

National Labour Institute

Oral History Project

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Shahir Nivrutti Pawar: over 70 years old is a typical representative of the Girangaon artist tradition. His story is here in his own words but the 'mitachi shahir' or 'salt seller bard' as he was called is an institution in the area.

'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 will be a great singer.

I came to Bombay in 1940. I remember hearing that there was to be a meeting where Gandhi was to speak and I and two of my friends went searching for the place. My father had told me Gandhi was like Shivaji- he was fighting for Swaraj just like Shivaji did. We reached there and all I remember is that I saw Gandhi. It was a prayer meeting, and that I asked whether I could sing. I sang an abhang by Tukaram. Gandhi was happy and he patted me on the back. It was a proud moment. People used to queue up in order to get Gandhi's signature. The Kasturba Fund would take 5 rupees to give out one autograph. We didn't have the money.

I was just fourteen when once I was walking down Lamington Road wearing a Gandhi cap, and a white man, a saheb came up to me, grabbed the topi from my head and threw it to the ground, and stamped on it. Then he said 'Get out'. What could I do? I just dusted off the cap and put it on again. Such incidents were not uncommon.

I heard many speeches by national leaders then. I went to Subhash Chandra Bose's meeting in Girgaum chowpatty.

My father was a seller of salt. He would go from house to house with the crystalline salt on a handcart, and I accompanied him. The moment I heard the taal of the dholki somewhere in any of the houses my steps would falter and my father would chide me, saying get out of this wasteful fixation with music- it won't get you anywhere- do you want to dance in a tamasha or what? He was convinced that artistes were degenerate alcoholics. He would say- if this happens to my eldest son, what will happen to my other children?! Still, without telling him I went off to see the Patthe Bapurao's tamasha- his was the most famous tamasha. The ticket was 2 rupees. What a crowd there was. With the very first beat of the dholak, I felt a tingling throughout my body.

Once my father took me to see his spiritual guru. There was an aarti in progress and I joined in. Maharaj asked- hey who's this boy. My father said that was his son. And he complained that I was singing lavnis in the tamasha, The guru said- let him sing anything but he should sing this boy. After that my father allowed me to sing whatever and wherever I wanted! There was a shahir in Girangaon called Shahir Haribhau Bhandari whose profession was selling a savoury from Konkan called 'khaja'. He would sing as he peddled, and I would accompany him. We would sing patriotic songs. I became popular with the local people and they would give me two or three rupees. Then I started getting invited to sing at functions. I will never forget how once they garlanded me with a hundred crisp one rupee notes after one recital. The harmonium player who was accompanying me, he said now why not make this a profession- we were getting so many programs and so much recognition.

My aunt used to run a khanaval in Naigaum. Many people used to eat there. There were revolutionaries who were underground who would ask me to sing after they had eaten their food and I would sing- we had to be careful because of they were in hiding. I would sing songs of freedom for them. Then there were the men from the gymnasium nearby. They were from my village. They were all living in 'galas' and their wives were in the village. They would meet only once a year sometimes. They too would ask me to sing. I would sing this song- 'A simple village called Kolhapur, in the Sahyadri mountains- my husband has gone to Mumbai, almost a month ago. I check in the village post office but there is still no word from him. My child weeps for him, what can I say to console him? I think of my beloved every moment, I wonder how he is doing; where does he eat? Where does he sleep?' This song would thrill my audience and they would make me sing it gain and again. They would feel nostalgic for their homes.

Bombay was full of large clean open spaces then. It was common to not see a single vehicle for one whole hour in our bye lane in Grant Road. Girangaon too was full of clean maidans (parks). When you walked down the streets you would hear bhajans and kirtans. We would go and watch while the sculptors worked on the Ganapati idols in Lalbag preparation for the Ganeshotsav in September. There were Rangoli artistes who made beautiful paintings. There were so lifelike, when you looked at them, you felt they would open their mouths and speak. They were drawn on the road, and people would come to see them. Where is the space to do that now, when the cars even climb the footpaths.

You will be surprised to know that Marathi people used to be afraid of the outsiders then, We were all poor and uneducated and we couldn't speak English. They were seen as English speaking and educated babus or sahebs.

Silam was the Speaker of the Assembly then. In 1946. I used to sell salt to his household. Once His wife said- come for a pooja we are having here tomorrow. So I said we would sing for the pooja. There were a hundred people there, and the Chief Minister B G Kher was also there. We sang about 7 or 8 songs. They made me repeat them twice and thrice. We were given three rupees. In Girangaon I started being called 'Mithwala shahir' (the saltseller bard). 'Shahir' is a title people give you. It is not a title conferred by any institution. I was working in Jupiter Mills for a while but I left later. I started getting invitations outside Bombay. I sang revolutionary songs and soon there was a warrant of arrest, so I had to go underground for a while. I joined the Peasants and Workers Party in 1949, and I was active for about 10 to 12 years. I started each of their meetings with my songs. I went to Sholapur during the time they had established a peoples' government there under the leadership of Nana Patil, to sing in the meeting there in

There were many shahirs in Girangaon. There were Sable, Farande, Shahir Gavankar. Earlier there were Muchate, Nikam, Gokul Nanivdekar and Khadilkar particularly inspired me. Their records. I used to sing songs written by Shahir Atmaram Patil. He wrote many povadas. I used to combine expression with a good memory for lyrics.

During the Samyukta Maharashtra, all the shahirs played an important role. We would sing in the public meetings, at the start and gather people. Huge crowds used to turn up to hear Acharya Atre speak. Atre once introduced me saying there is a shahir who sell salt in the day and sings in the evening- this is that shahir- Nivrutti Pawar.

I composed songs in the traditional forms, like the wedding songs with content of the message of Samyukta Maharashtra. I met many great people during that time. Once I sat next to C D Deshmukh in a bullock cart. During a propaganda tour, and I thought to myself- this is the man whose signature appears on every ten rupee note. We did not take money for singing in these meetings.

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.