

An exercise in history writing



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Reclaiming history: The mill lands were 600 acres of land right in the middle of the city Photo: Dr. Cathy Greenhalgh

The presentation of the Girangaon Mumbai Mill web archive highlighted the need to document working class histories of every city

“The struggle for the daily bread is an everyday question

At times outside the door, at times inside

I’m a worker, a flaming sword

Listen, you intellectuals! I’m going to commit a crime

I’ve suffered, witnessed, explored a bit

The sweet ache of my world lies in it...”

“Bread’s my first love, I agree, but I need something more

That’s why my world’s casting the royal seal

It’s here that I drop flowers into the palms of my words

It’s here that I give swords into the hands of my words...”

(Original Marathi poem titled “Chaar Shabda” [Nivdak Narayan Surve (Selected Poetry of Narayan Surve), ed. Kusumagraj)

Translated from Marathi, this is an excerpt from a poem penned by the late poet Narayan Surve, who worked actively in the mill worker’s union in Mumbai. Surve’s words recently reached out to an audience in Bangalore as they sat down for a presentation of the web archive of GiranMumbai/Mill Mumbai: a repository of films, poems, songs, interviews of/relating to the erstwhile mill workers of Girangaon in Bombay, put together by a team from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

As Surve’s words echoed in the room at Bangalore Film Society, through Saacha, one of the films in the archive, I was reminded of the recent strike by the garment workers in Bangalore. His words, written perhaps in the 1980 or 1990s for Mumbai had an eerie resonance with what was being said during the protests here in 2016.

The Giran Mumbai/Mill Mumbai archive (<http://millmumbai.tiss.edu/>) was born when the group from TISS decided to document the history of a part of the working class in the city because they felt there was an erasure of that narrative in public memory. This was the second such project that the team undertook; the first one was called ‘Remembering 1992’ undertaken in 2012. Both these initiatives are part of an on-going project called DiverCity.

The key figures in the creation of these archives are K.P. Jayashankar and Dr. Anjali Monteiro, both veteran documentary filmmakers and professors at the School of Media and Cultural Studies at the institute. “The idea of Mumbai today, of it being a smart city etc. is actually based on a series of erasures/expulsions and marginalisation of the labouring poor. If you travel to the mill areas today, the traces of the history of the area have been thoroughly erased. Both history and geography is being employed in the interest of a certain sanitised version of the city that has no space for the labouring poor. So, our attempt in creating this archive is to bring into public domain, the working class histories, their narrative stories and their ways of being in the city. We need to remember what the past was like because that is important if we have to understand our present and future,” said Anjali Monteiro.

Up on the web, the archive has acquired certain unique characteristics; it has the ability to be accessible from everywhere and of interacting with other contexts, news reports and movements.

Saacha, the film by the professor duo, for instance, sort of begins the narrative for us. The film tells us the history and plight of the working class from the point of view of Narayan Surve and Sudhir Patwardhan, an artist. Found as an abandoned baby near a garbage dump, Surve was adopted by a mill worker’s family. In the film, he speaks about experiencing the warmth of the working class- one that cannot be gleaned from books about them but from lived experience alone, he says. Sudhir Patwardhan’s tryst with the working class is shown to us through his paintings, particularly a series between the 1970s to the 1980s where he paints single working class figures in their specific environments. It is in those paintings that Bombay as it was then makes its first appearance.

The archive’s presentation also focussed on the breakdown of the trade union movement (the great Bombay textile strike that eventually culminated in the shutdown of the mills) and the consequences of that for the city, its architecture and overall identity. “The mill lands were

600 acres of land hosting about 100 mills right in the middle of the city. And we see from the 1980s onwards, a redevelopment of these lands into gated communities, malls etc. In other words, a wholesale collusion of various stakeholders to make use of this space. The ones who lost out on their rightful share were the workers, some of whom are still fighting for their compensation...” explained Monteiro.

The beauty of the archive is also in the sheer diversity of voices that it manages to host. For instance, a TISS student film, *Her Stories* documents the voices of former female mill workers such as Vaishali Girkar, Sulekha Rana and Laxmi Dhamanase. Made by Fareeda Muhammed, Milanth Gautham, Ridhima Sharma, Shiva Thorat and Silja Wurgler, this film highlights the fact that there was an equally strong participation from women in mills; that they too were affected by their closure and then explores their life post-mills. The film reminisces fondly about the past, the comradeship of the workers that continues even to this day. A particularly endearing moment is in the opening of the film in which Vaishali Girkar gives us an inkling of her undying spirit as she says, “If they make me Prime Minister for a day, I’ll expose them. Maharashtra, where I live, I’ll change that first, After that, the whole country...”

Overall, the archive embodies a celebratory tone- one that commemorates the working class life and culture both in terms of the struggle as well as the aspects of leisure. “Films, in general documentaries in India, have a limited reach which is why we decided to put them up in the form of an archive. The idea is to reach all kinds of user and expand the horizons of the documentary,” said Jayashankar. The limitations of such an archive, though, are in terms of sustainability and relevance predominantly, he added. “Perhaps, history departments of universities and students researching these topics might find such archives useful.”

What the presentation highlighted was the need for reclaiming history and including voices from all quarters in it. Afterall, history writing cannot be the prerogative of the powerful few alone, right?

Who decides what gets written down as history? While documenting a city's history, whose voices do we include and exclude? An extract from Narayan Surve’s poem on Mumbai comes to mind again: “It is people like me who build your grand edifice, who add to your glory day after day O city...”

Keywords: [Giran Mumbai Mill Archive](#), [TISS](#), [Dr. Anjali Monteiro](#), [K.P.Jayashankar](#)