

## **Jagdish Ajmera (All India Railwaymen's Federation, HMS)**

A short biographical note on Jagdish Ajmera interviewed by Krishna Jha on June 17, 2003 in Mumbai

I was born in a village called Lakhanpura in Bhavnagar district on 11 November, 1917 as Himmat Lal Ajmera. The village was gift to the relatives of Maharaja Bhavnagar and revenue was distributed among them.

I had my primary education in the village school where my teacher was in Civil Disobedience Movement and burnt foreign clothers. His actions inspired me. Later after fifth standard, I was sent to Limdi High school where I was a merit student. Many Swadeshi leaders visited the school and the teachers as well as students were asked to join the estate People's movement. After school, I went to Bhavnagar where the boys were influenced by the Russian revolution and organised discussion groups. Those days I was also active in the estate people's movement with Balwant Rai Mehta, Dhevar and many others.

Later I came to Bombay for college but joined Congress Socialist Party as a volunteer and organised shop assistants, truck drivers as well as Gumashta movement. In this phase I came in touch with Communists also like Nargis Batliwala and others but the communists lost popularity after their People's war policy in 1942.

I was arrested as I was a member of the Rashtra Sewa Dal and had the keys of the godown of the explosives. For three days I was tortured brutally as they wanted to know the whereabouts of the godown but I kept quiet. Later I was sent to Worli detention camp and then to Yavada jail where I attended study circles. After release, the group decided to work among the workers and I was asked to organise the railway workers in 1944.

BBCI Employees union was already operative with Maniben Kara as president and Manilal Kothari as general secretary. People's volunteer brigade (PVB) was still working in trade union and party. In the CSP, the elements nearer to Congress ideology like Guljari Lal Nanda, SR Basawra decided to join the Congress. Others decided to join AITUC but VV Giri was sceptical about communists as for him, they would not allow others to come to the leadership. However soonafter, INTUC was formed. Radical revolutionary groups and communists came together when Royal Indian Navy sailors declared strike. In Bombay city, the workers went on strike.

I also formed an action committee in the railways alongwith others. Parel and Mahaluxmi areas of Bombay were on strike. By then All India Railwaymen's Federation was revived which was formed in 1920. Congress supported the strike till the interim government was formed. Then adjudicative award was formed. NM Joshi was the leader of the first Pay Commission.

Congress formed Indian National Railwaymen's Federation in 1948. By this time labour constituencies were formed in various labour dominated areas. From Railway constituency that belonged to BBCI Railwaymen's union (Lal Baota), Shiv Vishal Singh was elected. But since there was warrant against him, he went underground and could not attend the session and was dropped. Guruswamy was also one of the leaders who started as a canteen boy and soon became assistant secretary of the BNR and later became general secretary of the AIRF. By this time I was vice president of the BCCI union which was later changed into Western Railway employees Union.

In this new phase the process of consolidation was going on and younger elements were brought in. In 1960 strike call was given which was strongly opposed by Prime Minister Nehru as it was war time. The demands were no victimisation, need based wages and formation of fair wages committee. I was secretary of the joint action committee in Bombay and got arrested. At least 40,000 workers were suspended and 7000 were arrested, In Dahod workshop there was firing killing five workers. However the strike fizzled out without any gains though the Shankar Sharan Tribunal decided to increase the wages, offering two increments after promotion. Categories were formed and duty hours were fixed.

Peter Alvares was president of AIRF and Goerge Fernandes was president of South Central Railway Mazdoor union but later became president of AIRF. Railway unions were autonomous and the field was enormous as even National Federation of Photographers in Railways was formed alongwith those of typists, station masters.

In 1974, on May 8, there was total strike. Stations were locked. Branchlines were stopped. But since May 10, strike started fizzling and workers were returning to work.

I changed my name from Himmatshah to Jagdish to evade arrest. Several times I have changed my name but somehow Jagdish has stuck to me. I am still involved in my union work and love to be busy.

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Later Jagdish came to Bombay for college but joined Congress Socialist Party as a volunteer and organised shop assistants, truck drivers as well as Gumashta movement. In this phase he came in touch with Communists also like Nargis Balliwala and others but according to him, the communists lost popularity after their People's war policy in 1942.

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Ajmera changed his name from Himmatshah to Jagdish to evade arrest. He is still active and looks after his union.