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Dr Shanti Patel (Hind Mazdoor Sabha)

A **short biographical note** on Dr Shanti Patel interviewed in Mumbai on June 23, 2003 by Krishna Jha in the office of the Union of Seafarers of which Dr Shanti Patel is President.

I was born on August 22, 1922 in a village called Vipoo which was under a estate ruled by a Nawab in Khandesh. My father was a doctor and was in close touch with the masses and their suffering. I was deeply religious in my adolescence and was a member of Swami Narayan sect. I was against Gandhiji's creed of untouchability. I was also blossoming as a rebel as I had organised strike in my school for three months as the students were not allowed to hoist national flag in the school on January 26, the then Independence Day decided by the nationalists. I had also attended Haripura session of the Congress as a volunteer.

Later when I came to Ahmedabad for college education, I started reading Gandhiji's views on religion, society, politics etc. It was a time when I was questioning the social customs and superstitions as I had witnessed the plight of my sister who was widowed early and suffered terribly at the hands of social guardians.

I came to Baroda for further studies and also attended Congress session in Bombay addressed by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Gandhiji among many others. I pursued my medical studies and continued to take part in nationalist movement. In the college hostel, every morning we used to go in a group around the city singing Vande Mataram and then attend classes. Soon I left college and got engaged in revolutionary activities. I used to make bombs and collect arms alongwith others.

In this phase I was greatly influenced by Jai Prakash Narayan and felt that workers must be organised to take part in the freedom struggle. I started working among textile workers in Bombay alongwith my freinds. Soon we tried to organise strike in support of Gandhiji's call in 1942, but failed as AITUC was a stronger force in the area and having a different view of the situation, opposed the move.

Later I came in touch with Peter Alvares and formed a socialist group working in trade union with Jagdish Ajmera, Mani Vasania and others. We started organising the 800 workers of a shipping company secretly visiting their houses. We had organised workers in several other units too. By this time the management came to know and 90 persons were removed from the job.

We went to court and succeeded in getting compensation for the discharged workers. It was a historic decision by the court to give retrenchment compensation.

By this time I had lost several years of medical studies and decided to appear for the final examinations. My dilemma was that as a doctor I would be able to serve only a handful of patients while in trade union there were greater masses involved. Hence I got involved in organising trade union in the hospital itself and formed JJ Hospital Employees Association and one woman worker called Shanta Bai emerged as a leader. Soon several workers were removed and I appealed to the court. It was challenging the basic concept whether hospital was an industry, and if so, then had the workers freedom to organise themselves. The court gave a landmark verdict and the union was recognised.

In 1944, Peter Alvares organised the port workers and formed Bombay Port Trust Employees Union and YB Patel was the general Secretary. Now the same union is called Mumbai Port Trust Dock and General Employees. I was introduced to this union by Peter. I was still a student and used to come from college to work though I did not have a post in the union till then. Here I came to know NM Joshi.

Later I was elected assistant secretary. It was 1948 and the first Pay Commission was announced. I wanted amendments according to the working conditions of the port. We gave a strike call and 10,000 workers responded paralysing the entire Bombay port.

After 42 days, Gandhiji observed that the strike was preventing the food ships to enter as those were famine days though he did not oppose the strike. JP and Ram Manohar Lohia came to adress the workers. Lohia was close to Jawahar Lal Nehru and Gandhiji and suggested that I should meet Gandhiji to clear the dead lock.

I had prepared my arguments well and reached Delhi where I was to meet Gandhiji after the prayer meeting. For the whole day, I was in Jamia Millia Islamia meeting friends and in the evening when I was coming towards Birla Bhavan, my taxi was caught in a jam near India gate. As it was getting late, I left the taxi and walked towards prayer venue but was stopped by a mob that shouted "Gandhiji has been shot dead".

Later Jai Prakash Narayan met John Mathai and got 50 to 60 percent of the demands met.

I was in the engineering section while D'Mellow was in Dock staff union. Later I was in Dock workers' association. I was also in the cargo handling section with loaders and the crane drivers which had a significant role in the process.

After few years, a federation was formed involving most of the ports and Makhan Chatterjee and Vishwanath Chatterjee joined in from Bengal. In 1958, first all India strike was called which was a success. Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru intervened and invited the leaders for negotiations and appointed wage board for them. Later almost all the major ports came under the banner of HMS.

Later Socialists came out of AITUC and formed Hind Mazdoor Panchayat and I became its Maharashtra secretary. Forward group also joined in and its leader Ruikar became the first chairman. Ashok Mehta, Dinkar Desai, Maniben Kara and many others joined in.

After finishing medical course, I took up job in a government hospital and then became full time trade unionist. During Emergency I had opposed the Congress line and sent a letter to the President of India after which our entire group was under surveillance. More than 50 workers were detained under MISA. All office bearers of the union were arrested. The workers who were outside collected funds to look after the families of the arrested workers. I was in Delhi and was called by the labour secretary for explanation. Later I was also arrested.

After release, I joined Janata Party and formed All India Port and Dock Workers' Association. Another split wing formed pro-government union.

I was also Member of Parliament during Janata rule. Later I became corporator in Mumbai Municipal council and then Mayor of Bombay.

I have not considered retirement as necessary till now as I am deeply involved in the mass work.

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Dr Shanti Patel is still actively involved in the mass work.