

A.K. Rai, Coal ft Iron ore Leader, Dhanbad

Name	A.K. Rai, Coal ft Iron ore Leader. Dhanbad. (President Bihar Colliery Kamgar Union, Dhanbad). (Pr. Ispat Mazdoor Morcha)
Date of Interview	January 23rd, 2003.
Time	3.45 pm onwards to 7.40 pm.
Place	At office of Bihar Colliery Kamgar Union in Dhanbad.
Context	A.K. Rai is a simple and bearded man who is very bold and courageous and took on mafia leaders in Dhanbad coal fields as the famous Suraj Deo Singh who was a dreaded person. He had many physical confrontations and had to form his own force to counter the coal mafia firing and he succeeded.
Interviewers	Bobby Poulouse.

Biographical Sketches

Arun Kumar Rai was born on 15th June 1925 in present day Bangladesh. He migrated to India after the creation of Pakistan. He studied MSC Technology and Chemical Engineering degree form Calcutta University. He worked as a Research Engineer from 1961 for five years in Fertilizer Corporation of India at Sindheri in 1960s under the influence of the rising naxaiie movement he did some struggles in Sindheri and got dismissed from his job. From then started his political and trade union life, in his school and college days also he was active in student politics. Sindheri workers became his work base and he won assembly seats from there many times and later from Dhanbad when he started work among the coal mines and iron ore mines near Dhanbad became MP many times. He joined the JP movement and fought against the emergency. He was arrested many times. He confronted physically and by force the biggest coal mafia of the 70s and 80s in Dhanbad Suraj Deo Singh. Finally by his tactics of counter terror Suraj Deo Singh was forced to give A.K. Rai his space in trade union work in the mines of Dhanbad. A.K. Rai said trade unionism of the mines in Bihar and Jharkhand is only as they popularly say for the: dabang', i.e. muscular men.

A.K. Rai is just the opposite. He is a small thin man of very little physical from but tremendous will power so much so that he built his own party once he was removed from CPM and formed his own group of strong men to fight the mafia. Fighting mafia, social evils like drinking, gambling, women's exploitation, caste discrimination, rights of tribais are the central pillars of his economic struggle in the trade union. He says there can by no economic struggle with social struggles for the dignity of man and woman. Dignity of the poor is the stepping stone for building any trade union movement. A.K. Rai's union produced many of todays tribal leaders who are in JMM and infact to some extent JMM itself was a product of the involvement of tribal leaders like Sibu Soren etc with him. As regards struggles A.K. Rai was leader in miners struggles in Dhanbad, Sindheri, and even was involved in struggles in Bokaro though not in a major way. His main contribution in trade unionism was against the mafia and social evils and tribais.

Transcript Summary

He began his interview by saying that he was born on 15th June 1925. His name is Arun Kumar Rai. His birthplace was near Rajhai town in Sopura village in present day Bangladesh. He migrated to India after the creation of Pakistan. As far as his education is concerned he studied in Calcutta University in Science & Technology Department. He did MSC Tech. & Chemical Engineering degree. Then he joined Fertilizer Corporation of India at the Planning & Development Division. He said he joined as Research Engineer in 1961 October. He worked there for 5 years. In his student life he joined the social and working class movement. He went through various struggles. Then he was dismissed from his job and was arrested. He was in an Executive post. It is after this that he started working as a whole timer. Then he narrated his political life. He said that in 1967 he got elected to the Sindheri assembly seat. Till that time he was working on fertilizer issues and tribal issues. He said that after 1967 colliery workers approached him and so he joined the colliery movement. In 1969 Vidhan Sabha was dissolved and elections took place and again he was elected.

Then in 1972 again Vidhan Sabha was dissolved and he again won. A.K. Rai said that during the first and second time he was MLA from CPI(M) and later he was involved in evolving the Jharkhand movement and also was involved with the Naxal issue. Due to some differences with CPI(M) he was removed from the party but he continued with the trade union. Then he narrated that from 1972 he joined the JP movement and a student movement stood up again against Mrs. Gandhi and he also joined it. In 1974 when the JP movement asked him to resign his seat he did so from the Vidhan Sabha. In the 1975 emergency he was arrested under MISA and released after 19 months in 1977. It was in this context he said that he organized the Marxist Coordination Center (MCC) and contested election and won the Dhanbad seat in 1977. Then the 1980 election also he won. The 1984 election when Mrs. Gandhi died he lost. Then the 1989 elections he again won MP post. 1991 elections he lost MP post and after that he has been losing.

As regards his trade union life he said he did not come with the intention of doing trade unionism or politics. Rather he came with the intention of doing his job. But on seeing the condition of society he said he could'nt bear it and he joined politics. It was during his work at Sindheri while working on tribal issues and spreading awareness that he developed his party. A.K. Rai's view on trade unionism is that it is much more than a struggle for economical issues. The main issue is to politicize workers. The biggest issue is of minimum wage. He said most of the working class in collieries and mines were dalits. Thus he says issues of struggles for social justice and social reform are very important according to him. As regards wages in collieries he said it should be at least Rs. 687- but the actual amount given is less i.e. Rs. 457-. The middlemen eat up the in between.

Then he narrated his struggles with the mafia. He said his slogan was 'nirman and sudhar' and 'social reform and economical struggle'. It was during this struggle with mafia who are according to him the biggest oppressors of mine worker who are mainly dalits and tribals that the JMM was born. He says that most of the JMM leaders were part of this movement. And he still has good ties with JMM. The unique thing in his trade union movement which others recognized was the mixing of working class struggle with tribal movement in Jharkhand. He mentioned many names of people who were killed by mafia. The biggest mafia in Dhanbad Suraj Deo Singh fired more than 24 rounds on him. He escaped many times. Finally he said he had to organize his workers to

fight the mafia also with arms as many of the members were killed. Finally when Suraj Deo Singh realized his men were also being killed and he had a powerful opposition that he stopped murderous attacks on him and tried to become friendly. However A.K. Rai said he never obliged. Then he mentioned about the 1966 drought to which the Congress govt. remained apathetic. Here also A.K. Rai and his unions and political party mobilized the workers to help the rural masses. It was during the process of this struggle that he made an organization called 'Sathi'. Through this A.K. Rai said 'we took the working class to the kisans' on the issue of starvation. He said he took them to the block level through self-help groups, and also to the district level. The actions were totally decentralized. There were 'Action Committees', which organized the workers and took them to the starvation ridden areas where farmers and agricultural labour were literally dying. They distributed food and saved many from death.

Another important strike he organized was the 1967 Sindheri Fertilizer hartal. It went on for 12 days. Sindheri A.K. Rai was the first place where he started his trade union life. Again this was a strike by workers for their legitimate demands. Then he said that he organized a hartal on 3rd Dec. 2002. The hartal was 98% successful. As regards the state owned steel industry A.K. Rai said the govt. of India is basically penalizing and killing of the state owned steel industry and its workers for satisfying the interests of private players in the steel industry. Before the state owned steel industry was supposed to produce by 2000, nearly 100 million tons of steel. Then the target was reduced to 50 million tons, then 35 million tons, then 25 million tons. Now the surplus is only of about 1 million tons. Thus there is a distinct pattern discernable according to A.K. Rai of an effort for helping the private steel producers and for that killing progressively killing the state owned steel industry. A.K. Rai said that before developing the steel industry itself you are putting increasingly lesser limits of production only because private steel production lobbies don't want the state steel companies to produce anything, rather they want to see them die.

A.K. Rai again emphasized that apart from basic bread and butter issues like wages, bonus etc. He said he always felt that social issues are as crucial as economical and political and made a huge impact. Thus he always addressed issues like alcoholism, women's sexual exploitation, indebtedness, mafia, social ills like the issue of caste and social justice. He narrated that several leaders who worked among the coal workers in the many coal fields. In many such collieries there was a direct confrontation between the coal workers and thekedar and mafia gang. A.K. Rai narrated several instances in for e.g. Sindheri collieries, South Golak collieries, Aralghar collieries, Kuthi collieries in Puthki where several leaders like for e.g. one Chaman Pasi was shot by the mafia and killed. He said there were two major confrontations to stop under payment. The slogan was that- whatever was legally payable must be paid.

A.K. Rai said they won by sheer physical confrontation. The situation is such if you do not physically protect yourself and attack in an offensive manner they will kill you. The coal mafia lives by completely corrupting the local officials, police, administration, local politicians, and individual workers and even the women tribal workers. The environment for mobilizing any kind of workers is extremely bad. The whole so called system of justice and police and administration is completely corrupted beyond all limits and in every know human way possible. From giving money to providing alcohol or women, the social impact of mafia is utter feudal and brutal rapacious capitalistic greed, lust for a literal rape of the coal mines. Nationalization has just managed to stop it to some extent in the sense that this stopped happening directly. When prior to

nationalization all the mines were privately owned then the whole coal fields were completely raped, quite literally with no exaggeration in the sense that there is a certain scientific process through which this is done. But the private collieries with profit only as their motive simply observe no scientific processes and simply dig directly where there is the best coal and completely destroy the entire coal field for ever. The town of Jharia today is literally burning from underneath and full of big hole below. The reason is because after digging in govt. mines they fill the holes with sand. But prior to nationalization the Jharia coal fields were all privately owned. These private owners were even paid a special subsidy to fill in these huge holes with sand. But they simply ate up the subsidy money and so there are these huge underlying holes left which today are burning. There was a committee, which recommended the govt. take over these mines even before nationalization took place, or there was any talk of it. The committee was by the govt. and no leftist. It only recommended long before 1975 that if state did not take over the mines there will be a total environmental collapse in the region as the private coal owners and mafia had created an environmental disaster.

Thus A.K. Rai said a very important fact not usually known or highlighted that it is not the state owned Coal India Limited which has in fact spent thousands of crores of rupees both through the govt. machinery and by give huge subsidies to private parties involved in the collieries. But none of the private parties are interested in doing anything honestly. They simply eat up all the money and add to their profits. This is the situation on the ground that A.K. Rai said one has to deal with. And if any workers organization tries to do anything A.K. Rai said the police and administration will not help them against the murderous attacks of the mafia as they are bought over by the mafia. And when the collieries workers mainly dalits and tribals try to organize some physical resistance and offensive actions against the mafia they are hounded and jailed by the police and administration. The state does not implement its own laws by which they are bound. A.K. Rai also said caste is a huge factor as the mafia is totally high caste in its social character. Thus caste based attacks on workers who are 99% scheduled castes and tribals. The remaining are also low caste i.e. backward castes from UP, Bihar, Orrisa, MP and WB. Thus there is also a high caste-low caste divide at the social level for the majority of the coal workers. There are also some workers from high castes working as coal mine workers, but even among them the majority are working as supervisors and slightly higher levels mostly close to and under the easy control of private coal mafia parties who are all from high caste categories.

A.K. Rai emphasised this social point very much and thus unlike the traditional parties who negate this caste aspect, he worked and mobilized the workers using the social i.e. caste based oppression from the entire system beginning from their petty low level officials who are mere agents of high caste coal mafiaso. In this sense A.K. Rai's analysis and method was unique and more so while being a high caste leftist himself he emphasised this social reality in a major way in his struggle. This A.K. Rai said was one reason why they were attacked, jailed, bombed, shot, and many of their good leaders killed. In fact A.K. Rai said that Suraj Deo Singh the mafia don of late 70s and 80s who was his main adversary in Dhanbad collieries apart from many smaller mafias, fired 24 rounds of cartridges at A.K. Rai in a murderous attack once but A.K. Rai escaped by a mere whisker. Or else he had almost died. He said trade union politics in coal mines is the most difficult and based on sheer force and the term used in local Bihar language is "dabangiri".

Thus A.K. Rai said if you had to be called a 'neta' of the poor in coal mines then you had to be 'dabang'. And being 'dabang' means only one thing both for the mafia and poor - it is that you have the power to kill by means of a group of privately financed goons or an organized group of poor. Either ways if you want to exist in coal mines both as an exploiter or as a group of the exploited you have to be 'dabang'. The most unique aspect of this social law in coalmines is that even the poor will only flock around that leader who has muscle and guts and not any wordy idealistic non-violent talker leader. In fact as recently as 14 April 2000 one of their local leaders and MLA of A.K. Rai's party was killed in Nirsa mines. Then another of their leader one Anando Mahato who was also an MLA was killed by the mafia recently in the Sindheri constituency. A.K. Rai said he directly took up issues of society, which are usually not much focused like indebtedness, alcoholism, women's exploitation, tribal issue, caste issue and social justice and social equality.

These according to A.K. Rai were successfully used by him and people responded to it and that is the reason why he got elected in these coal mining areas so many times as MLA and later as an MP. A.K. Rai said of course he had to pay a price for all this in terms of physically being attacked many times in an almost fatal way and lived to survive to tell this tale. He said many of his fellow comrades did not live to tell, they are dead and were killed. One cannot help but coming after meeting A.K. Rai that he is quite unique in his ways and extremely devoted to his cause and extremely knowledgeable, humble and strong in his ways. There is no exaggeration in saying that in the killing coal fields of Dhanbad far away from our comfortable living rooms while Suraj Deo Singh was the king of coal mafia on the one hand, but A.K. Rai was the symbol of resistance to him and all that is exploitative in the coal industry.