

A short transcriptive note on

17. Chaudhry Raghbir Singh (Panipat)

I was born on 15 mARCH, 1926 in village Dhaisauli in Panipat district. I passed my matriculation in 1945, did FA from Rohtak and then graduated privately. I was involved in the relief work organised for the victims of communal violence of 1947 when I was in college.

In my wife's family, relatives supported Unionist Party that had ruled over Punjab. These factors influenced me and politicised my views. Discussions, observations and events led me to conclude that I should become a leader ("leadery karna chahiye!") as till then I was not inclined to take up any job.

Those days there were only Congress and Unionist party and I had no intention of joining the crowd of leaders in these parties. Accidentally I met a cycle repair wallah who was a Communist Party member and influenced me to join the party.

Meanwhile, I contested Panchayat elections and gradually came in contact with the working class whom I started organising in Panipat soonafter.

The Second World War had increased the importance of Panipat as a transit and trading centre. Gradually some industrial establishments also emerged. Soon factories making woollen blankets and other items came up in Panipat. To organise the workers, we invited Punjab Trade union leader Baba Kartar Singh.

In 1958, there was a strike in Panipat demanding rise in wages. We would have got it even without agitation but workers were not prepared to accept it without strike action! Though we managed to bring them around, but their regret remained. Four years later when we launched another movement, no negotiations were held and the workers went on strike and only then went for settlement. It was 28-day long strike and large number of women took part in it.

We mobilised women workers too as they were employed in large number in handloom and textile industries in Panipat. These women had conducted militant agitations and trade union movement has played a significant role in raising their awareness. Their wages are generally lower than men and we have fought for the equalisation.

In late 1960-early 70s, I worked among the foundry worker at Satlakha near Panipat. We used to celebrate May Day at a grand scale where not only the workers but some of the owners too used to take part.

We have launched a struggle against contract system in Panipat which is on the rise everywhere since 70s.

Workers' Education Board has been of great help in organising workers at Panipat. We have been able to conduct trade union schools regularly with the Workers' Education Board to deal with issues concerning the workers.

We also have a large number of child labour which we want to eliminate. But every time we intend to take initiative, the mothers of the toiling kids implore us not raise our protest against it as it is the only source of income for them.

The trade union movement got a spurt in 1966 when Haryana was separated from Punjab.

I have worked among worker of sugar mill, public sector enterprises like HMT, NFIL, road transport, press, BTM and BIT mills of Bhiwani, BATA at Faridabad and also confederation of various employees including transport, Dharuhera Spinning and Weaving Mills, Pashupati textiles, engineering and many others.

In 2001, there was a three-month long strike conducted jointly at Panipat on the question of maintaining muster rolls for workers.

At present, I am General Secretary of Haryana state Trade Union Committee.

Date: 3 Nov 2002
Time: Morning
Vence: Panipat
Interviewer: Anil Rajimurak.

A short biographical note on

17. Chaudhry Raghbir Singh (Panipat)

Born on MArch 15, 1926, Chaudhry Raghbir Singh comes from a family of cultivators. He studied in school in Panipat and went to Rohtak for FA and later graduated privately. He got married in a family where some of the relatives were supporters of Unionist Party of British days in Punjab. It was the beginning of the political influences for him. Before that he had no such exposure except working for the relief of communal riot victims, a duty assigned to him by the college authorities.

Raghbir was never keen to take up a job and wanted only to become a "political leader" in the early days, an idea that occurred to him after the political discussions he had at home. But the problem arose when he found that only major parties were Unionist Party and the Congress and he did not want to join the crowd of leaders. He contested Panchayat elections in this period and wanted to join some smaller party. That is how he came closer to CPI.

Raghbir came in contact with the trade union movement in early 50s. Panipat had by then become an industrial centre in the wake of Second World War. Several woollen mills, markets and other industrial units came up in this period. Gradually Panipat became a centre of small scale textile and woollen mills as well as handlooms. Raghbir Singh started organising these workers in trade unions.

Raghbir Singh led and took part in several strikes and agitations in these parts getting several primary simple facilities sanctioned.

In 1968 and 1970-71, major struggles of textiles and general workers were conducted. Raghbir Singh organised Textile Labour Union in Panipat, and led a strike of workers that went on for 28 days demanding the names of the workers registered in the factory register. Raghbir Singh organised workers elsewhere also in trade union after Haryana got separated from Punjab in 1966.

Raghbir Singh organised workers at Bhiwani, Faridabad, Pinjore, Gurgaon, Samalakhia and also at state level activities. He had organised the Khaddi and wool workers also in the state. He also supervised a strike on demand of a muster roll that went on for three months at Panipat in 2001.

Chaudhry Raghbir Singh has also been associated with workers in road transport, engineering and government employees confederation.

At present he is General Secretary of Haryana State Trade Union Committee.