

T Gunnarao

A short transcriptive note on T Gunnarao, former general secretary of Chitti Valsa Jute Mill Labour Union, interviewed on September 15, 2004 at Chitti Valsa, near Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

I was born sometime in 1937. I am not sure about the exact month and date. I was born in a workers' family at Thangarpu Valsa. My father was a mill worker at Chitti Valsa. It was an old factory set up as early as in 1924, producing Indigo. Most of the fields in the area were engaged in growing Indigo. There was a river nearby called Gostani and power from the water was generated to run the factory. It was same for many other factories as they were set up at river banks to get power to run the steam machines.

Later the British government found jute more profitable and Indigo factory was turned into jute mill. My father was still working in the factory as Indigo workers became jute workers. The state of agriculture was poor in the area as the fields were unyielding and whatever remained went into Indigo farming that spoiled the land even further. However the workers in these factories had their own piece of land as well where they worked after slogging in the factory for twelve hours at a stretch.

Karunakar Subbarao was one of those who organised workers as early as in 1936 in the Nilimarla jute mill as it was called then alongwith the port and harbour workers. The area was part of Vijayanagaram.

As soon as the workers were organised they launched a struggle demanding eight-hour shifts and job guarantee. The workers used to slog for unlimited hours and were treated worse than casual workers. There were 3500 workers in the mill then.

The workers in the mill walked upto Vishakhapatnam, a stretch of 30 miles, on foot to meet the district collector. All the workers were on hunger strike too. They were led by their president Subbarao and vice president Bhadram. Bhadram climbed on a tree and spoke to the workers with a mouth piece made of tin.

There was another strike around 1940 when a worker was killed inside the factory as the workers were agitating for wage hike. They were given only Rs ten a month. These workers demanded only a hike of two annas. The management not only refused but called the police. The workers refused to withdraw and there was firing in which Sanyasi Rao, a worker in the factory was killed and there was tools down strike.

Subbarao was post graduate and his wife a medical doctor. Both of them were active in the union when I was in school. I was working in All India Students' Federation and All India Youth Federation.

In 1948, BT Ranadive, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, gave a call to launch a struggle against Congress led Government. The workers at Chitti Valsa started cutting telephone wires. They had adopted many forms of agitations and at least fifteen workers were put in jail.

It was also the period of Telengana struggle. Cultural groups came to Chitti Valsa and enacted plays based on the cause and commitment of the heroes of the struggle. One play, called Ma Bhumi, based on land reforms, was very popular among the workers. The entry ticket was two annas but workers paid more. They collected funds to keep alive the Telengana movement.

Famous artists from Telugu screen like Yamuna, Nagabhushanam, Alluri Ramalingayya and many others visited Chitti Valsa in this period to collect funds in support of Telengana struggle. They were all members of Praja Natya Mandali, the cultural wing of the Communist party. They also collected funds for Bengal famine known as Bengal Karavu. In a form of Harikatha, the stories of divinities, they started Burrakatha and told the stories of the martyrs who died defending the cause of people.

I started working in the trade union but only from outside. I was led by JKV Vallabhrao who was the general secretary of the jute mill workers' union from 1946 to 1966. In 1966, Vallabhrao was expelled from the party as he committed the mistake of talking to the management without prior permission of his union. It was a period when modernisation had just started and automation was introduced in the factory and workers were to be retrenched. Vallabhrao helped the management in getting the workers' out. It was serious charge and Vallabhrao was suspended from the party even for one year. At this time the union was led by stalwarts like Vijay Kumar, JR Ram Naidu and several others. I was an outsider but active in the union.

In 1966, after Vallabhrao left, Ram Naidu was made the general secretary. However, Naidu died in an accident in 1984 and I was asked to become general secretary and I remained in my post till 1997.

In the early sixties, there was a wage hike by Rs 30 in West Bengal for the jute mill workers and the Andhra workers wanted the same. In 1969, there was strike for for 15 days. All the workers used to work in one shift which soon became two and later three and the factory was open for all the twentyfour hours. In one shift there were at least 3500 workers. Again in 1972, there was strike demanding wage hike. Wage Board committee was formed. In 1974, there was another strike that continued for 45 days. In 1979, INTUC office bearers attacked the AITUC union workers outside the factory. Gangadhar Reddy was the president of INTUC union called Congress Karmika Sangam. Later Gangadhar Reddy joined CITU and became CPI(M) member though only to form another left wing party.

By 1984, modernisation was in full swing. No less than 500 workers were removed in one stroke. The machine parts have been changed. In 1974, 75000 tonnes of jute was processed each day while by nineties, 96,000 tonnes is being processed everyday. In Andhra Pradesh alone there have been 23 new composite and twine mills. The owners start a new mill to produce twine and soon get license for composite mill. Compared to West Bengal where the jute industry is in crisis and factories are facing lock out, in Andhra, new mills are sprouting which means smooth flow of profit in the sector. The jute mill owners are now even venturing into new fields with the surplus earned. However, there is increasing competition with the plastic industry.

In April 2002, management served a notice to the workers cutting wages and increasing the workload. All the unions led by AITUC, CITU, INTUC and several others opposed it and went

on a strike for four months from June, 2003. Other jute mills in the state went on a one day token strike in solidarity with them. They also offered donations to help the striking workers survive.

In Chitti Valsa, the jute workers get only Rs 140 a day while in West Bengal, it is Rs 190. The management had proposed to cut Rs 9 every day. For 18 months, there was no Dearness Allowance also.

The management was asked by the Government to lift lock out, and return to the terms valid as on April 4, 2003. The strike was also over.

I am no more the general secretary but I work among the workers and help the leadership.

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A short biographical note on T Gunnarao, former general secretary of Chitti Valsa Jute Mill Labour Union, interviewed on September 15, 2004 at Chitti Valsa, near Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

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