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From the Selected Works of Professor Vibhuti Patel

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OBITUARY Thakor Shah by amar Jesani & Vibhuti Patel

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At a time when the nation needs people who could keep alive the secular conscience of Gujarat, the passing away of Thakor Shah on April 10, 2004 in Vadodara due to massive heart attack has come as a big jolt. He died while participating in the meeting of the network of social movements in Gujarat. Of the 76 years he lived, he spent over 60 years in public life, making personal sacrifices, fearlessly withstanding all attacks – physical and political – in his incessant struggle for organising working masses for their rights and justice. His life was a political journey in search of liberation and a commitment to ethics and integrity.

Born on December 20, 1928 in Vadodara, he came under the influence of Gandhi when he was 15 years and plunged into political activism in the 1942 Quit India movement. From that point on, he dedicated his life to public work, adopted khadi and followed the Gandhian principle of non-violence and satyagraha. He was a foot soldier of the Quit India movement, and like many other progressive people such as Indulal Yagnik, Dinkar Mehta, Jagannath Vohra from Gujarat, began his political life as disciple of Gandhi and/or member of the Congress Party. He joined Congress and was attracted to the Congress Seva Dal (CSD). In the CSD his emphasis was on the intellectual development and the ideological commitments of the youth to society. His attraction to the CSD was related to Gandhi’s teaching of Sarvodaya and his call for devoting to the constructive work after the independence. He also participated in Bhoodan movement.

He left the CSD and joined as resident correspondent of Sandesh in Delhi. But in no time at all he had to leave this newspaper as his writings were censured on political grounds. On his return to Vadodara, he accepted the editorship of the daily newspaper, Navbharat (published from Baroda) and began a new life as a full-time journalist. By 1964, he had started feeling very uneasy about the way Congress was moving and the decline in the moral values of the organisation and its leadership and so he quit Navbharat, and started his own Gujarati weekly, Prajasattak. Two events in the late 1960s shook him and the third one took him on a new path to realise the vision of liberation and justice. The first was the split in Congress Party. He sided with the old Congress – not because of its ideology; but because he was not impressed by the rhetoric of Indira Gandhi and her style of politics. But he was not happy with the either faction. And soon the second event, the first large-scale brutal communal riots after independence in Gujarat in 1969 that took lives of a few thousand people, mainly Muslims, devastated him. Ahmedabad and Vadodara were the main centres of this
violence, and he witnessed the ineptitude and collusion of his party then in power, the factional fights fanning the violence and direct participation of the present-day Hindutva brigade. It was in this state of disillusionment with his old party and the process of ideological rethinking that he came in touch with the movement of Workers’ Committee in Vadodara.

The Workers’ Committee movement had emerged due to two reasons. Firstly, it was an expression of rebellion against the Majoer Mahajan (MM), the recognised union in the textile industry in Gujarat under the infamous Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act. MM had Gandhian origins, and Thakorbhai knew about it very well. The role of MM in Gujarat was and still remains worse than its counterpart in Mumbai under the BIR Act, the Rashtriya Mill Majdoor Sangh (RMMS). While in Mumbai, the working class movement had unsuccessfully but regularly waged militant struggles against the RMMS and the BIR Act under the leadership of the Left and other trade unions, in Gujarat, barring one attempt under Indulal Yagnik, there was no history of serious organised challenge against the MM. The Gandhian and Congress-affiliated MM had not only helped managements in trampling the rights of workers, but many of its local leaders had got thoroughly corrupted, some of them becoming moneylenders and direct oppressor of workers. The dissident militant workers from many textile mills (and other factories) in Vadodara had therefore organised themselves under the workers’ committees.

The second reason for the committee movement was the source of its political aspiration. The key textile and other workers and middle class activists of the committee movement were affiliated to the small but locally active far-left Trotskyist group in Baroda, the Socialist Workers Party (later renamed as Communist League and then as Inquilabi Communist Sangathan). They believed in trade union democracy and unity of working class movement; and translated them into a strategy for democratisation of existing trade unions and transcending their economism by political actions spearheaded by the workers’ committees. Their critique of trade union economism had provided impetus to the workers’ committee militancy in several industrial units and also in establishing works in the slums and nearby villages. Nurtured in Gandhian politics and value system, Thakorbhai had believed that the criticism by the Communists of Gandhi and his politics, was unfair and at times, scandalous. So his steps towards acceptance of Communist ideology were slow. But what pushed him more was not the ideology, but the work. He saw the reflection of what he stood for in the day-to-day political struggles being waged by the committed workers and students in the Workers’ Committee movement. He also saw a reflection of his ‘Nai Taleem’ when he observed the campaign by the youth of the Study and Struggle Alliance, an organisation of students and youths affiliated to the same politics as the Workers’ Committee movement, on “principles, programme and policies” in the student community and also its work in slums and villages. He often said that it was not the theory but the sincere and militant work of those groups that made him accept Marxism. And so far as Marxism was concerned, for long he continued to believe that, for him, the genuine goals and objectives of Gandhism were realisable only through the practice of Marxism.

Two more movements guided him towards full acceptance of radical position. The first was Nav Nirman movement and second, the movement by Jaya Prakash Narayan that followed it. It was not the movements per se, but the way the movements were politically viewed and the interventions made by the political organisation he was close to, that convinced him to formally shift his affiliation. Being a seasoned politician from the mainstream, he was quick to see through the political manipulation of the student leadership of the Nav Nirman by the established parties. He could also see that there would be attempts to contain the movement within a limited sphere of rebellion. He contributed immensely to the efforts of the students of activists to bring working masses into the Nav Nirman movement which was essentially against price rise and corruption. In the JP movement that followed, he was also impressed by the radical interpretation to the ‘total revolution’ given by these groups at the ground level. Between 1970 and 1974, his weekly, Prajasattak, underwent a transformation. No longer it was carrying the articles and reports to fuel dissident movements and factional fights in the Congress. It was becoming a mouthpiece of the Workers’ Committee movement. Another distinct aspect of movement in Vadodara was the attempt by the politically conscious workers to contest plant level elections in the established trade unions, including in the MM. They were mostly defeated, but the political campaign for trade union democracy used to have an electrifying effect on the workers. Prajasattak was the mouthpiece of such campaigns. Interestingly, workers also contested general – the state and parliament – elections in order to use those platforms to take their political voice to the working masses. Thakorbhai also contested a Lok Sabha election on such a workers’ manifesto. In the wake of Nav Nirman, Vadodara also witnessed massive movement of women, particularly against the price rise. Mrinal Gore and Ahilya Rangnekar of Mumbai were frequent visitors to Vadodara for providing support to the movement. Suryakantaben (his wife), and their 10-year old daughter, Trupti, were active participants. Many of his close associates in the working class movement later on significantly contributed in the women’s movement in Gujarat and outside. He always supported women’s causes in his personal capacity, at policy and programmatic levels and through public action. In his personal life and in the movement, he shared all types of work – cooking, cleaning and caring. He actively supported women’s cause through the union activities and as a sympathiser of the women’s rights group, Sahiyar.

The Workers’ Committee movement under the kamdar samitis in Vadodara faced lots of attacks and harassments, but the imposition of emergency succeeded in wounding it and forcing it to change course. While Janata front government in Gujarat had generally lessened the impact of emergency for the opposition leaders many of whom were allowed to hide there, it was not so for the working class militancy. Many Workers’ Committee leaders were summarily dismissed. The established unions were refusing even to fight cases of these workers in the labour court because these committees were their political opponents; and the committees had no money to hire lawyers to fight cases. Thakorbhai’s training in constructive work and institution building instinctively propelled him to become trade union builder. The worker leaders of the committees such as Dhayabhai Parmar, Shanabhai Vaghela, Shirazbhai Saikh, Shankarbhai Pandya, Salimbhai and others from different factories and mills took leadership positions and Thakorbhai was asked to be general secretary. Thus was born the Vadodara Kandar Union (VKU). In the first two years, he combined militancy with
Gandhian method of satyagrha, including long-drawn peaceful hunger strike, to survive the emergency. Thakorbhai taught workers that in order to be revolutionary, they needed to be more disciplined. He also demanded integrity and commitment to work. In the labour court, he used his methods of satyagrha whenever he felt that judges or lawyers were being dishonest. He insisted that anybody representing workers from the union always went fully prepared for taking the case forward. He intensely disliked repeated adjournment of cases under flimsiest of pretext thus wasting workers’ resources and delaying justice. His dislike was so strong that he made announcement in the courts that on his death the labour court should not stop work. And this did happen after his death – on April 12, 2004 when the labour court in Vadodara convened, workers and others saluted him and the courts continued functioning. This was the first time in the history of Vadodara labour court that it did not close down due to death of a lawyer or trade union leader.

**Bridging the Divide**

In the last half of 1980s, the struggle against Narmada dam was emerging as strong movement, and so was the brutal determination of the Gujarat government to build the dam. At this time, the workers constructing the Narmada dam approached VKU. The dam workers hailing from Orissa, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh were exploited by the construction contractors and absolutely oppressed, so much so that they were treated like prisoners within the labour colony. They were housed in prohibited areas, preventing free movement and interaction with their colleagues. Any outsider wanting to meet them had to take prior permission from the contractors. For the first meeting in February 1987, the few workers called Thakorbhai and his VKU comrade Narpethabhai 20 km away from the dam site in a small town for discussion. The management spies soon discovered that a meeting had taken place and five workers who had participated were sent packing. But the efforts continued; as also the repression. Thakorbhai and VKU had taken the story of slavery in the Kevadia colony of the dam site to the larger society. Several human rights groups, the individuals from the universities and other organisations made concerted efforts to bring out facts on the brutal repression and exploitation of workers.

Thakorbhai was also working closely with Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The NBA was undertaking its activities in Gujarat from the office of the VKU. So along with many other organisations, the NBA and environmental organisations were also motivated to look into the conditions of workers at the dam site. After two years of efforts in organisation, negotiation and continued brutal attacks on their leaders, the workers decided to resort to strike after serving a strike notice. Thus, started the 77-day long strike of dam workers from January 30, 1989, the day of Gandhi’s martyrdom. The government reacted swiftly – the entire area was taken over by the police, workers arrested, meetings disallowed and disrupted and individual leaders physically assaulted. In order to ensure that condition at the construction site and labour colony were not investigated and reported, the government clamped the Official Secrets Act on the entire area, prevented fact finding teams of human rights, teachers, women’s and other organisations from entering the area and from talking to the striking workers. Sustaining the struggle of thousands of poor workers in a remote area was not easy – in addition to the attacks of police and goondas, they were struggling against hunger. And here the network between the trade union and the NBA, the environmental organisations, human rights groups, women’s groups and so on provided massive support by supplying food. Unlike the traditional divide between the opponents of the dam and the workers (and its union) constructing the dam, this struggle brought about their unity due to the political maturity of leadership.

On March 29, 1989, on the evening as he was coming out of the union office, the hired goons of the management stabbed Thakorbhai. Fortunately, the assailant on the bicycle missed the target and Thakorbhai was injured only on his buttocks. But this attack and his hospitalisation began the demoralisation of workers. After 65 days of strike, as a last resort the leadership of workers went on a mass hunger strike in front of Narmada Bhavan in Vadodara. Thakorbhai, though injured from the attack, sat with workers. The hunger strike lasted 12 days before the strike was withdrawn. Thousands of workers were picked up in the buses, given railway tickets to go back to their homes and ensured that they boarded the train by the police and the security personnel of the construction companies. The strike was lost, but the bond formed with all supporting organisations endured. The NBA used the VKU office for several years for its work and despite threats of attack on the office and attempts to burn it down, the VKU and Thakorbhai refused to budge from this solidarity with the NBA.

In the early 1980s, the anti-reservation agitation and attacks on dalits and from mid-1980s to the massacre of Muslims in 2001 carnage, Vadodara has been one of the main centres of sectarian hatred and violence in Gujarat. Castes and religions have acted as powerful forces dividing workers unity and they have also prevented the politicisation of workers in the trade union movement. As a consequence, the trade union leaderships have often taken very ambiguous position on these issues. In the last 20 years, therefore, the role played by VKU has been exemplary. Thakorbhai was not only personally involved in the struggle against communalism in organisations like the PUCL and Vadodara Shanti Abhiyan, but he also motivated the union to take a public stand on the subject. He mobilised the union in protest against Narendra Modi and at great personal risk, intervened during the violence. His daughter and son-in-law (an inter-caste marriage) lived in a Muslim majority area during the carnage, and ensured the strong bond between both the communities despite organised attempts to inflame violence there. He fully supported such commitment.

He, however, was deeply disturbed by the carnage. A life lived to prevent such happenings was made to witness the worst kind of violence. He believed that all energy must be spent to combat communalisation and to get justice for the victims. He was one of the many involved in supporting efforts for justice in Best Bakery as well as scores of other cases. But the emotional and intellectual disturbance caused by the carnage, his need to do the most in the shortest possible time to fight the reactionary forces and the history of two previous heart attacks proved to be difficult to manage and he succumbed to the third one. He lived as an activist, and passed away while in action in the meeting of the social movements. In conservative Gujarat, he ignited a red spark and it is only to be hoped that his young, enthusiastic and militant comrades will keep it burning and make it a counter to the communal fascist forces. [We are grateful to Trupti Shah and Ghanshyam Shah for providing information and for comments on the first draft.]