

Not Run of the Mill



A view of a mill in Mumbai.

At the heart of the seemingly-swish neighbourhood of Lower Parel, a near-dilapidating structure stands as if in a time warp. Opened in the 1930s, Mahatma Phule Vyayam Shala was an akhada for migrant mill workers until the end of the 20th century, when the mills shut down.

Currently, wrestlers who ferry fish across the city or take up other work as day jobs, live and practise kushti here. It tells the story of the city as well as the history of this dying sport. This space, rendered invisible by gated residential and corporate buildings, has been captured in a 15.52-minute-film by the 2014 batch at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). This was part of their masters course in Media and Cultural Studies.

This film among several others, made by students as part of the project on Mumbai's now-defunct mills, will soon be accessible to the public. Supplemented by additional research, TISS has made these films a part of an online repository. Titled Giran Mumbai (millmumbai.tiss.edu), it will be launched on August 4. "Many young people have only seen the shiny glass facades of Lower Parel and don't know that Mumbai was once a different city. This project is an attempt to reclaim the city's history and also make this information available to researchers and people who are interested in the subject," says KP Jayasankar, Dean, School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS.

The website, basic in its design, is an attempt to provide a holistic view on the mill history of the city. There are interviews with academicians, historians and artists. For instance, the voices of architect Neera Adarkar (also author of One Hundred Years One Hundred Voices on the mill issue), trade unionist Datta Iswalkar and late noted Marathi poet Narayan Surve also feature in a

separate section.

Surve's poetry, which centred on the mill workers' movement, also finds place in the repository, with English translations. There are also academic studies, reports, photo projects and films (or their edited versions) by external sources included in the project.

Jayasankar says that a film, or a series of shorts, can get dated but an online project such as Giran Mumbai, will remain dynamic, allowing it to grow. "Keeping it open source allows it to expand over time," says the Dean, who has conceptualised the website with Anjali Monteiro, his colleague at the media school. While the duo approached external sources initially, such as documentary filmmaker Paromita Vohra for her film Annapurna: Goddess of Food, and Mumbai historian Shekhar Krishnan and Catherine Greenhalgh for his photo project, now chroniclers are keen on contributing to Giran Mumbai. "It's also a way for them to archive and make accessible their work," says Monteiro. The repository is a part of their project, DiverCity (divercity.tiss.edu).

Established last year as the city's visual archive, it includes a few projects similar to Giran Mumbai. These include Remembering 1992 that chronicles the communal riots of '92-'93, and Castemolitan Mumbai on caste relations, among others. "The students, while working on Remembering 1992 (mumbairiots.tiss.edu), shot a film on memories of bystanders, engaged with Hindu traders in Mohammed Ali Road.

Many believed that the Bombay bomb blasts were followed by the demolition of Babri Masjid and then the riots. "It's exactly the opposite of how things happened, perhaps a way of justifying the violence. This prompted us to come up with DiverCity," says

Monteiro. Remembering 1992, hence, has a detailed timeline on its home page.

DiverCity is also an attempt to uncover critical issues that go unnoticed. For instance, Jayasankar and Monteiro say while it is known that women were also employed at the mills, they have never been the focus of the debate. HerStory on Giran Mumbai addresses this.

With help from a student of the 2014 batch, Sriram Mohan, along with another student of the 2015 batch, Monteiro and Jayasankar put Giran Mumbai together. They say, “It’s a challenge in terms of resources since we don’t have the budget. But we are keen to develop this repository as the internet allows us to circumvent various kinds of censorship — of state, market and vigilante on the streets who are easy to offend.”

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