farmer family. He comes from a dalit background. His initial interest in politics in his childhood started when he saw his uncle's political activities as leader of the SC Federation in Wardha. His uncle was Nagar Palika chairman. Since Wardha had a lot of beedi workers he from his childhood saw them very closely and later on started his trade union work with them and manganese ore mines workers. He started full-time trade union work from 1958 under leadership of Krishna Modi in Balaghat district's manganese ore mines. He was due to his active work made secretary of the Balaghat region. He also simultaneously worked with beedi workers. Then he began work in Bhilai steel plant's iron ore mines, and dolomite mines. His main conflict and struggle was with the 'thekedars' in the mining and beedi industry on issues of wages and social security, which were missing for the workers. From 1982 he moved from Balaghat to Raipur and since then is running unions in various sectors i.e. PWD workers, Nagar Nigam. Employees, Plywood industry, Small Scale industries, forest workers, cement, engineering, rice mills, sugar, diamond industry.