

(2) **Bhikubhai Vaghela, Jamnagar (Gujrat)**

Bhikubhai Vaghela was born on 18 Jan 1933. He is the president of Jamnagar Trade Union council and vice-president of Gujarat State TUC (AITUC). He also holds Important posts like the presidentship, etc. of woolen mills Karmachari Union, Municipal Corporation Karmachari Union, Small Engineering and Allied Workers Union, Zilla Salt works Karmachari Union, Cinema Karmachari Union of Jamnagar, Multipurpose karmachari Union, etc.

Bhikubhai himself was a worker. He joined service in the woolen mills in Jamnagar.

In TU movement

In 1953, an interesting event took place among Jamnagar woolen workers. Stalin died that year. Workers in the woolen mills wanted to go on strike as a mark of respect of Stalin. But the Union under the control of the INTUC, did not agree. So the workers struck despite INTUC's resistance. After the strike, another union was formed, which was joined by 13-1400 workers, which was an overwhelming majority, almost 90%. But still there was no recognition. Consequently, there was ghero movement, much before the word became current and widespread. The gherao was for more than 9 hours, till midnight, with no food and water allowed for the management. Women played a prominent part, some 400 of them; they 'offered' bangles to the management.

Bhikubhai, Vasa, some others played a leading role in the movement. Bhikubhai was the vice-president of the Union, while Vasa its general secretary.

14 leading workers were suspended. Ultimately, the case went upto the labour Tribunal, which asked all the workers to be taken back.

Infact, Bhikubhai's contacts with trade union, labour and people's movements go back to the mid-40s. Jamnagar before India's independence was a princely state. Various types of mass movements and activities, secret and open, used to take place. Bhikubhai used to read the paper "Jai Gujarat" while working in a medical store. There were processions against the arrest of Vasa. Bhikubhai was already in contact with the workers of match factory, oil mills, Digvijay Cotton Mills, Tonga Union, etc. He used to go to the Union and take up various issues.

Simultaneously with the RIN Revolt in Bombay in Feb. 1946, unrest was brewing in the Valsura Navy Camp near Jamnagar. Vasa went to organize them, and Bhikubhai was watching the events.

People's movement for responsible govt. broke out in 1946-47 in Jamnagar. The employees in the private telephone company went on strike led by their Union. There were movements against city bus fare hike, as also in Harshad Textile Silk Mills, metal works, etc. Hunger strikes, movements and strikes continued well into 1948.

Bhikubhai was a delegate to the Saurashtra TU convention in 1956 in Porbandar. Mirajkar addressed it, and Prithvi Raj Kapoor attended as a guest. Bhikubhai was very impressed by the proceedings. Bhikubhai was actively involved in the memorable strike of the woolen mills in 1956. There was a hunger strike too. A strong union in shipping, stevedoring, loading unloading was formed in 1956-57. Bhikubhai and his colleagues kept the workers active by setting up temporary camps of the workers in the Rann (of Kutch). Bhikubhai participated in the Ernakulam conference of AITUC in 1959. A memorable strike for 66 days of the Maharana Mills took place in 1956 with active participation of Bhikubhai. Unions were formed in Sikka Cement and Digvijay Cement. These Unions were so strong and militant that their agitations and activities on the sea-shore were a sight to see: the workers used to stand with red flags in groups and lines right into the sea.

A "Japa-Tod Satyagraha" took place in those days: attempt of the workers and villagers to enter the town and factory gates from Sikka village in a procession. There also was the demand for meeting place as the INTUC Union was already allowed within the factory premises. The demand was conceded. Workers also demanded the right for "Satyanarayana Katha" in the temple run by the management.

Bhikubhai was a leading figure in it all, and was arrested.

He won the 1957 municipal elections, getting special permission from the Collector to get registered as a voter. Since then, he has been continuously winning for 7 terms till he decided not to contest in 1995.

Bhikubhai was in the thick of the govt. employees' struggles in 1959. A joint action committee (JAC) was formed in Gujarat and a legal committee of advocates constituted. The struggle became so intense that Bhikubhai had to go underground.

Along with other categories of workers, he made special efforts to organize salt workers. It was a very difficult task, and he succeeded in organizing nearly 2000 of them spread over about half-a-dozen salt works. He also organized women workers.

He also organized credit cooperative societies of workers in 1956 in Digjam Co.; it spread to other places over the years.

Bhikubhai, at present, is the leading figure of Jamnagar, both as a widely recognized trade unionist as a respected ex-corporate and city figure. He continues to be active at state-level too.

Transcriptive notes on the basis of interview
Bhikubhai Baghela (Gujarat)

My date of birth is 18 January, 1933.

The year I began my active life as a simple worker in one of the Woolen Mills in Jamnagar (Gujarat), some interesting events took place. That year, Stalin had died and the workers wanted to go on strike as a mark of respect to the departed leader but the existing union did not approve as it belonged to INTUC. Despite their opposition the workers went on strike.

Myself and few others formed a new union after the strike. Soon the majority of the workers, at least 90 percent of them joined us.

However the union was not recognised. So there was protest movement. Those days gherao did not take place, but we did gherao the magistrate for more than nine hours, till midnight and allowed neither water nor food. The women workers who were large in numbers offered bangles to the magistrate. I became the vice president of the union.

Jamnagar was a princely state. Earlier, I used to work in a medical store and read nationalist paper. I was also in contact with the labour in match factory, textile, oil etc and formed a tonga union too.

Alongwith the naval revolt in Bombay in February 1946, there were signs of agitation among the members of a navy camp in Jamnagar too. I was aware of the political movements and gathered information about the events taking place all over the country.

A mass movement came up in Jamnagar in 1946-47 against the princely state. It demanded responsible government. Employees of a private telephone company went on strike. They had a strong union. There were other movements also coming up among metal workers, textile and silk mills, against city bus fare hike.

A Saurashtra trade union movement was organised in Porbandar in 1956. I was a delegate to the convention, which was attended by Prithvi Raj Kapoor as a guest. He performed some cultural programme also. I was very impressed by the conference.

During 1956-57, I was involved in a number of strikes and mass movements. The memorable and historic among them were the strike of woollen mill workers, shipping and dock workers' movement etc. I was among the organisers of the shipping, stevedoring, loading unloading workers unions. During their movement I kept them going by organising kitchens in the vast plains of sands in the Runn where they cooked, ate and slept, only to come back in the town to continue their struggle. The Runn of Kutch became their place of hiding. The workers of the Maharana Mills also went on strike, for 65 days in 1956. I remember them alongwith the salt workers, standing on the sea shore and in water far out in the horizon, with the red flags dotting the background.

A unique "Japa-Tod" movement took place those days, an attempt to force into the factory premises. The workers came from Sikka in a procession alongwith the villagers. The demand was for a meeting place inside the factory premises like the INTUC was allowed to have. It was conceded. Among their other demands was the permission to have "Satya Narayan Katha" in the temple of the factory.

I have been elected to the municipal committee for seven