

Interview with Darryl D'Monte  
Interviewer: Anjali Monteiro  
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Interviewer: Darryl, thank you for agreeing to speak to us. I was wondering if you could give us the context of the mill lands and the central role they played within the mill economy and in development [of the city].

DD: I think we will have to take collective responsibility for our failure to think and act on the mill lands. For too long we saw it as an issue which was related to labour, the retention of their jobs, the settlement they received—they either quit or were sacked—those kind of issues. We woke up far too late by which time much of the damage was done. I started researching for this book called *Ripping the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and its Mills* in about 1996-97 and it was published in 2002. I remember people telling me, they said, “Darryl, what on earth are you writing this book for? Because it's all over.” So in 2002, it was published and we followed it up with that book I edited in 2007 called *Mills for Sale*. But as you can see, it's still reverberating, although the echoes are dying down now. It's still reverberating in the public conscience. So it was our collective failure as activists, as environmentalists especially not to see what the impact of that whole decision was going to be on the city. It was in fact as you remember when the Bombay Environmental Action Group filed that case on the mill land, they were confronted with exactly the same question. They won the case in the High Court,

happening in that mill - Kohinoor No. 1- I have a few pictures of the mill workers in that mill. They are there in their gunjis and singlets every day. They did no work for 6 to 7 years. Clocked in, clocked out. The only activity during the day was these water tankers that came to draw the water from the ponds that existed in the mills. It was a completely de-humanizing fact. I remember going...if you speak to conservation architects they tell you that the best ensemble, they call it, of the mills with all its architectural features is India United No. 1, David Sassoon's mill and it's about 11 acres and it has all the features. Even there, I remember, you were confronted with the site of these people just flocking and doing no work, playing cards, there was a tremendous feeling of decay and devastation actually. Incidentally, that was the mill that conservationists wanted to be preserved as an example of what was Mumbai's past. Just to digress back in history one can see that the two features which made Mumbai— the first was the port and then was the mill. If you see in history, after the mills from mid 19th century came the heavy engineering industries followed by chemicals followed by petrochemicals. It was only from the 1990s onward that IT and financial services then took their place. So the mills were integral to that history of Mumbai. But as I said it was not part of anybody's consciousness.

It should be recorded that at one stage there were like 250,000 workers in these 50 odd mills, both private and state owned mills. There has been no city in the world where there have been more workers in one industry in one city anywhere. In Germany, you could have in the Ruhr area you could have workers in the German steel industry but over several towns. This was in one city, in one industry. As you know, because you have done that film, you will be aware that people had a hereditary occupation. You could pass on your job to your son or a nephew. Mills were known by the families because they worked as a hereditary right in those mills over a few generations. All of us in the 1960s to 1970s can remember catching a last train from Churchgate to the suburbs where we lived and at Parel... at Lower Parel at midnight or just past it, the train would immediately fill up because it was the night shift ending, working in three shifts. It was part of the fabric of the city. As you must know, dabbawalas even, not on same scale as lunch but would even deliver dinners to a few mill workers working in the night shifts. That was all part of the industrial landscape of Mumbai, which we have lost. I think, it's our failure not to see the implications. We were hardly aware till we started studying this issue. Mill was one industry where the land was not allowed to be sold because the government realized what a huge employment—not potential, but its actuality was at that stage, 250,000 workers. That was the direct employment. There were of course the women who were always not on the regular rolls and were the first to be sacked because they were on a temporary basis. First to be sacked in any crisis or strike or any down turn.

9:27 - 17:06

How these mills... because if you say there were 250,000 workers directly employed, at least 3 or 4 (lakhs) were indirectly employed, both by providing food and the ancillary industries, chemicals that were used up in the textile industry itself and all those ancillary industries and services which propped up the whole of the city. I think it's variously described... both here and Ahmedabad have been described as the Manchester of the East. It's very instructive to read Jan Bremen, his labour history of Ahmedabad where it clearly shows by the 1980s... because the mills were somewhat more liberal and employed Dalits, I don't think too many Muslims necessarily, but certainly Dalits in the mill. By the 1980s they reached a stage where the children could be sent to complete their education in school, which would enable them to work perhaps not as mill workers but in some other occupation. Because of the riots in Ahmedabad from 1980s, many of the mill workers, which included many Dalits especially lost their jobs. They interrupted the education of their children and

the history of communalization in Ahmedabad can start or certainly has to be factored, in that the decline of the mills, closure of the mills had a catastrophic impact on the employment in the city. We all know it may be facile but, I think, sometimes the most obvious things are also true. It would be true to say, I was editing the Times of India in 1992 when the riots began and I remember writing a piece in the Times, saying we always thought Mumbai was this cosmopolitan city. Unlike, may be Kanpur and other industrial cities in the north, we have not faced that kind of communalization. It occurred to me even then, much before I started working on the mills that because of the closure of the mills that people in that sort of situation turned upon the other and wreaked their kind of communal prejudice on the minority. These are classic symptoms of fascism in Germany after the Depression in the 1920s, giving rise to that kind of Nazism. As I said it sounds too obvious, but sometimes the obvious can be true and we have to look at that because there are no... I kept telling people, there is nothing in our DNA which marks us as being communal. It's the outside circumstances that have closed the major source of employment. There is no other form of employment readily available. I argue in that book that the liberalizers made out a case that, in fact when the book was published by Oxford University Press, before it was published they sent it to an economist to review it, and he said that this was the natural way of people... of industries to decline and die. It's happened all over the world. It happened in the country, which is the father or mother of the industrial revolution, which is Britain. All the mills in Manchester have died and gone away. There was a natural process and I shouldn't be shedding tears, just because it's a natural process. We replaced those jobs by financial services, by IT and all these new sunrise industries and services more likely. Whereas, I think, a moment's reflection would make it clear that first of all that kind of liberalization goes hand in hand with privatization and globalization. By the very nature, these jobs are getting more and more mechanized, more IT related and they can never hope to replace the number. There will be a built-in class divide where people who are not as well educated will be at the bottom of the pile. There is an interesting anecdote... I have to tell that. Once Outlook magazine asked me to write an article, a cover story on the decline of Mumbai. I wrote it and I said would...I was writing this book of mine...I will write you an argument but you should get a reporter to question various people to corroborate or dispute those points I made in my argument. They agreed with that. I kept asking about this article. They said there is some political story, etc. I forgot all about it until I was at a party on a Saturday night. I wrote it as a question mark, 'Is Mumbai dying?' Somebody said you are being very courageous with what you have written about Mumbai. I said, 'What are you talking about?' They said, ' Haven't you seen Outlook?' I said, 'No.' It's as an affirmative statement - 'The death of a great city' or whatever... I don't remember the title. They had put in all kinds of interviews without even showing it to me. I realized just like if you remember once Rajiv Gandhi said that Calcutta was dying and there was almost a riot in Calcutta. Here, people also and journalist Bachi Karkaria was in Mid Day and she wrote a cover story to contradict Outlook saying that No, No, No, Bombay is not... and she is quite unself-conscious. She carried a centre spread in that Mid Day after a cover story saying that Mumbai was not dying. And in the centre spread there is a story of a former mill worker whose now selling vegetables as a vendor and she is saying this is the spirit of Mumbai that people can... and people are so unaware of they are saying that somebody who had a regular, decent job is now selling kanda-batata [potatoes and onions] on the sidewalk. It is supposed to be a progress of some kind or somebody landing on his feet! So I think that is the kind of background of the whole issue, especially we as the environmentalists—The Bombay Environmental Action Group came into picture very late.

17:06 - 21:41

We saw even when Charles... as you know, the State government appointed Charles Correa to

head a committee to decide what to do with the mill land. The Correa committee for instance pointed to this golden triangle which was between three contiguous mills in Parel and Lalbaug which is about 2 and a half times the triangle between CST, Horniman Circle and Flora Fountain. Two and a half times that area so as you know Mumbai now has about 1.24 square meters per person. One of the things that I always say and I have written that at some future date Mumbaikars will change into some other kind of human being. If we have 1.24 square meters per person, we will mutate into something else. So as that subsequent book which I edited—Mills for Sale shows that we lost altogether about 350 acres both for open space and for public amenities especially for low cost housing. I think a lot of middle class people, some of the green groups which are not particularly certainly not pro-labour, they are anti-hawker but they were interested in the preservation of the open space and had someone, I don't know who could have performed that bridging role between the union movement or the workers' movement and the environmentalists and the others on that side, but we would have been a stronger force. Somehow that bridge was not made and subsequently only we came into the picture. The area now that we have lost is due to the absolute kind of corruption on the part of the state government in league with builders and bureaucrats. The urban development department and the state government were complicit in these deals. As you know, the DC rules came in 1991 with that 1/3 formula, where 1/3rd of the land which was going to be sold or redeveloped would go to the BMC for public amenities either open space or schools; 1/3rd would go to MHADA (Maharashtra Housing Area Development Agency) for public housing, low cost housing and the last 3rd, the mill owner or developer could sell or redevelop. But it was not as if he lost the rights on the 2/3rds that he had surrendered because he could get the building rights, the FSI on the 2/3rds that he... so it was quite a good deal. That is why in 1991, although the Mill Owners' Association kept saying that land was being taken away, they didn't make much of a fuss. But I think the building industry has no limit to the kind of greed it displays because by that time they already started objecting to the DC rules saying they were too constricting. In 2001, ten years later the state government amended, without anybody in the public domain knowing it, the rules saying 2/3rd of vacant area only. The mills have typically a huge footprint, they are huge sprawling big galas so the amount of open space is not that large. So we lost in that one amendment about 350 acres. In a city which can least do without the kind of space that has been lost to us.

21:41 - 27:21

One of the most frightening things I point out in my book is that now with the new, now what is called, Upper Worli because the mention of Parel is anathema to developers and people who want to work and live there. So they refer to it as Upper Worli or Worli East which is more 'user-friendly' and the most frightening is that some people are not even aware that it is on the site of a mill. So it's been... in some areas only the chimneys been retained. But if you go to the Ruia's Phoenix Mills, there is that chimney, but about the rest people are totally unaware. You might remember the that anecdote that I documented in my book, where at one stage the owners of the Ruia mill when they still had a small shift working there. They wanted permission to put a bowling alley and they found it difficult to get that permission. So they wrote a letter, which is on record saying that the workers were demanding for recreation a bowling alley. It cost then, I don't what it costs now, Rs. 500 at a go to use that bowling alley.

Of course in England also, one must make no mistake, Manchester has been gentrified to a large extent. They have preserved them and made them commercial but at least they haven't demolished them. People are aware. One is in fact a world heritage site. It's near a river. Because you know, all mills require high degree of humidity, that's why you find them normally near a river,

similarly in Manchester. What they have done in Manchester is to make them into very trendy artists' studios, even very upmarket residences. But at least they retained that

the area of the mill land. It's 1800 acres. So we have every possibility of repeating the kind of mistakes that have happened in the mill land, which is the privatization of those spaces. The public being denied the 2/3rds which was there due, there has been a committee formed now which is... the findings have not been made fully public, and various other activists have got into the... there has been some talk. I think now the pressure for retaining some public space is much greater than it was in the case of the mill lands. So there is talk of some areas being kept open along the eastern sea board but there is also talk of this London Eye kind of development and there is constant references to Singapore but Singapore has a kind of an Eye also and is seen as some kind of a model for Mumbai to follow. They are talking about an international cruise terminal, I don't think by any stretch of the imagination Mumbai needs as an overwhelming priority an international cruise station. First of all, not many people want to visit Mumbai because it's not on the tourist map as such. So these are sort of things which are in the realm of fantasy just like the Shivaji statue off the coast of Chowpatty and other such exercises in make-believe, that we are trying to catch up with other cities and countries in the world by these kinds of huge edifices, the biggest and the tallest. I think it's our own failure of imagination not to see what we are now in danger of losing again that we are unable to deal with that. I have to be quite pessimistic that I don't see a coming together of sufficient number of forces with sufficient sophistication to fight such causes. So I don't see that there is a strong movement to safeguard these spaces. So I think the issue of housing now has become central especially for the mill workers. They have got, I forget the number now, some concessions in terms of land for their housing. But there is still a lot more. As time passes, I just wonder how much they will actually get on that front? Apart from the mill workers themselves, there is a huge need for low cost housing and the development control...the draft development plan now moves in entirely the opposite direction where it's talking about...it's using the deceleration of Mumbai's growth...Mumbai is decelerating, the rate of growth is declining. So it's saying that people will occupy bigger...it's some kind of fantasy again...people will occupy bigger flats, they need bigger flats and they haven't provided for redevelopment of slums in the DP plan but they have said in every development over 2000 sq. meters, 10% of the land will be left open for amenities and then I think there is the invisible hand of the market which is supposed to provide such... Now even with the DC rules about the 1/3rd for housing, as you know it was observed more in the breach. One of the first - perhaps of the few mills which went by the DC rules was Matulya Mills in Parel and as I understand the open space, the 1/3rd open space has been kept at the back, completely at the rear end of the development. Now, no mother would entrust her young son or daughter to play somewhere you can't even see them. So they have just observed the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. This ludicrous proposal that 10% be left open and this will somehow be sorted out is ridiculous. It's actually turning a blind eye to the fact that the development plan proposes higher densification, higher FSIs under the assumption that with that there will be provision for low cost housing but in fact it works exactly the opposite. With all these years now even with a lower FSI, with the kind of manipulation and procurement of higher FSI than is actually permitted, certainly the low cost housing is been given a complete short shrift. For that matter even MHADA now is not building homes for what is euphemistically called economically weaker sections anymore. They are building middle class housing where they want to recover their money from it. As we all know, in any case, this builder-led redevelopment of slum land, where slum dwellers can not afford the maintenance of those [flats] and they sell out. We are faced in Mumbai with the completely ludicrous situation where some of these very high-end apartments are left vacant because they are for speculation not for actual occupation. So you can see the thrust of the development in this draft development plan. In the previous 20 year plan, it was very optimistic that I guess it was in 1991 that the earlier development plan... because they said Mumbai was at the cusp of this period of globalization and Mumbai is the first city to be able to become a financial

international or regional finance centre and jobs will be created and all this... Now, the plan very soberly says that we are uncertain about what the future holds for us. But in spite of that, they have virtually called for the densification of the city and even going up to a FSI of 8 at place like Dadar and Andheri near transport hubs. Now to imagine that anything in this process is going to benefit the poor is completely far fetched. So I think we are facing a very serious issue that in this city which used to be a city where workers... a cosmopolitan city where workers also had a place is now going to be further condemned to these huge disparities. So we have the situation where slum dwellers, which is officially put at only 41%, unofficially at least 50%-60%, occupying only 9% of the space of Greater Mumbai. So I think with the development plan and the whole thrust towards privatization, with the real estate industry getting so many concessions, that we are faced with very serious problems. Mumbai's first need is for jobs and people do not have... It's estimated that at something like 80% of all the jobs now are in the informal sector. So with that kind of economic situation, nobody can afford a home even if they earn a fairly decent wage and there are more people in a slum dweller's family, poor family working than they are in middle and upper middle class families. So their income is not that insignificant but they do not have the wherewithal to pay for any housing because it's priced out of their reach. So what will this lead Mumbai to is something... I think that unless something changes. Because of the decline of the unions and other social organizations, I wonder even if in art, in plays and in poetry, in films... I wonder that even the artists are no longer grappling with these issues. I think it's something that confronts us which is giving a lot of sleepless nights.