

14. A.K. AHMAD Iron & Steel (Bokaro Steel Plant & Hindustan Steelworks Construction Limited), Bokaro Steel City, Bokaro, Jharkhand.

Date of interview:- 18<sup>th</sup> January (Sat) 2003 & 20<sup>th</sup> January (Mon) 2003.

Time :- On 18<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2003 in afternoon 12.30p.m. to 1.40p.m. & 6.00p.m. to 9.00p.m.

- On 20<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2003 in evening from 5.00p.m. to 7.15p.m.

Venue:- Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union office at 823/III D in Bokaro Steel City, Bokaro in Jharkhand.

Interviewers:- Bobby Poulouse

Context:- A.K. Ahmad is above 65 years and he is now among the seniormost trade union leaders in Bokaro. At first sight you cannot believe that a man who was a worker himself rose through sheer instinctual opposition to any kind of injustice to such seniority and respect and regard in the trade union movement in Bokaro. He came as a worker and instinctively fought injustice without caring about its consequences. Many a time he hunted down by both the police and the hired goons of the contractors in HSCL and Bokaro Steel Plant (BSP). He never cared about which direction his life would take and he said that its was his fights in the trade union movement which unconsciously decided his destiny.

Summary of Interview:-

Abdul Khair Ahmed was born in village Pinjarawa in Gaya district in the year 1939. He said he came from a rural family background and his father ran a small transport business. He said that after studying in the village he did ITI training from Bhuli in Dhanbad in a polytechnic. His plant training was done in Sindhri Fertilizer a govt. concern then a big thing but today almost closed down. Then he talked about his jobs. In 1960 he said he joined a Coal Washery Construction at Bhujudi in Dhanbad district. The Coal Washery was run by a British company Kope & Co Great Britain Ltd. There he had a fight with a British who called Indians as "rats" i.e. they are so corrupt that they eat up everything. This angered A.K. Ahmad who worked there as an electrical fitter. This incident made him he said leave the place. Then in 1961 he joined Patel Engineering Company at Baruni. It was here that he said that his trade union work began and here also he developed some problem with the management due to what he thought was less wages given. Then again he left this place also. Then in 1963 A.K. Ahmad said he was transferred to Jamalpur in the same company and deliberately given night duty hours so that he would not do trade union work. But in 1963 an important incident

A.K. Ahmad (page 1)

took place in Baruni where at the same company a firing took place on protesting workers and some workers were killed. A.K. Ahmad said that he had to go to Barauni to help the workers and had to fill a false log book for his night duty so that he could leave Jamalpur and be there at Barauni. It was a period when Bihar was under President's rule and the issue at Barauni was again wage problems, holidays, hours of work, and retrenchment etc. After that he worked in Pather Coal Washery and left it too, it was in Dhanbad. However at that time L&T workers at Barauni Refinery A.K. Ahmad said requested him not to leave so that he can deal with workers problems there. The leaders he says were testing him in a way to see if A. K. Ahmad would stand there and he stayed and worked there. A. K. Ahmad said he worked at L&T for three or four months only and once the project was over he was retrenched. There also there were some workers problems with the personnel engineer.

In 1964 A. K. Ahmad said he went and joined at Obra Hydel Project in UP as an electrician workcharge. There while he was at Obra workers from L&T came looking to recruit for their project at Rishikesh. So A. K. Ahmad said that he joined L&T again in 1965. Thus A. K. Ahmad went to Rishikesh and the wage then was less than Rs. 2.75/- for unskilled and Rs. 7.25/- for fitter. There was some labour problem in L&T when one day a person i.e. a welder who was a south Indian was removed from job. The workers at L&T were of three types i.e. Gujarati, Bihari, and Punjabi's. There were a total of 400 to 500 workers. There was no union there but he said he mobilized the workers to form a committee which approached the Labour Department to come to L&T company and see the non-application of labour laws. The Labour Inspector came and he wrote a report in which he identified the faults. This forced the company at Rishikesh to come to an agreement. A little after that the project was over and A. K. Ahmad had to leave as the project was over and he was retrenched.

In the end of 1966 A. K. Ahmad came back to Jehanabad in Gaya. In 1967 end A. K. Ahmad said that he was told to go to Bokaro. So he went there and searched a job there and got a job in Chandrapura as an electrician. The job was in a small company. A. K. Ahmad said that the General Secy of the Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union (BIKU) was Chinmay Mukherjee. It was registered in 1968. The time A. K. Ahmad came to Bokaro the Steel Plant was just being constructed. Various construction companies were involved in it like Gammon India Ltd. , Duggal, Saha, Joshi etc. All these private construction companies formed a Builders Association. Then there was a Fabricator's Association of which Owners plus workers. The recruitment to Bokaro Steel Plant took place from 1968 onwards till 1980. In 1980 Indira Gandhi stopped recruitment to the Bokaro Steel Plant.

As regards the General Secretaries of BIKU A. K. Ahmad said from 1968 to 1971 the G-S was Shri. Chinmay Mukherjee who was the founder of that union and it was he who registered it. Then from 1971 to 1985 the G-S was Gaya Singh and from 1985 it was Anirudh Singh.

He narrated the histories of two unions i.e. one of Bokaro Steel Plant (BSP) and another of Hindustan Steelworks Construction Ltd. (HSCL). A. K. Ahmad said he was from 1968 associated with the BIKU of BSP as well as the HSCL Workers Union. He however later became full time leader and Gen. Secy of HSCL Workers

Union in 1981. In 1964 HSCL had 2000 workers but by 1977 their strength rose to 26,000.

### **Bokaro Steel Plant Strikes:-**

As regards the labour history of Bokaro A. K. Ahmad narrated histories of two major union with which he was deeply associated since late 1960s when both Bokaro Steel Plant and HSCL was still in the process of development. Initially there was only the Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union (BIKU) and A. K. Ahmad said he was personally associated with it only. The HSCL union was registered later only.

As regards the labour history of Bokaro Steel Plant workers A. K. Ahmad narrated that the BIKU launched major struggles in 1969, and then there was a major struggle by independent craft unions in 1973, and then a major struggle launched by BIKU in 1981 after which there were no major struggles till after 1990 when the Govt. of India started the policy of privatization and liberalization & VRS under which today Bokaro Steel Plant and HSCL are reeling.

**(1) 1969 Strikes:** As regards the labour history of Bokaro Steel Plant A. K. Ahmad spoke about the 1969 strikes. In 1969 he said there were three important strikes-

(i) On 8<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1969- a call was given for Bokaro Bandh over the issue of beating up of workers who were involved in union activities and low wages and goondaism by the private management's of construction workers (all on contract). They did not want to see any red flag union so the violent goon attacks.

(ii) On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1969- there was a strike in all civil companies and A. K. Ahmad joined this strike mobilization Gaya Singh was also very much in the leading of this strike though the main leader was Chinmay Mukherjee.

(iii) On 29 Nov. 1969- a dharna was going on at the site of Duggal construction company. Chinmay Mukerjee and others were at another place and were planning to come to the dharna site where A.K. Ahmad and the contract workers working in construction companies were mobilized. However the owners of Duggal construction mobilized big dumper trucks and made them move over the workers. A. K. Ahmad was almost crushed by the Duggal company's dumper trucks as he was the most wanted man by the private managements of the construction companies whose workers were all on contract and were paid very poorly. It were these private companies that were constructing the Bokaro Steel Plant and hiring workers at very low wages and bad working conditions. It was in this strike that when the workers at Duggal construction site had a direct conflict with the management goondas that the police took the side of the management and started firing and resulting in the death of one worker i.e. K.T. Joseph. The 1969 strikes were historic as far putting up the demands of the daily wage contract workers.

In the process of these three major strikes of 1969 more than 1200 workers were arrested and jailed and it took A. K. Ahmad nearly 4 months to get all of them bailed out. The 1969 strikes A. K. Ahmad said were very crucial in establishing the BIKU among both the construction workers who were all contract workers and also the Bokaro Steel Plant workers. After the 1969 strikes which had mass following among the workers there was a wage agreement under which the GOI decided on a

common wage for all workers in the steel plants and engineering companies. In 1969 there was general agitation in all steel industries all over India and so the strikes in Bokaro Steel plant that year were instrumental in forcing the Govt to form a National Joint Consultative Committee (NJCS) i.e. a committee on steel plants through which the govt. in consultation and pressure of trade union movement in steel industry as a whole had appointed a committee under Shri. Ishwari Prasad on wage negotiation. Kedar Das the famous leader of steel workers from Jamshedpur the headquarters of the TATA monopoly empire was the representative from the workers side in this committee on wage negotiation. So Kedar Das's the towering trade union leader of steel had a historic role in getting for the steel workers all over the country a decent wage and all other benefits they deserve. This committee under Shri. Ishwari Prasad gave what is now popularly called the Ishwari Prasad Award in 1969-70. Bokaro Steel Plant was not in NJCS in 1969 but the massive strike under the leadership Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union (BIKU). In that sense A. K. Ahmad said that the 1969 strikes were very historic by BIKU and need to be further studied. There was generally a very bad wage structure for steel workers all over India which got remedied after the trade union struggles of late 1960s and early 1970s in the steel companies. A. K. Ahmad said that in that sense their struggle in strikes of 1969 was very much helpful in that direction.

Another important effect of the struggles and strikes among the contract workers working in the private construction companies engaged in the construction of Bokaro Steel Plant was that the issue of minimum wage for all contract workers and their social security became an important issue in Bihar and the struggles of contract workers launched under the leadership of BIKU under the leadership of Chinmay Mukherjee, Gaya Singh and A.K. Ahmad played a crucial role in building up the overall pressure for the Bihar govt. in 1972 passing the Road Building & Construction Workers Regulation Act. It forced the private contractors in road building, construction and Bokaro steel plant's private construction companies and others all over Bihar to raise their wages and gave scope for trade union to force them through struggles in individual units to give according to the new law. All these changes in law for the steel works and contract workers engaged in construction of the Bokaro Steel Plant were a result of these strikes and other such all over India in the steel industry. Bokaro Steel Plant was not member of NJCS in 1969 but did become one in 1970.

**(2) 1973 Craft Unions' Strike by Independent Union of various crafts and trades:** Then A.K. Ahmad narrated the strike called by independent craft unions in 1973 which the BIKU supported and participated in. The strike went on for 15 to 20 days and the issues were again wages and various facilities. Though the strike was not called by BIKU but the independent craft unions however later on the craft unions could not handle the negotiations and so they finally sent Gaya Singh and A. K. Ahmad and others as their leaders to negotiate a settlement which was proving to be almost non-existent. In fact it was a situation of stalemate and the Bokaro Steel Plant management was not ready to compromise on any issue. And the settlement had to be arrived at as otherwise the strike was difficult to sustain and some solution was required to even call off the strike. Gaya Singh played a crucial role and at the insistence of craft unions he arrived at a settlement on one issue which though might seem not very important yet it had a big role in keeping the honour of the workers. Under the wage agreement the BSP workers would get a



canteen allowance of Rs. 10/- which today has today risen to Rs. 400/- per month and is quite a substantial part of their wage. Thus BIKU after 1969 strikes though not the recognized union achieved a major space among the workers of BSP and so the management had to involve them in all the decisions regarding workers. So also was the role of BIKU in the 1973 strike. In the 1973 strike Ram Dulari Sinha was the Minister of Labour of Bihar and he also helped in supporting a resolution to the craft unions strike at BSP.

**(3) 1981 Strike:-** This was also a historic strike both as far as the BSP workers and the power of the BIKU is concerned. This strike was also called very much at the instance of BIKU and other unions had to join in as the workers were mainly still with BIKU. As far as A.K. Ahmad is concerned, he was involved very much in this strike however the main leader who led the strike was BIKU's next General Secretary Anirudh Singh who is the current Gen. Secy. He unfortunately got very badly beaten by the police and CISF on the head and developed a brain clot. He was leading the workers at the main gate while A.K. Ahmad was at one of the other gates of the BSP. Anirudh Singh had to be admitted to hospital and till today he has certain neurological problems for which he is on medicines even today. A.K. Ahmad was also involved in this struggle and played a crucial role in this strike though Anirudh Singh was the main leader.

#### **HSCL Strikes:-**

HSCL had about 1500 to 2000 employees on 1964 to 1965. By 1977 their employees strength touched 26,000. When the construction work slowed down at BSP the then Minister of Steel Mohan Kumaramangalam said that work should go on and recruitment continue. A.K. Ahmad began his trade union life in Bokaro with BIKU but slowly he was assigned duties in HSCL. It was his work from 1969 that led to his appointment in 1981 as the General Secretary of HSCL Union and he has been in that position till today. A.K. Ahmad narrated that the struggle of BSP workers and HSCL workers most of whom were contract workers went on together and developed together. The development of a proper wage structure for BSP workers spurred the workers of HSCL to demand that they should also get a similar wage structure like them. The HSCL workers wanted that there should be a committee to decide on wages.

**1974 Strike in HSCL:-** In 1974 there was an agitation in HSCL over the issue of wages. Till then the HSCL were given wage on a daily wage rate. The workers demand was for a monthly wage rate. When this demand was put the question arose as to under what scheme should they be given monthly wage rate. It was decided by the HSCL management that the monthly wage rate should be given on the basis the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pay Commission. In 1979 a committee was formed called the "Joint Forum" where all the trade unions of HSCL were given representation and were involved in the process of decision making on labour matters. The 1974 strike had some positive effect as it brought to light the issue of wages and led to some forward movement on the issue of wages and trade union rights by the formation of "Joint Forum".

**1977:-** Under pressure of the BSP management massive recruitment took place of apprentices. Thus by 1980s the strength of HSCL employees rose to

26,000. Some time between 1977 and 1980 another BSP worker was martyred by name Mr. Sudershan.

**1981:-** The issue of giving "industrial wage" came up when the employees demanded DA and the management said it can give DA according to 'industrial wage' i.e. railways. When they said this A.K. Ahmad says the workers said why don't they get 'industrial wage', as the management can give 'industrial DA'. The workers were not ready to accept wage according to central govt. employees pay commission as it means a pay rise only in 10 years. They were industrial wage as it is increased in a pay commission that comes every 5 to 4 years. However the govt. would not agree. This issue remained and was the background according to A. K. Ahmad to engineers in 1984 going to SC over the issue of wages.

**1984 - HSCL Engineers file Case in SC on the issue of Wages:-** The SC gave a verdict under which it appointed a committee called Ranganath Mishra Committee that looked into the matter. The verdict he gave was that they should be given pay under the next pay commission i.e. 4<sup>th</sup> Pay Commission. Then afterwards HSCL employees got pay according to the central govt. pay commission. Thus they got it in 1983 and then also the 1996 fifth pay commission.

**Late 1990s:-** the massive shift in Govt's policy under Manmohan Singh to liberalization marked the end of both BSP and HSCL according to A. K. Ahmad. Since the 1990s there have been massive layoffs. HSCL which till 1990 had over 26,000 employees is today having only 2000 to 3000 staff. There has been a complete collapse and the HSCL is doing today only some instrumentation work, some refractory work and something more. Its main job of constructing steel plants has stopped from 1990 and the govt. has stopped any new construction of steel plant. SAIL is in the process of being sold off. A.K. Ahmad it is just a matter of time. The impact on BSP and HSCL and the whole industrial activity in Bihar/Jharkhand and Bokaro Steel city is very bad. Till yesterday BSP and HSCL were the biggest creators of jobs in these two states and today it is generating greater unemployment and even those who are taking VRS are in fact not able to get their backlog as govt. promised and some have committed suicide and for the first time young boys of decent employees of BSP and HSCL have been caught being involved in big crimes and murders and kidnappings etc just for the sake of making a living. For even the middle class which existed because of these two plants it is a daily trauma as those in HSCL today are not getting salaries regularly and are wondering when suddenly they will be thrown out due to closure. It is a massive emotional and psychological trauma for all. Liberalization has only shattered the happy prosperity and peace of people of Bihar and Jharkhand. There is also another union which came up in the 1980s i.e. Bokaro Contractor Workers Union whose general secretary is one Shri. Rajendra Prasad Yadav who also worked alongside A.K. Ahmad and Gaya Singh and Chinmay Mukherjee.

These were broadly the main points of the interview with A.K. Ahmad.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILES OF PERSONS INTERVIEWED IN BIHAR AND JHARKHAND**

### **No 14. A.K. AHMAD**

A.K. Ahmad is one the senior most trade union leaders in Bokaro Steel plant trade unions. In Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union and HSCL Workers Union also he is one of the oldest along with Gaya Singh who is the biggest leader of Bokaro. His life long mission and instinct has been to fight any kind of injustice and even if this meant confronting somebody who is bigger he never cared about the consequences. Born in 1939 in Gaya district he did ITI training worked as an electrical fitter in various private companies in Dhanbad, Baruni, Jamaipur, Haridwar, Obra, Chandrapura, Jehanabad, Gaya, and finally in 1968 he landed up in Bokaro at a time when Bokaro Steel Plant was just being constructed. Prior to coming to Bokaro itself he had been removed at some places and had some experiences of mobilizing workers and he had already come to the notice of the trade union leadership of Bihar and they told him to find some job in Bokaro and also get associated with the trade union movement there which at that time was under the leadership of Chinmay Mukherjee. Gaya Singh was just a learner under Chinmay Mukherjee who had registered the Bokaro Ispat Kamgar Union (BIKU) in Bokaro in 1968. All the trade union work among the proper workers at Bokaro Steel Plant, contract workers working in HSCL and other public sector and private sector construction companies was done through this one union. Also the unorganized workers and HSCL workers were under BIKU. Today there are three separate unions one for Bokaro Steel Plant workers, another for HSCL workers, and another for contractor workers. A.K. Ahmad was involved in the three major strikes in 1969 which actually laid the foundation for BIKU. Then he was one of the leading activists of the 1973 Crafts unions' strike by independent unions. After that A.K. Ahmad became General Secretary of HSCL workers union. In 1981 BSP strike under the leadership of Anirudh Singh was also a big leadership role for A.K. Ahmad. Then A.K. Ahmad became the leader of HSCL workers and led many strikes in 1974, 1977, 1981, 1984 and 1990s struggle against closure of public sector concerns. Thus A.K. Ahmad had a very major role to play in both BSP and HSCL and contractor workers since 1968.