

PROJECT REPORT

Death of an industrial city: Testimonies of life around Bombay textile strike

Hemant Babu

Introduction:

In its relative failure, as it would have been in its success, the Bombay textile strike of 1882-84 proved to be a watershed in the history of Indian labour. In almost two years long struggle, the textile workers in Bombay threatened to break down a carefully designed structure that straitjacketed them for over three decades. If the success of the strike would have heralded a new era in the history of Indian labour, its failure facilitated the spatial remaking and cultural transformation of the city.

The events also re-established how trade unionism transcended beyond its economic super structure to become a full-scale political struggle¹. The struggling workers of Bombay also understood to their dismay that how the ruling classes and industrial capital could unite to act against the economic rationality, as understood by the working class. Undoubtedly, the issues that the strike raised were not only numerous but also extremely complex for the historic interpretations.

The project was rooted in the memories of a classical working class neighbourhood: Workers lived in close proximity to one other and most of them worked close by. They got their news through word of mouth, some newspapers and probably radio. Their children woke up with mill siren while men set out for a hard day work for a very little pay that kept them far away from obsessive consumption. After work they set in bars, drank and ^{ate} at community eatery. Yes they were different, divided by caste, regional and religious identities and yet they represented working class outlook if not consciousness.

All these do not exist any more. However, industrial production continues to flood markets. Today we find factories in isolated areas and people are hired from far-flung

localities. When shift ends workers scatter in trucks and buses to their rural homes. There is no sense of community and no one wants to be considered working class. Young workers do not think about union as their fathers once did. They lack sociological imagination to understand why things are the way they are. They are interested in themselves, consumption and little else. Their heroes are the heroes of hegemonic capitalist system. The project was rooted in the need to understand those lives that resisted the epochal shift and got almost destroyed.

Background:

It was business as usual in Bombay when textile mill workers on September 27, 1981 struck work for a day to demand higher bonus coupled with earlier demands of wage revision and improvement in working condition. Militancy was in the air but no one anticipated that the textile workers would open a chapter in the history of Indian labour.

On October 20, the Bombay Mill Owners Association and the monopoly trade union Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS)² announced bonus agreement. According to the agreement, the 47 private textile mills in the city were to pay a total amount of Rs 20.62 crore to their 1.75 lakh workers, while 13 state owned mills were to pay sum of Rs 2.40 crore to their 30,000 workers. Nine of the private mills announced that they would pay 17.33 per cent bonus, four agreed to pay 15 per cent, three mills were to pay 14.5 per cent and one mill 14 per cent. The remaining mills were to pay between statutory minimums of 8.33 per cent to 12.5 per cent.

The agreement was not satisfactory to workers. The next day workers from 15 mills staged a sit down dharna. This action prompted the Communist Party of India affiliated Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union gave a call for indefinite strike. On October 23, hundred of workers from the Standard mills marched for several kilometers to the residence of militant trade union leader Dr Datta Samant, asking him to take over the leadership of their struggle. Reluctant Dr Samant finally agreed to lead the textile workers and struck an immediate rapport with thousands of workers by lashing out at the monopoly RMMS union in the first gate meeting outside Standard mills. In matter of days workers from mill after another flocked behind Dr Samant and he emerged to be the undisputed leader of the textile workers in Mumbai.

Months that followed Dr Samant's entry into the textile industry witnessed protracted labour mobilisation against all economic odds. During those months the behavioral pattern of the city's working class was almost unexpected among the rulers and mill owners. After six months of continuous strike and unspeakable suffering only 7 per cent of the total textile workforce had resumed work according to an estimate released then by the Mill Owners' Association.

The textile workers strike took most curious and alarming turn with Bombay police, including the armed constabulary, striking work on August 18. The police asserting its identity as working class, protested against the government's move to thwart their efforts at organising. The previous night authority had arrested the leadership of the policemen's association infuriating the force. In the utter chaos that prevailed in the city the striking workers who were peaceful for the past seven months, gave a spontaneous vent to their anger. The striking workers and police took the city by the storm. It was second time in the history of Bombay the blood of the men in uniform and civilians flew together like it did in the days of RIN strike³ of 1946.

Girangaon:

In those historic days, activities concentrated around a central Mumbai locality called 'Girangaon', which means village of textile mills. As the name suggests the whole area was once a hub of textile mills with several chimneys dotting the skyline. There are row upon rows of single room tenements where textile workers continue to live amidst the skeletons of modernist industrial structures where they used to work and weave dreams before lockouts. Today the poorly maintained housing colonies with worn out walls and broken windowpanes depict social and economical decay that began with the death of mills. Walking on Girangaon streets one hears the throb of life, which is struggling to survive in rapidly changing world around it. The textile workers have been battling to claim their space in the spatial remaking of the city in which the manufacturing activities are being thrown out of the city limits and also outside the domain of organised labour. They no longer have the same faith in the power of collective bargaining as they used to have. There are, however, desperate attempts to regain their power, sometimes through the barrel of a gun and sometimes through militant identity politics. The delinquent sub-culture that emerged out of the death of the industrial city became fodder to the burgeoning underbelly of Mumbai.

It may be noted that Arun Gawli, a dreaded underworld don was himself a son of textile mill worker just as his 'boys', most of them are the second generation of the locked out mill workers. On the other hand growth of forces like Shiv Sena in Girangaon, which was traditionally considered a Marxist citadel of Mumbai shows how workers chose to regain their strength through communal and regional identity politics.

The job loss had its own impact on Girangaon. As the population of Bombay grew by 1.8 per cent a year between 1981 to 1991 the three main district of Girangaon –Parel, Elphinston Road and Sandhurst Road-- fell by 1.5 per cent, 0.3 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively. In 1976, about 27 per cent of the working population found jobs in these mills today the figure is less than 7 per cent.

The textile mills of Bombay today are identified with approximately 500 acres of prime land they occupy in the centre of the city worth millions. They are remnants of industrial economy that lived its age of optimum production. It has outlived its utility and the people around that economy are at the most the financial drain.

In the era of economic liberalisation, when Bombay became the financial capital of India the land prices soared bringing mill land into sharp focus. The World Bank recipe was ready. In its report titled "India – an Industrialising Economy in Transition it stated "Giving companies greater freedom to make investments, enter new lines of production, and expand, may have only a modest effect if firms are not concurrently given greater freedom to adapt to market forces by retrenchment, merger or closure and sell of assets". However, a sovereign country like India will not accept the World Bank recipe as it comes. The Finance ministry appointed Goswami committee, which almost echoed the recommendation of the World Bank paving way for wiping out the landscape of Girangaon along with its working people. The Charls Correa committee that was appointed to plan the development of Central Bombay did not have livelihood of the mill workers in its terms of reference.

Today, retrenchment schemes have already been implemented. The last five years saw the World Bank and finance ministry asking stringent land laws to be repealed and the local government obliged. In the new city planning documents government decisively

withdrew its own power of control over urban land. As a result, the textile mills' chimneys are being replaced by skyscrapers and erstwhile workplace are being converted into amusement parks. The landscape has been changing and probably in few years from now Girangaon may exist only in the pages of history.

The project:

What some social analysts described as the last upsurge of the working class in Bombay, the textile strike left an imprint on the labour movement of India. The history that was created during those days had many obscured layers hidden in the wounds of the working class psyche. The capital has its case well documented. While the working class side of the story dwelt largely in their spirit and action. They rarely expressed anger, frustration, logic, strategies or sheer will to survive without wages for years in words. These feelings and emotion continue to simmer in their memories, which needed to be recorded. Of 2.5 lakh odd workers who participated in the struggle, very few are there to speak about that phase of their lives.

The was project aimed at capturing the workers' perception of the strike rather than its events. The process was painful for interviewees and interviewers both. For interviewees it was a polite attempt at preventing someone reopening an old wound while for interviewer it is an exercise in breaking through the conditioned responses which are essentially the parts of workers' defense mechanism against their own painful past.

Methodology:

Our choice of interviewees was guided by the overall aim of the project. Apart from workers who directly participated in strike we interviewed women who ran Khanval⁴, a community eatery where most of the migrant workers used to have their daily meals, a woman who unsuspectingly wedded to a mill worker on strike, a laundry manager, a rangoli artist, Lok Shahirs (People's Poets) and tamasha⁵ organisers and a Shiv Sena activist who moved out of the party and became a part of an autonomous union in the post strike period. We also have second-generation mill owner Jagdish Thackersey talking about what should have been done to save mills.

For the first time, when we contacted a worker for an interview, he confronted us with a question: "Everything about the strike has come into papers what more do you want to

ask me". His question underlined the fact that he perhaps never thought that the history would ever attach any importance to his personal perception of the strike. He never thought that he could be called upon to articulate his perception, to read out his mind, ideas, sensations and feelings. Strained political discourses in industrial society perhaps never had a room for such individual indulgences.

Some interviews are long and some are short in length, but all of them have their relevance in the given context. We kept our conversation with people as free flowing as possible. But we always approached the interviewees for the second time to note down some of the basic social and economic details. In many cases we found it extremely difficult to ask people about their present level of income. Any questions about present level of income invariably put the interviewee and us in an awkward position. Some interviewees did reveal the figure if we insisted but the question in their eyes was "you can see for yourself the condition around me. Why do you want to ask me the figure"? Later we stopped insisting on figure.

Similarly, sometimes it was difficult to ask people about their castes, a factor that social historian could be interested in. Here our strategy was to include caste only if the interviewee volunteered that information.

From the beginning of the project we knew that interviews conventionally conducted would be a meaningless exercise. The conditioned clichés were sure to dominate the conversation. We began our job by softly stirring workers' memory in a very informal conversation. After convincing ourselves that we were not making mistake in selection, we revealed our objective and told them how and why we wanted to record her memory. Although we had more than functional knowledge of their language, Marathi, we always kept Marathi speaking person with us to avoid any possibility of miscommunication.

The people:

We interviewed 40-year-old Asmita⁶ who got married to Ankush Gavde, a mill worker, just a couple of months after the strike began. So what does she remember of her marriage? "The strike would get over may be today or tomorrow, we thought", she said. Though the strike never got over, her husband died in 1990 after a prolonged illness. She does not have much to say about the strike, unions or mill workers. Her world was

different from her husband's world outside the four walls of their one room house. But she knew her husband, a man on strike, much better than anybody ever knew him. Talking to Asmita one realizes that words could not be the medium of communication with this woman. She does not have too many words to express her. She talks with long pauses while her hands move swiftly around stitched cloths, giving them finishing touches, what they call "Dhaga Kato"⁷. Most of the women in her neighborhood have the same occupation. They earn 50 paise per unit, which could be a readymade shirt or a trouser. These women remove excess threads from stitched cloths.

After the strike he did not get his job in the mill back. The case was going on but she just received the provident fund, which was hardly Rs 8000. That was spent on lawyers fees. Ultimately the couple gave expecting much from the court. Whether her husband resigned from the mill, she does not know, but she feels she must get some compensation. "Somebody told me that if you are married, then perhaps even I could have got something. But I have no certificate of marriage...only an album," she says.

When asked so how did she live during the strike, she says "Now what can I tell you? I was here alone. My children were in the school; one was in 4th one was in 5th the other was in 8th standard. I was confined in the house for almost a year. I had five children 3 boys and 2 girls. They got married after the strike. The boys then worked somewhere or the other to get their expenses of the school. My sister in Mumbai helped with the food. It was later that he had a paralytic stroke. He had not been to work for almost a year. During the strike he did some work... He was in the Kamgar (ESI) hospital at Worli for 3 months. We got him home later; he can't walk ever since. You should see him now. Earlier he was okay, meaning he would go to the toilet all on his own later last year he got another stroke which affected his head. He can't even speak now, we have to do everything for him. We have to feed him".

Also for example Sindhutai, an ex worker of Phoenix mill says, "My entire family was in the mills. My father, my mother in law, my cousins... everyone. I joined Phoenix Mills in 1972 in place of my mother in law... The workers suffered terribly during the long drawn out strike. There was no sign of the end of the strike. In many families, both parents were mill workers. Children had to leave school. Or take up small jobs, and mill workers' wives would go out to work as domestic workers here and there". However she would

not say much about how exactly she managed her family or how her children grew up in their difficult times.

Her story in words is simple. Many women in varied sociological environment may relate to it and she too said it in a very matter of fact tone. However, the imprint that the social decay that had already set in as the strike seemed to be heading nowhere, was seen on her entire being, though she hardly spoke about it. It is probably these words of a working class poet Narayan Surve⁸:

*My father came down the Sahyadris
a quilt over his shoulder
he stood at your doorstep
with nothing but his labour.*

*It was only my mother who knew
when he came and went
from the decrepit, hunchback shack
where I was born one night.*

*On pay-day he stormed into the house
wild with drunken frenzy
while mother huddled into a corner
cowering with fear.*

*On such days he drew me near
hair disheveled, laughing loudly
tossed me up in the air;
At times, he slapped me.*

*He was very fond of us
yet never once missed a day
in your service
working day and night.*

*I carried a tiffin-box
to the mill since childhood
I was cast the way
a smith forges a hammer.*

*I learnt my ropes
working on a loom
learnt on occasion
to go on a strike.*

*Here by the sea, my father died
struggling to his last breath;
I was hired then, by a wheezing foreman
who put me on his loom.*

(A part of Survey's poem titled 'Mumbai' from his collection 'Maze Vidyapeeth'. Translation from Marathi by Mangesh Kulkarni. Jatin Wagle and Abhay Sardesai.)

It was our endeavor to explore various forms of expressions of the working class ethos; some of them had roots in tradition of coastal Maharashtra and some emerged a fresh during those turbulent times. Poetry was one of the most prominent forms of expression. Most working class poetries were in the style of what is called *Pawada*, which narrated stories in lyrical form. Lavani form on the other hand was a curious mixture of dance poetry and theatre. Both of these forms were rooted in the cultural hinterland of Maharashtra. During the strike, however, a few street theatre groups were formed following the Marxist tradition carrying the message of class struggle.

Shahir Nivrutti Pawar⁹, over 70 years old is a typical representative of the Girangaon artist tradition. His story has been recorded in his own words. Pawar, 'mitachi shahir' or 'salt seller bard' as he was called had been signing working class songs with subtle political satire and deep human tragedy. His aunt used to run a community eatery and he used to sing for those who came there to eat. In early days I have sang for revolutionaries, he recalls with pride.

In his early days of being people's poet he worked in a textile mill in the Bombay but left his job later since he had found his real occupation, singing songs. He talks about

indigenous people, their fear of outsiders. He describes the landscape of Bombay during those days and sums up with the recent decay.

He says "All I inherited from my mother was a love for music. At dawn every day she would sit at the stone grinder, grinding grain and singing. I grew up with this memory, waking up to the sound of her melodious voice, and the grinding of stone against stone. The songs were full of imagery, about nature, about the sowing and reaping, about values. When I cut my first record was cut in 1970, I sang the song that my mother used to sing. I was eight when I sang with the leading kirtan singer in the village. He said- this boy would be a great singer."

Describing the city as he sees now he says, "Bombay has changed and so have the people. I am not blaming outsiders, in fact they have contributed to Bombay's prosperity and development. But now workers are being thrown out and mills are closing down. Chawls are going, and high rise buildings have come up. Mills should not close. They are the pride of the city. They talk of utilising open land- but why can't they remain open? Why does it bother you I want to ask them! We don't want to leave this area. We don't want money, we want to live here in the land of our forefathers, our traditions. I have lived here for 63 years and my father lived here before me. My children? Yes they are artistes; my three sons sing, and my grandson dances well! Yes I hope they carry on the tradition".

Theatre in Girangaon was symbol of the economic condition of working class in Bombay. Productions were made on shoestring budgets. Many a times artists were not paid at all for performance, which took place on makeshift stages. However, that theatre was richest in terms of its political content given the increasing political awareness among its audience. Various themes of working class movement got interwoven with traditional mythology and the result was the exhilarating art of story telling.

Apart from its political content the basic need for recreation kept these theatres going despite severe financial constraint. After working 12 hours day in noisy textile mills and sleeping in crowded rooms the workers used to look forward to an hour or two of laughter and forgetting. Also this form of recreation was easy on their pockets and relevant to the situation they found themselves in. Also, most of the workers came from

Sahyadry mountain range on the West coast of India and hence they were known as *Ghati*. The performers too came from the same region and brought with them some cultural nuances from home for many workers. From their language to their music everything about this performance reminded the workers of their home, which was almost necessary for their emotional balance¹⁰.

57-year-old Madhukar Nerale¹¹ had taken it upon himself to entertain the textile workers who otherwise had no reason to smile. Nerale used to run a Tamasha group. Tamasha is a traditional Maharashtra form of public entertainment that uses songs, dances, and theatrics to talk about mythology, contemporary politics and at times robust eroticism. Some of the *Laavni*¹² dancers who performed in Tamasha had acquired a status of *superstars among the workers*. The *tamasha* came to the mill area through the workers who came from the Ghat- Sangli Satara, Kolhapur etc. and became one of the most popular folk forms in the city. Nerale recalls his association with the textile mills and regrets, like many other traditional artists of his time, the death of Tamasha in the information age.

He says "Mills were the hub around which the life of the community revolved. The siren told us the time, we didn't need to check a watch. I used to wake up at 6 am and when the siren sounded at 7 am I would rush to school. I remember once as people were in the process of getting ready to go to work, just before the siren, the Lalbag gas turbine burst and a huge ball of fire flew up into the sky and dropped into the ocean. People immediately left everything and went to the aid of those who were hurt. I remember many had their skin burnt off. The community bonds were close and strong."

Describing his early days in the world of Tamasha he recalls "A friend of my father's came to my father with the suggestion that they should organise tamasha programs on contract. Where this Hanuman theatre stands now, there was a vegetable farm. There was only jungle around that, no industries or anything. My father took this place on rent. There were many bullock carts in those days, in 1946 which were used to ferry goods. My father didn't have money to buy bamboos, thatch and metal sheets. So he put up a cloth tent supported by bullock carts That was our theatre. There were 19 tamasha theatres in Bombay, and the big contractors were Bangdiwala Sheth and Abdul Rehman Sheth. The cinema theatres you see in Kamatipura now were all tamasha theatres in

those days. Abdul Rehman Sheth bought up the whole of Batatyachi Chawl so that his artistes could live there. The working class families loved tamashas. Cinema was more a middle class medium.”

Talking about the decline of the Tamasha tradition Nerale says “Now there are hardly any mills running and very few textile workers. The mathadi workers (loaders) have all gone to New Bombay. There still are people from ghat in South Bombay, in transport and coolie work. The state government built the Rang Bhavan an open air theatre in South Bombay. There used to be tamashas and plays performed there, starting late in the night when these workers get free. Then some people objected to the sound and there was a court order to restrict the timing of the performances. Tamashas are not noisy. Jazz and rock are much louder. But the court brought a blanket ban on performances late in the night. Naturally there is no way to perform tamashas or Loknatyas there any more”, Nerale says.

One of the important aspects of the strike was that it withered the Marxist trade union movement in the city of Bombay. To combat and check the spread of Marxists among urban labour was a political compulsion of Congress and other right wing parties. Shiv Sena, a regional, sectarian and communal political party, has its genesis in the right wing parties’ need to combat Marxism. Shiv Sena’s charismatic leader Bal Thackeray and the party led unions took a long time to react in fast developing situation in the mill area when it did react they came out strongly against Dr Datta Samant and the Congress led Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh¹³. However, the only purpose the Sena’s meeting served was to provide additional emotive charge to Dr Samant rally the very next evening.

Bal Nar¹⁴, whose political journey took him from early years in the Shiv Sena to Congress to the Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti, a co-ordination committee of the closed mill workers union has curious observations to make about Sena’s politics and the faith that he continues to have in the Sena chief Bal Thackeray. He is one of those who we interviewed continues to fight for the rights of the locked out workers just as he continues to work in Piramal Mills.

Recalling his early memories of Bal Thackeray he says “ Balasaheb used to move around in the lanes and bylanes of Girangaon in order to mobilise support for his organisation. He came to Modern Mills, and he took meetings there. Wherever young people like us called him he would come- people were not in awe of him as they are today. Nor was he afraid. Justice for the *Marathi manus*– that was the slogan, the inspiration before us”, he says.

He was instrumental in making initiating first few inroads that Sena made in the textile mills. Recalling those days he says “Our first *Shakha* Pramukh (branch leader) was Ramesh Labde. He used to go around canvassing support and we would accompany him. Ramesh Labde set up a *shakha* in Modern Mills. It was a small makeshift place built over a gutter. Like a urinal. It was just a thatch. It had to be rebuilt several times”.

Janardan Chandrakant Narkar¹⁵ and his father ran a laundry business in Girangaon. Narkar represents that section of urban society whose small business got affected due to labour unrest in the city. Narkar demonstrates his robust political insight, that explains some of the most complex political dynamics in the simplest manner. This is what he had to say about various unions around in Girangaon: “There was a union of the communist party. R.M.M.S. and George Fernandes union was there too. P.S.P. union existed at that time. There were also other unions at that time. But these main two three unions like R.M.M.S., the communists, and George Fernandes were progressive. Actually about 75 % of the workers belonged to the communist union at one time. There was a strike when the communist union was strong too. We were very young then. A communist gentleman by the name Sripad Amrut Dange, tried his best to settle the demands through strike at that time. His attempt was to benefit the workers without giving much trouble to the mill owners.”

So who is responsible for the failure of the strike? Narkar answers the question in one line: “The union, which was responsible for the strike, is responsible for it's failure”, he concludes.

Anant Kumbhar¹⁶ is one of many workers who chose to go back to the hinterland. He continued to live in Bombay for a long time after the strike but he meticulously planned

his exit from the city. Today his house in his native Kolhapur is ready and he announces it with a pride.

The prolonged strike at one stage had sparked off reverse migration. Workers who could not find any other means to feed themselves during the strike chose to go back home from where they had migrated in search of a better future. Anant Kumbhar, like many other workers had a strong link with their villages, Recollecting the days of reverse migration he says "Initially 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".

However, Guntant Manjerkar¹⁷, a rangoli artist, recollected that life was not easy for those who went back home. "I am from the Konkan and I have seen what has been happening to the mill workers. They are Marathi but they are being ruined and displaced. There are many I have seen who have gone back to their villages and are struggling to eat a single meal. There are some who just gave up and committed suicide. This age belongs to the mill owners because they have diversified into other industries at the cost of the mills and the workers have nowhere to go. Where government has bothered to do anything about stopping the sale of mill land, some of the workers have been saved. Nothing happens to the mill owners. They are doing well for themselves because they are in other industries. The workers who built this city have no place in it anymore.

One of the incidents that made the situation more explosive and also made the ruling elite and middle classes sit up in their chair was the police strike. Some of those who participated in the police strike were not traceable and some were back into the force, unable to even utter a word about the strike. After a rigorous search we found Kumar Kadam, a former journalist and president of a journalist organisation called Mumbai Marathi Patrakar Sangh. Kadam was closely linked with police personals who were on the forefront of the strike and on an occasion he helped defusing tension between armed

constabulary and the authority. The following paragraph is what he has to say on the strike¹⁸.

"I would not say that it was an uprising or mutiny. What the police did was that they displayed indiscipline by wearing black ribbons on the 1982 Independence Day after the flag hoisting. This indiscipline could have been dealt with in a different way. But on 17th August, the Maharashtra government brought in a large force of police from Delhi, it was from the Central Reserve Police. All the local police personnel and the state reserve police were removed from work from all the police stations in Mumbai. Only the officers were allowed to work with the Central Reserve Police. On the same night the office bearer leaders and the activists of the Police Karmachari Sanghatana were arrested under the National Security Act. The services of all of them were terminated. This caused tremendous anger and unrest in the police colonies the next day. To add fuel to the fire, the water supply at Naigaum Police quarters was cut off on that day. Nobody knew who cut the water off. Perhaps the officers can throw some light on this. But as there was no water in the colonies the wives and children of the police personnel came out on the streets in protest. There were hot exchanges of words between them and the police officers. This sparked off trouble and the riots started. This will show that the police personnel did not start this. This was not a police mutiny. Their leaders were arrested early in the morning. When the trouble began their leaders were not with them. Another factor is the textile workers strike that was going on at that time. The atmosphere in Mumbai city was tense and people were restless. So many people who were not connected to the police agitation took part in the riots. The riot spread alarmingly. Mumbai city was burning for two days in some parts. The main trouble was in central Dádar, Naigaum. Therefore Mumbai was divided into two parts due to the riots".

Beyond conditioned responses:

As they spoke we waited endlessly for a small window to open through which we can have glimpses of the obscured emotional and personal world of a worker; to see how the strike really affected their psyche. We had to see through the conditioned responses. But those openings were rare and the vision through it was poor.

When asked categorically, Vasant Mahadik, a worker with New Great Easter Mill speaks a few line about how the strike affected his family. "I never went to work during the strike

period", he insists because that was the "right" thing to do in the class ethos of that time or just the right thing to say now. Over a period of time he, like many others, has idealised the past in confirmation with the idealised values. He continues "We survived because my son did two jobs; he used to go to the post office during the day and at night he worked in a press. Even then running of the house was difficult. It was a very difficult time. My son could not complete his education. My wife started working. My daughter, poor girl, could not be educated. She too started working." The grief comes out of his words.

But we wonder isn't it possible that during the days of acute economic deprivation, he did nurture the idea of going back to work when Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh, a Congress affiliated union were taking truck-loads of workers back to spindles. How did he react to various kinds of inducements offered by mill owners, various other political forces and also the rival unions, which went out their way to break the strike? Or how did he react to the threat to his body and family when hired goons were deployed to break the strike. He does not say.

The conditioned responses are those, which are truthful to the documented historical truth. There is a tendency towards idealising the documented truth, which is generally articulated by those who were mere observers of the historical process, for example media, rather than the agent of such process itself. For example in the case of the textile strike, a local Marathi newspaper called Navakaal, was almost seen as a mirror image of truth. And most workers at one or the other time had tested their perception with the 'truth' that was published on the pages of this paper. Initially we observed that when some interviewees led us to a brief guided tour to their family life during the period of the strike some other did not open any window to peep in. Even those who spoke about their personal suffering would want to wind up the issue in just a few lines and got back to what they thought were the important things to talk about.

As we proceeded further with the project we learnt to deal with such conditioned responses. Workers began to speak their mind. They began to talk about their own interpretation of the history. For example a former timekeeper of Swan Mill named Arondekar said, "The workers had put all their might behind the strike. If Datta Samant had withdrawn the strike in time, the workers would not have been ruined. They sold

their tenements. There were some who had to sell their kerosene stoves for 4-5 rupees, and they would subsist on tea they made by heating water by burning old newspapers.”

But looking at Arondekar's background one learns that he never personally participated in the strike, though he sympathised with communist trade unions. And hence one can suspect of him being not a true representative of those who rallied behind Dr Datta Samant and stood by him in everything he did.

On the other hand Vasant Mahadik, who himself participated in the strike and paid for living with the then prevalent working class ethos says “I don't think that Datta Samant made a mistake. He had warned us- keep enough provisions to last for 6 months. It was not his fault. He didn't call the strike. The workers did”¹⁹.

We remember some five years ago, children of Khatau mill workers had organised a dharana in Mumbai. They wrote poems and sang songs about their childhood and dreams. Standing on their toes they reached to the mike and spoke about what happened to the family when her father lost his job. The event was not recorded. We also have friends among workers. For the past several years we have interacted at length -sometimes in a restaurant or simply walking through Girangaon, looking at slogan freshly painted on walls-without me carrying a tape recorder. Those conversations would have perhaps made invaluable oral testimony of the working class experience. Our experience shows that familiarity or that feeling of togetherness helps to achieve what every oral historian would aim for. A paratrooping approach seems quite out of place while dealing with individuals and their complex memory of historical processes, which quite often we find have turned into nostalgia.

These voices of people tell us what empiricists may not want to know. They tell us about the time and space that hosted events of far reaching consequences. They may not tell us about the collective perception of the political struggle. But they give us an account of individual battles that every one of them fought at home, in hospitals, in a grocery shops and in bars. They talk about the people who fought political battle as they wrote poetry, sang songs, drew Rangoli, felt romantic at times, laughed at erotic gestures of men and women in Tamasha and also cried in despair at times. They essentially talk about the life that created history rather than history that destroyed lives.

These bits and pieces of memory recorded in this project, I am sure, will go a long way in explaining the time when Bombay city underwent transformation, from a manufacturing city to a hub of financial services, when the city known for its working class got to recognition of India's financial capital, when working class politics took a curious turn to become the politics of regional and religious identities, when a large number of people were uprooted from their political, economical and physical space.

Documented History:

It was also our endeavour to concentrate on those parts of documented history of the textile strike, which have escaped researchers' attention so far. One of the main source of written history that we thought should be preserved is numerous news and articles appeared in what continues to be known as Mumbai's mill workers news paper called "Navaakal":

The newspaper has been one of the most popular among industrial workers in Bombay. For the past several decades it has been one of the largest circulated daily in Bombay. The editorial policy of the newspaper has been a sort of microcosm of the working class thinking. In early 70 the newspaper played a role of vanguard of proletariat ethos. The legendary editor of the newspaper, Nilkanth Khadilkar, during those days had visited Soviet Russia and had come back very impressed with that brand of socialism. He wrote a series of article in his paper and preached what he called "practical socialism" for India. His theory of "practical socialism" did not evoke much debate among Indian intelligentsia, but for his readership it was almost the way forward.

During the strike, the paper clearly stood by the striking workers. Every news about the strike was given the uppermost importance in the paper while series of editorial appeared in the paper during the strike clearly supported the working class cause.

However, during the era of communal frenzy in Bombay, the same newspaper took a blatant pro Hindu stance and virtually competed with Shiv Sena's mouthpiece Saamna in publishing communally provocative articles. Justice Srikrishna commission, that probed 1992-93 communal riots in Bombay, said "...the communal passions of the Hindus were aroused to fever pitch by the inciting writings in print media, particularly 'Saamna' and

'Navakal' which gave exaggerated accounts of the Mathadi murders and the Radhabai Chawl incident..."

To our utmost dismay we discovered that the Navakaal had no archive, or it was not in a shape for a researcher to refer. The space constrain was cited to be the main reason by the management for maintaining no workable archive. After a long search we discovered that a public library, Marathi Granth Sangrahalaya, has preserved files of Navakaal. However, given the condition of the file it was not possible to photocopy the relevant articles.

After some deliberation we got the permission for digital photography. Armed with a simple table lamp and a digital camera we photographed the newspaper articles for several weeks. As a result we have approximately 390 images of articles appeared during the strike in the paper. All these images are not fully readable but the headline and first few paragraphs of the article can be read in the images. Unfortunately, most parts of the newspapers could not be read with bare eyes.

The collection of these articles reveals some very curious dynamics. On July 15, Navakaal gave a coverage to workers' children rally at the government headquarter in Bombay. The story described how young students marched with placards and shouted slogans for justice. In the same column the newspaper reports formation of a Hindu Student Organisation. On further investigation it was revealed how the forces of Hindutwa, which did not have any presence in that area, were at work operating subtly among students of workers. Now it is a historical fact that after the strike the Central Mumbai parliamentary constituency, which had elected leaders like S A Dange and George Fernandes, became a citadel of Hindutwa forces.

We also made several rounds of the union offices in search of relevant documents, pamphlets, posters or any other printed material, which could be archived for the future historians. However, these trips did not yield much results. Piles and piles of dusted documents in RMMS office had no archival value while it had no other record preserved.

"We did not print too many posters...it was expensive... the best was wall painting, it was cheap and you can involve more people", a Kamgar Aghadi activist told us later. However, the search for the relevant archival material in print would continue.

Conclusion:

The historical resources that our oral history project has generated clearly show the paradigm shift in the way workers lived and perceived themselves before, during and after the strike. Girangaon today is a living testimony of Gramsci's famous phrase "Capitalism is a hegemonic system", that infiltrates all aspects of our lives, our space and our time and subjugates all other cultures. After one of the most ruthless onslaught of state and the capital on the working class ethos, Girangaon lies like a corpse of a vibrant culture – culture that did have capacity to fight exploitation and an ability to look forward to egalitarian society.

The second generations of the textile workers are now in a desperate search for collective identity. Religious fundamentalists and armed militia have been thriving on these forgotten people's urge for identity. They do not have any ideological perspective or basic framework – not even some crude Keynesianism. As a result there is a pervasive cynicism: everyone is corrupt, every one are here for money, nothing can be trusted and nothing can be done. Unions too are reduced to just another special interest groups, probably corrupt.

Even to those intellectuals who are not overtly hostile to workers, the terms like working class consciousness or class struggle are anathema. The labour-management co-operation has been a dominant paradigm.

In conclusion of the project one can only remember the people who spoke to us. The project, being about working class struggle, was essentially about violence to spirit and body, it was about humiliation and betrayals, promises and frustration. For people to talk about such violence to their being was a formidable task. They spoke for the defense of history.

¹ Javed Anand, a reporter with The Daily quoted workers he met during the strike saying "You won't understand a thing, if you try and understand our struggle from a *Bania's* point of view... This is not an everyday strike, we are fighting for a new future, not only for ourselves but for the coming generations".

² Under the Bombay Industrial Relation Act, RMMS was and has been the sole representative union of the textile workers in the city of Bombay.

³ The RIN strike has now been recognised as an anti-imperialist upsurge. It ended an era in which Indian soldiers were used as mercenaries for the battles of imperialists. In its last message to the people of India, the Naval Central Strike Committee wrote:

"Our strike has been a historic event in life of our nation. For the first time blood of the men in services and men on the streets flowed together in a common cause."

"We in the service will never forget this. We know also that you, our brothers and sisters, will not forget".

⁴ Bombay's textile industry got its labour force mainly from coastal Maharashtra where Sahyadri mountain range runs parallel to the picturesque coastline. The whole region is called Konkan which for geographical reasons remained behind in economic development. The region predominantly had the monsoon-fed agrarian economy along with a low intensity coastal fishing activities. In the post independence industrialisation there was a large scale migration to the industrialised city like Bombay. But most migrant were men working in the city while the family was left behind to take care of old people and land. This system gave a rise to the Khanaval system in which women would cook at home for men at work for a very affordable price.

⁵ The tamashas were organised on a contractor system. The tamasha is the most popular cultural form in Maharashtra. It appeals to all strata of society. It was a complex mixture of many forms and is distinctive in its lack of any religious content or connotation. Nor was it associated with any religious function or ritual. The Ghats were the birthplace of the famous 'tamasha'. This is a composite form consisting of 'ganagawan' (Krishna's teasing pranks on the 'gopis' or milkmaids), sangeet bari (song and/or dance sequence performed by women, either sitting or dancing). This composed the first part. The second is almost entirely given up to the wagh (skit, which is the narrative). The skit was perhaps influenced by the dashavatari (from the Konkan) form. The origin of the robust and erotic form 'lavni' which was the most important part of the tamasha, was originally the dance performed for the entertainment of the soldiers and

dated back to the 17th century, which is when it took its present form. The tamasha came to the mill area through the workers who came from the Ghat- Sangli Satara, Kolhapur etc. and became one of the most popular folk forms in the city.

⁶ For complete interview refer Cassette No 18, VVGNI, Archive of India Labour

⁷ Dhaga Kato (Cut thread) has been one of the most sustained occupations in the mill area, especially among women. It grew with the mercurial growth of unorganised ready-made garment industry. Thousands of the make shift sewing factory mushroomed in Bombay in 90s feeding to the chain of ready made garment store across the city and also for the burgeoning export markets. The industry is a classic case of post industrial ancilerised production system. Cloths are procured from scattered power looms, they are cut in trousers and shirts in a unit, sent for stitching to another and finally given to housewives for giving finishing touches. The Dhaga Kato women manually pluck loose threads from a stitched trouser for about 50 paise per trouser or shirt.

⁸ Narayan Surve, who is known as a working class poet, has put the voice of Bombay working class in the Marathi literary tradition. His father was a textile worker and he learnt to operate looms by observing his father at work. He pays homage to his father through his poetry.

⁹ For complete interview refer cassette no 13A, 13B, VVGNI, Archive of Indian Labour

¹⁰ A Tamasha organisor, Nerale, recalls "There were shahirs then like Shahir Amar Sheikh, Gavankar and Anna Bhau Sathe who were in the communist party and they did much to propagate the party's politics amongst ordinary people. Songs like Anna Bhau Sathe's '*majhi maina gavavar rahili, majha jeevachi hotiya kahili*, (my beloved is left behind in our village and my heart burns for her) were popular because so many young workers were here alone and lonely, and they responded to the song. There were also many songs they wrote spontaneously on the problems of the workers who lived here, and on political issues. They were fired with the need to organise and mobilise people. The communists were able to reach workers this way; but the socialists, they also had their writers and poets but they did not address the basic problems of the workers. They were more into sermonising on moral and ethical issues."

¹¹ For complete interview refer cassette no 11, VVGNI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹² The origin of the robust and erotic form 'lavni' which was the most important part of the tamasha, was originally the dance performed for the entertainment of the soldiers and dated back to the 17th century, which is when it took its present form.

¹³ It was in September 1982. Shiv Sena organised the first meeting of workers to announce the end of party alliance with Congress and lash out at RMMS and Dr Samant. Sena's trade union leader Datta Salvi in his speech tried to invoke regionalism by saying that Sena was with the striking workers because most of them were Maharashtrians and Sena's *raison d'être* was to work for the justice to Maharashtrians. In the same meeting Sena chief Bal Thackeray lashed out at Dr Datta Samant and accused him of destroying life of workers by unnecessarily prolonging the strike. He called upon workers to desert Samant and come to him for quick justice.

¹⁴ For complete interview refer Cassette No 10, VVGNLI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹⁵ For complete interview refer cassette no. 14, VVGNLI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹⁶ For complete interview refer Cassette No 07, VVGNLI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹⁷ For complete interview refer to Cassatees 8A, 8B, VVGNLI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹⁸ For complete interview refer to Cassette DD, VVGNLI, Archive of Indian Labour.

¹⁹ In an interview on October 27, 1981, Dr Datta Samant said "Actually, workers from different mills had been coming to me from time to time. But I kept declining as I was already overburdened with responsibilities. Standard Mill workers however stuck to their request and refused to leave my place till I gave my consent. I finally agreed when they told me that the workers themselves would take the responsibility of any struggle and only wanted me to be their spokesman."

Reference:

1. World bank report: India –an Industrialising economy in transition
2. World Bank Report: India's recent development and Medium term issues.
3. The report of the committee on industrial sickness and corporate restructuring (Goswami Committee Report)
4. Sujata Patel, Alice Thorner: Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture.
5. David Moberg, Nation, January 1997.
6. Javed Anand: The 10th month, Bombay's historic textile strike, CED, 1982
7. Gurbir Singh: Force and Counterforce, CED, 1982.
8. Murder of the Mills: Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana Report
9. Michel D Yates, Monthly Review, February 1997.
10. H. Van Wersh: The Bombay Textile Strike, Oxford, 1987.
11. Mill Owners Association Report, 1970, 1995, 1997.
12. Socio-Economic Review of Greater Bombay, Centre for Research And Development, 1994.
13. Gayatri Singh, Colin Gonsalves: Repeal of the BIR Act, 1995.
14. Development Control Rules, 1991.
15. Justice Srikrishna Commission's report on Bombay Communal riots of 1992-93
16. Subrata Banerjee, The RIN strike, PPH, 1954