

National Labour Institute research project

Ref no. :

Cassette no. 07

Name	Anant Yashwant Kumbhar
Gender	Male
Age	39
Education	9 th Standard Pass
Religion	Hindu
Caste	Kumbhar (Potter)
Profession	Mill Worker (Elphinstone Mills)
Type of Work	Weaver
Address	Sai Colony, Nimbalkar, Gargoti Gadinglaj Road, Budurgad, Kolhapur.
Mother tongue	Marathi
Father's Profession	Printing Press
Mother's Profession	House wife, farming, and works as ayah in a Municipal Hospital.
Place of birth	Gargoti, Sangaon

Siblings

Name	Age	Profession
Vishwanath	30	Mill Worker
Madhukar	25	Mill Worker
Suvarnai (sister)	48	House Wife

Family:

Wife	32	House wife, 10 th Standard Pass
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Children

Ashutosh	4	Male
Anurag	7 months	Male

Political affiliation/sympathy:

Pre textile strike (1970 to 1982): None

During Strike Datta Samant's Union

Post textile strike (1983 to 1990's): Same

Comments:

The interviewee is building a house at Kolhapur and hopes to settle there. He does not like to live in Bombay any more. He spends most of his time in Kolhapur and visits Bombay just once a month. This interview was conducted during his visits Bombay.

Interview with Anant Kumbhar

When did you start working in the mills?

I started in the year 1977, in Century mills.

Were you in Bombay before that?

No, I was in Bombay till 7th –8th std. I was in my village; later I came here. I was at Kolhapur- Gargoti. Pimpalgaon is a little further from there.

And what about your father ?

My father was an artist in Rajkamal studios, prior to 1982. He used to paint posters.

Then how did you manage to come here?

I came here for my education, but soon my father expired. The situation was very grim. He had a friend (a lady whom he knew) in the Century mills. She used to act in theatres and all that. With her help I was trained in Century mills, but I could not get employment as a badli worker. So I went to Elphinstone mills. Just 3 years after that, the strike began, in the year 1982. In that strike we were kept out for almost 3-4 years. Ever since I have been in Victoria Mills.

What did you start as? Did you have an apprenticeship?

As a weaver. I worked as an apprentice for 6 months.

How much were you paid then?

As the days were filled we got the pay, otherwise for an apprentice there was no fixed salary. If there was an absent worker then we were given the work and paid accordingly.

How long were you in Century?

After the apprenticeship I worked for 7-8 months, as a badli kamgar. But as I was not getting the badli so I went to Elphinstone mills. In Century mills, there was a man called Phalke who employed me there. In the next 6 months I was made permanent there since my work was good.

What after the strike?

Because we were with Dr Samant, we were blacklisted after the strike. We were the people who provoked the workers according to them. But we did what we thought was right -- to get justice and so we were blacklisted. We were about 40 of us. After that I didn't pay much of attention. I didn't try to get my job back. Then through influence, i.e. my sister (not my real sister) Rajwade, her husband got me a job in the mills.

Do you have any memories about the strike?

The official union i.e. the RMMS ignored the workers; our demands were not fulfilled. We did not expect complete fulfilment of wants(demands), but that union had the power. They could have done whatever they wanted. There was no rival union so whatever they said had to be accepted. This neglect upset the workers. They thought that there was nobody for our protection and so with the issue of bonus the workers of 5-6 mills went to Datta Samant with their problems. At that time Doctor advised the workers not to go on strike, all at once. He said- my strike can go on for 4-5 years or it could even take months. But the workers thought he would be effective and bring them victory, and so they rallied behind him and the strike happened. Doctor (Samant) himself didn't ask the workers to go on strike, the worker themselves wanted to, and they did.

The 1982 strike, it was actually started by Shiv Sena At the Kamgar Maidan at Parel. There was a meeting conducted by Balasaheb Thakeray. Until the last moment everyone was under the impression that the strike will happen. In the last 8-10 minutes Balasaheb went to take the strike call back. And it so happened that the 5-6 mills that had taken part in the strike felt helpless. They had all gone against the RMMS so they couldn't take their support (RMMS support). Then some went to Doctor and called for another strike.

Prior to 1982 were you interested in labour issues?

Yes, but I did not have enough knowledge as to in which party to go etc. I just went for the work, as there was no education. But later we came to know what was happening on the worker front and unions. As we came to know, we took interest. I went for meetings in general as I was interested, but some opinions were acceptable and some were not. I liked Samant's views. Whatever he did, he did openly, he did not hide anything- so I went with Doctor and remained on his side.

Why did people go with Shiv Sena first?

From what little knowledge I have, the workers had some conflicts with the RMMS on the issue of bonus. The Konkani with some influence went to Balasaheb i.e. the *chakernaanes* of the textiles saying, we are not getting proper bonus, RMMS is ignoring our problems, so you help us. To do something for the mill workers, he (Balasaheb) entered the textile field, but he left the workers half way. He said "take back the strike, go to work we shall talk at higher levels". But people misunderstood, thinking that there must be something, some deal from inside that is agreed upon. So the people were not ready to go back. They wanted some results. The mill workers of the 8-9 mills had gone with the Shiv Sena. As the SS couldn't help, the workers of the rest of the mills came forward to support them and they too went to Datta Samant.

What were the preparations, like meetings etc, prior to the strike?

I do not know what happened before the strike since I became active after the strike began. I didn't pay attention before I became permanent as I was a badli worker and a badli worker couldn't afford to join any union because a company or the union could remove him since he was temporary.

So when did you become permanent?

In 1979 in Elphinstone mills, even then I kept behind as we were newly permanent, and I was not in the RMMS. The RMMS local leaders had good relations with the union and we did not have any knowledge about Datta Samant's union. But after 1982 when we came to know there was a better union, we went with Datta Samant.

Do you remember the 1st day of the strike ?

We knew about the 5-6 mills who first went on strike. In the beginning nobody was permitted in the mill by the striking workers. There was tremendous pressure at the beginning. On the 16th January, only the RMMS workers went inside. But later they came to know that the power was no longer in their hands. All workers were going to Datta Samant, so most of the RMMS workers either went to their villages or joined our union. The workers did approach the RMMS first, but later as nothing was resulting from this, they turned to the other union (DS's) and it became stronger. Some RMMS people went to their villages. At that time there was a strength or fear of Doctor's name; there was a strong opposition to anyone trying to break the strike, so they left for their villages. They tried to break the strike but Datta Samant's union was much stronger. Earlier, the RMMS's workers used to threaten the workers. Doctor's was not so powerful then. The RMMS made propaganda that this Datta Samant union- it is inexperienced.

Do you know any body who got hurt because of the violence?

Yes I was myself attacked and my hands were broken. My colleague Dhotre in Elphinstone and I had talked to some 3-4 bhaiyyas who used to go to work without anybody's knowledge. We told them that the strike was good for us and it

was for everybody's benefit, so you don't go to work. (they complained to RMMS workers) So some Sangh workers attacked us near the Elphinstone Bridge. I fractured my hand and my doctor was contacted. I was operated upon at Wadia hospital as my entire bone was broken. We had decided that if the workers go to work, first we should make them understand and if they don't obey we will threaten them. That is why we went to threaten those 3-4 bhaiyyas. Ramesh Dhotre was a dashing and a sturdy man. We were standing at the gate, the people of the RMMS used to go in groups without anybody's knowledge. They saw us as we walked towards them near the Elphinstone bridge. 2-3 workers of the Sangh attacked us with lathis one of them had a *shingh*. As he was about to hit the iron weapon on my head I raised my hand and it fractured my hand. Then they kicked me in my stomach. I couldn't do any thing. It was afternoon. There were 4 of them and we were two. Ramesh Dhotre hit them and I was rushed to the hospital. Ramesh went and told the Datta Samant union workers about this incident. That evening itself, I was operated in Wadia and for almost 1-1.5 months I had a plaster on my hand. Even Dhotre got his face scratched in the fight. He sells pan (betel) at a pan shop outside Curry road now. He still works there.

Did Datta Samant's union people attack RMMS workers?

Yes, if they attacked us, and so we attacked in turn. We were prepared to fight. Without such action, we would have been underestimated by the others. They would think we were weak. Not everybody was dashing but if you answer back a threat you will get the backing and we would be stronger.

Do you think Doctor should have accepted Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosle's offer and called off the strike?

Datta Samant was ready to compromise, but no concrete offer was made. He wanted the government to make a firm agreement with his union and issue a formal statement. But, he said, if you back RMMS only because we have gone on strike, then people will not accept your proposals. He said- I represent the

workers in majority so you give us the recognition. But they refused to do that, and the workers refused to compromise. They said that if we have demanded Re 1 at least give us 75paise, not less than that! We were not to get Re1 that was for sure, we were denied even 75 ps. Instead of 75 ps, they were giving us hardly 5 ps. So the workers refused.

Were you married ?

No I was not married then. In the village I had my parents and 2-3 months after the strike my father expired.

Then how did it work out for you?

At the time of strike I used to work as a painter- I painted a building of the police camp. When I went, I used to stay in the room of the mandal. I did not have a house of my own. They gave us Rs 10 for a day's work. There, I used to colour from outside. I was not experienced. In the day we used to work and in the evening we went to the union's office to do union work.

When did you start looking out for work after the strike?

Thinking that the strike would get over now or tomorrow, I waited for 1-1 ½ months but later I looked for other work. In the mean time I asked for help from the people back in the village. The union gave rationing to some workers Rs 50 or so, some doctors gave *dauda* to some workers. We as responsible union activists never took such incentives or rationing, because those with wives and children needed it more. I thought that I had just one stomach to be fed they needed the rationing more. So whatever I got I used to give it to my colleagues. This strike had its impact and the name throughout the country. So when Doctor went out on tour through the state and even the country, he said to people- the mill workers need your help, then the people helped with both their hands, and the union distributed the foodgrains. They used to distribute the grains in the meetings or at the union office.

Then you started with the painting work after 5 months?

Yes. But I was not experienced. Once when I was painting I fell down from the 4th floor. I was fortunate that there was sand beneath. So after 5-6 months I started concentrating more on the union work. The people with whom I was working had some money and they told me that I was already hurt during the mill strike and then I met with this fatal accident so I should no longer look for work. Then again I was without work for 1-1 ½ months. After that in 1985-86 I rejoined Victoria mills. For about 1 to 1 ½ years, no worker went near the mill and the few workers who went in for the first 6 months went because of the pressure from the RMMS. By my reckoning, for about 6-7 months the workers did not even go out of Bombay. We had confidence in Doctor and thought that the mills would start today or tomorrow. His earlier agreements in other industries had been successful ones. There was a pressure on Doctor. After a year or so the workers got tired of waiting, and went to their villages.

Some people who had thought that their term of service was over and who had a large family to be fed they went to villages to look after their lands and they settled there and never thought about the strike. Some resigned.

How many of them were blacklisted with you?

In Elphinstone they say 30-40. They didn't even consider them. As the RMMS was in control in the company, they knew who were the militant workers so they were blacklisted. The rest filed a case but I did not bother. I did not file any case. I thought whatever was to be done would be done according to the rules (and regulation of re-appointment of workers). Whatever Doctor advised would be right (I'd act according to Datta Samant's advice). The union was a huge one if the union has filed a case (it has fought for all workers, so the case too was for everyone) then why should I file (my individual case) one?

How did you get employed in Victoria Mills?

There was one woman who was like my sister to me, called Rajwade. She and her husband supported me during the strike. They knew my condition very well.

While on strike I was with them. So through some contacts they got me a job. There was no longer any guarantee with regards to the strike; so I agreed. In the year ending of 1985, I joined Victoria. I was there until 4 years ago, until the company closed down. They properly paid us the dues. Victoria was a very profitable company. Even during the strike period the productivity was very good. But the owner Aditya Mangaldas, sold the company to Ramesh Gowani, a famous builder in the city so they say. The original owner was Madanmohan Mangaldas. Due to property disputes he sold the company. When we read it in the newspaper we thought how come such a productive company was being sold? So we asked Mr Kulkarni, our legal advisor. When we asked the owners they refused to say anything. They said it was on lease for Rs 10 crores, but later when we read in the news we came to know that it was for Rs 100 crores. We fought and talked to the union, then Doctor was not there. There was Dada Samant. He asked us to carry on the legal proceedings but the new management acted so fast that it could not be completed.

The work was totally stopped they said it was for modernisation. We said- we were not against modernisation but with the new machines how many workers will you employ? Is everybody going to get work? Out of 3500 workers how many are you employing? You first show us the scheme! Which machines are going to be there? Have you put out any tender only then we shall allow you to work on those lines. We fought but they stopped the work completely. The company had sold nearly 80-85% of the production but the new owner Ramesh Gowani, he was not interested at all. So they told us that they would be employing only 450 workers, we told them to employ the 450 and the people who were on the verge of completing their term should be compensated, give those 450 jobs to young people, but nothing came out of that. There were only two unions RMMS and ours. 99% were with us and hardly 1% with them. We 'tore more receipts' than the RMMS even though we were not recognized and could not take our receipt books into the company. We are not recognised, but we had the good of the textile industry at heart. Our Victoria mills committee was very active in union matters.

Even today, we feel that whatever happened with Dr Samant was very bad- he got shot. That was bad for the workers.

We went and met Ramesh Gowani. He was willing to negotiate with us, but RMMS didn't want that, so they played a trick on us. They pushed some of their workers to provoke a fight with us. We even had a meeting with RMMS.

Sachinbhai (Sachin Ahir, General Secretary of the RMMS) was already there. He told us that our questions (issues and problems) were alright but that there should be mutual understanding between us (RMMS and Datta Samant's union). Then we insisted that we wanted our leaders (at the higher levels) to talk with each other in a meeting. It was the question of our mill this time, the rest of issues did not arise (matter). When Dada Samant talked with inside sources, they told him that the company was running in losses. But then Dada Samant said then how can you bring about modernisation? How can you run the mill like that? If you want I shall help you to get the loan from any where then you repay it back. But the workers thought that if the workers were willing to help and if still the management were not willing then something is wrong. Sachinbhai and Dada Samant both said that this (the owners' stand) was not right at that time. But then Sachinbhai backed out, being (the government recognised) union it couldn't do any justice (to us workers). We gave them a fight. They had a lockout in the mill. So we filed a case in court. Then the RMMS started breaking the workers in a different way. They split the workers- in 2 groups; 2000-2500 stayed with us and the rest 1000 went with them. Even though we had offered to help the company, the owner did nothing. The system changed and the policies changed, so did the situation of the entire textile industry. RMMS did not support the workers, the government too did not help – they just gave assurances. The State Assembly representative was Dattaji Nalawade. We went to the local representative and to the mayor and right from the corporators to legislators. Datta Nalawade said that he could act according to orders given. We asked him what are your actions once you are given the orders (how will you implement orders)? We said to him- This is a good working mill; the families of the 3500 workers are going to be ruined so please do something. We went to every body

but found that it was hopeless. Even our union did not have any power. We went to labour office at Bombay Central and we told them too but nothing happened. By then the workers lost that hope so the management took aside such workers and told them that we will give you Rs 1,00,000 and an annual service Retrenchment Compensation of 56 days per year of service. Some got tired and started filling the forms for resigning. The RMMS made a lot of propaganda. Some of them like a few lady workers and Mahadik who left said that the people who supported them and resigned would get so much money so take your dues and resign. So their members also left. Also workers whose service was hearing completion felt that they would get only Rs 50000 after retiring anyway, and if they resigned now they would get Rs 100000. We realized that the mill will never go into production. It reminded us of the days of the strike. This went on for almost a year and a half. After Aditya Mangaldas sold this company we discussed a lot with Ramesh Gowane. Then I went to Dada Samant and told him that people remember their strike days (their condition was reminiscent of the 1982 strike). The workers then planned a strike and asked around for financial help. So he(Dada Samant) gave Rs 50000 to the needy that time. These workers were from our union as well as other unions. But there were so many of them that they hardly got Rs1000. Some of us like me didn't take any money because of there were so many workers with a family to feed.

Nearly 1.5 years, then I resigned last year. As the workers resigned, he promptly gave the money. He did not waste time. He gave cheques of Rs50000 and an extra of Rs30000. This extra amount was given because we pressurized him, saying that if people are leaving then you should give them more. The badli kamgars (temporary workers) were paid Rs 50000. The permanent but not old ones were given rise in the basics and by doing so we tried to give them as much as possible. The people took whatever was given to them. They could have fought but the conditions in the textile industry were very grim.

Besides, people rust due to circumstances. What will we 50-60- workers do against such a powerful owner? We won the lockout case but he was not ready to start the mill, give the salary. If Doctor was there, then something better would

have come up. Dada said how long can I help you? He helped us financially. In the end we 100-150 workers told Dada and resigned. We talked about it to Adv. Kulkarni. Actually to decide that was very wrong, but the circumstances were such that we had to take a decision. I could have served for another 10-15 years.

What did the other do?

Some who were little educated, got some jobs. Some became watchmen. People who were already from Mumbai i.e. most Konkanis stayed here and people from Kolhapur who had farms they went and settled there. My colleagues from Pune, in Koliwada. whose wives were into the fishing profession went there. Some like me who had a little general knowledge, went to do something in the village. Some who were old their sons started earning. The strike situation was considerably worse in government mills. They gave us a lot of hopes. Even in private mills like Bhaidas' mills or others, our only worry was whether our owner could pay us or not. And we kept quiet with whatever he gave us. There is no one to protect the workers- even the RMMS is broken. No dashing leader and due to the strength of the owner the worker is in no position to fight. Even the government doesn't take any initiative in case of the 20-25 government mills. There is a increment of almost 3-3.5 crores of rupees but what is the use, there are no modernisation, same old machinery. The plan of Indira Gandhi turned out wrong with the nationalization of the private mills. The owners did not pay attention, so the focus was totally lost. Nowadays there are just officers in the mills. Even in our mill, loads of cloth get swindled. The management would swindle the mill, the watchmen helped them. This is the case even in public sector mills. Everyone is connected in the conspiracy., nothing can be done without bribing. It is the situation that makes a person, so I felt bad, taking an active part in the strike I had to resign when I could work for another 10-15 years. I was an efficient worker. People asked- how come even you had to resign but the circumstances were such- what would I eat?

According to you what went wrong in the strike?

This strike was on the verge of success if it was not for the deliberate move by Indira Gandhi's government. Dr Samant had met her. But some ruling people said that if the strike succeeds then Dr Samant would emerge as a powerful figure in the Maharashtra textile industry that will weaken RMMS's and the Congress. That is why the strike was prolonged. The government ignored it. At that time if Indiraji had considered the workers to be important than the leaders then the history would have been different. If the workers were protected then the country would be protected. They should have considered the need of the workers and given them something more. Doctor had been ready to compromise. The top people like *Vivek Loke's father (couldn't remember the name- could be Vijay Loke's father Gajanan Loke)* had been there but the outlook of the government was not at all proper. If the government had taken interest, then the strike would have been over within 6 months. The union would have been willing to compromise. The government should have declared in the paper that they were ready to compromise. The leaders were not in a mood to make the move. The government did not want to take any initiative either. Doctor was in the Congress in the beginning but due to some conflict, he left. I staunchly believe that this strike was disrupted to stop Doctor's popularity from growing. The RMMS and the BIR law were resorted to so we could not come forward (to fight against injustice). Doctor said clearly that if you are suffering, and your condition is bad and if you don't have faith in me, then you are free to go to work. But he had already warned us that his strike could take months or even years so even we took responsibility and stayed by his side. In the final analysis, the leader cannot do anything if the workers don't stay with him. He did whatever was possible for him, he toured through out Maharashtra, collected food grains for the striking workers. After all even he did not have enough to support all the workers and their families. Even Dada Samant gave Rs 50000; he gave the workers loans. The intentions of the leaders were good. The more important thing is the way the workers understood it. The outlook of any government is always the same, that of indifference and giving false hopes.

The Shiv Sena's union was not of much help either. Balasaheb was known for his attitude. People thought being the leader of the Marathi manus (Marathi man), Balasaheb would help us. People even liked his style. The Konkani people, who were his main supporters, were the main force in the textile industry. But he let us down right at the start. So the workers went to Doctor. But he (doctor) was not famous in the textile industry. (With his popularity) The Shiv Sena suffered a setback. It was ignored till last 7-8 years. Even then they tried to regain their name. They made some attempts to win us. But we workers kept to Doctor's side. 99% still are on his side. Even the RMMS workers agreed with us. But only because of their legal stamp (recognition), they kept quiet. They approved of doctor's opinion but due to politics of groupism (in the Congress) they kept silent.

How do you think workers have changed after the strike?

Earlier a worker was innocent being— he was not conscious politically and he was concerned only with his work and food. After the strike he gained political knowledge, he realized that- it was because the workers were not politically educated that we were facing this situation. Had we been politically experienced this strike would have ended soon. We taught them that, and made them aware - and now this awareness is of no use. Now all we can do is to tell our experiences to others. So that they can learn.