



## PUBLICATIONS

### **Death of an Industrial City: Testimonies of Life Around Bombay Textile Strike of 1982**

**Hemant Babu**

- [ABOUT ARCHIVES](#)
- [VVGNNLI](#)
- [AILH](#)
- [PUBLICATIONS](#)
- [RESEARCH PROJECTS](#)
- [RESEARCH PARTNERS](#)
- [ARCHIVAL SOURCES](#)
- [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)
- [EVENTS](#)
- [CONTACT US](#)

#### **I. Introduction:**

In its relative failure, as it would have been in its success, the Bombay textile strike of 1982-84 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 struggle<sup>[i]</sup>. 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 where 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 very little pay that kept them far away from obsessive consumption. After work they sat in bars, drank and ate at the community eatery. Yes they were different, divided by caste, regional and religious identities and yet they represented the 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 their 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 the union as their father once did. They lack the 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 a hegemonic capitalist system. The project was rooted in the need to understand those lives that resisted the epochal shift and got almost destroyed.

#### **II. 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)<sup>[ii]</sup> 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 Girmi 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 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 strike<sup>[iii]</sup> of 1946.

### III. 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.

#### **IV. Concern:**

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 year long activities of the project were 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.

#### **V. 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 Khanval<sup>[iv]</sup>, 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 tamasha<sup>[v]</sup> 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. Most interviewees were contacted several times in different settings in our attempt to increase their comfort level. Almost all interviews were conducted between November 1999 to December 2000.

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.

#### **VI The People:**

Asmita<sup>[vi]</sup>, now 40 years old dashing woman, 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. She does not have too many words to express herself. She talks with long pauses while her hands move swiftly around stitched cloths, giving them finishing touches, what they call "Dhaga Kato"[\[vii\]](#). 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 up 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 (of photographs)," she says.

Savitri Shelar, wife of a mill worker who got paralytic stroke after the strike gives a stern look when asked so how did she live during the strike. "Now what can I tell you?", she says, "I was here alone...my children were in the school; one was in 4<sup>th</sup> one was in 5<sup>th</sup> the other was in 8<sup>th</sup> 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 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 expressed the best in these words of a working class poet Narayan Surve[\[viii\]](#):

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. [ix]

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 Pawar [x], 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 singing 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 sung 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 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 Sahyadri mountain range on the West coast of India and hence they were know 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 balance[xi].

57-year-old Madhukar Nerale[xii] 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[xiii] 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 recollects 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 recollects “A friend of my father’s came with a 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 Sangh[xiv]. However, the only purpose the Sena’s meeting served was to provide additional emotive charge to Dr Samant rally the very next evening.

Bal Nar[xv], whose political journey took him from early years in the Shiv Sena to Congress to the Girmi 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 Narkar<sup>[xvii]</sup> 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 Kumbhar<sup>[xviii]</sup> 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, Gunvant Manjerkar<sup>[xix]</sup>, 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”, he says.

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 that coincided with the textile 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<sup>[xx]</sup>, 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 strike<sup>[xxi]</sup>.

“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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 shows 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 Dadar, Naigaum. Therefore Mumbai was divided into two parts due to the riots”.

### **VII. 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 an individual who lived during those turbulent days; to see how the strike really affected their psyche. 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 lines 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"[\[xxi\]](#).

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.

### **VIII. 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. On 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 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.

## **IX. 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. In this world view 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, we could only remember the people who spoke to us. The enquiry, 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.

## **NOTES**

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[i] 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.

[iii] 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”.

[iv] 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.

[v] 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 ‘ganagawlan’ (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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

[vi] For complete interview refer Cassette No 18, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[vii] 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 anther 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.

[viii] 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.

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

[x] For complete interview refer cassette no 13A, 13B, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xi] 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."

[xii] For complete interview refer Interview IV in Annexure and cassette no 11, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xiii] 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 17<sup>th</sup> century, which is when it took its present form.

[xiv] 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'etre 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.

[xv] For complete interview refer Interview I in Annexure and Cassette No 10, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xvi] For complete interview refer cassette no. 14, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xvii] For complete interview refer Cassette No 07, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xviii] For complete interview refer to Interview III in Annexure and Cassettes 8A, 8B, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGnLI.

[xix] For complete transcribe refer Interview II in Annexure.

[xx] For complete interview refer to Cassette DD, Archives of Indian Labour, ILHRP, VVGNI.

[xxi] 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.”

## Annexure

Here I have selected five interviews to see how the epochal shift in the character of Girangaon affected life of various individuals who were involved in different activities around the textile mills. From a political activist to a person in the entertainment business, every individual had a unique perception of the working class and its collective action. Neither in words nor in spirit they claimed any representation of a class or a section of society and there are no attempts made at any level of generalisation. These interviews are life stories. They do not convey a message but they leave behind inferences, which enriches understanding.

### Interview I

#### Bal Nar:

*Bal Nar is an activist in the Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti, and is now an active leader of the union in Piramal Mills where he now works. His political journey took him from early years in the Shiv Sena, then the Congress and then as a founder member of the independent Closed Mills Committee after the closure of the mill in which he worked. In the period to which he refers here he was living in Mahalaxmi in the Modern Mills compound where he also worked then.*

‘ Balasaeb 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.

We could see it before our eyes- the street vendors, the traders were all outsiders- Madrasis, Gujarathis, Telugu and they would not treat us with respect. They would do *dadagiri*. They were organised. No one could oppose them. As the Shiv Sena grew, then when some of them got beaten then they started behaving with respect. They realised the strength of Sena as an organisation. We had no political knowledge then, it was an emotional response. We got carried away. As time went by, we became more aware. Jobs were an important issue. That morcha to the Air India, where we beat up the general Manager- the boys had fielded so well; he will remember it all his life. He was dragged from the lift upto his cabin, and he was beaten all the way. But it had an impact. Maharashtrians were recruited. I was in that morcha. Incidents like these convinced the youth that the Sena stood for Maharashtrians.

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. We would sit there. In those days when we wanted to organise Shiv Jayanthi we would collect 2 or 3 rupees each from the local *baniyas*. Ramesh was an educated man. He was a Hindi teacher in the Christian school on Arthur Road. He was smart, he could pick up people; he knew who would be useful. The rest of us did not know anything about politics. We were in school then, and we would all roam around with Labde. That way we built the organisation and the *shakha*. We told people about 80% reservation for Maharashtrians, about the Belgaum Karwar border issue- *Belgaum Karwar Maharashtracha, naahin kunacha baapacha!* ( Belgaum Karwar belongs to Maharashtra, not to your father).

Then Sena participated in the Corporation elections. We campaigned for Labde. He lost but by just 49 votes! Congress won the seat. Balasaeb came for the street corner meetings. Navalkar too. We used to go to Balasaeb’s house in Kalanagar also to meet him. And he would come down to meet us. Now he won’t entertain us if we go.

We used to oppose any misbehaviour in those days. If we caught a *sainik* harassing a woman or looting, say stealing *chikoos* from a UP vendor, we would not hesitate to administer a couple of slaps. Those who did not tolerate such behaviour were in the majority then. There was no

corruption either. I know our *Shakha* didn't even have any money. In 1970 our *Shakha* had just 4000 rupees. All mostly from membership of 1 or 2 rupees, and some contributions for Shiv Jayanthi from local blackmarketeers, like the liquor and matka owners. There was no extortion but we would go in a bunch of 20-30 to make the collection. Shiv Jayanthi was made an important festival because of the Sena. Sena also became more visible because of their participation in the traditional Ganeshotsav. The Sena placed its cadre in the Ganeshotsav Mandals. That also helped the organisation.

One issue that we took up was the issue of the name boards on the shops. If they were not written in Marathi we smeared them with tar. Balasaeb asked us to do that.

One thing- Balasaeb always supported his cadres then. When the murder of Krishna Desai took place, and Ashok Kulkarni and Khatate etc. were arrested then Balasaeb declared publicly- ' If I ever have to humble myself it will be for my *sainiks* never for myself'. There was some help from the Congress to settle that case. That's why when Ramrao Adik stood for elections, Shiv Sena supported him. At that time Bandu Shingre opposed Balasaeb, because he wanted Sena to field a candidate and fight for that seat. Anyway, after that election, these boys were released. About Krishna Desai I never knew very much. We were told that he used to teach the young boys to sing Russian songs. That he propagated communism. He was fearless, people said. The *lal bawta* did as much *tod- phod* when they were the main opposition union in the mills. I have seen that myself. We had heard the speeches of people like Acharya Atre and Gulabrao Ganacharya- they would all come to our lane. During the elections when Gulabrao stood for the Assembly, then Shahir Amar Sheikh would come with his troupe and sing. Here near the post office. Street corner meetings. Amar Sheikh lived just in front of Modern Mills.

We did not like communism. The communists started to decline after the attack on their Dalvi Building office in Parel.. The whole office was burnt and everything was thrown out on the streets. Bandu Shingre was the main person involved in these attacks. Balasaeb hated communism. Why? I don't know, he never gave any reasons. His stand has always been- no deal with the communists. Anyone else we can talk with he said but not the communists. He allied even with the socialists, but never the communists.

But as I said he always saved his *sainiks*. In my case, I was arrested after the communal riots of 1970. . We were accused of throwing bombs on the mosque near Vithal Niwas in Saat Rasta. The incident was first raised in the Assembly by Gulabrao Ganacharya. No, I was not involved in the incident. About 15 days after that, the police came to my house at 3am. I was in my shorts and I said, at least let me put on my clothes. They said we just want to talk with you. But I knew. Mehendale was a CID then. I had just taken a card from the employment exchange that morning. So I said at least let me submit the card. It's a question of my future. If I didn't have a job, I would have no alternative but to take to the path of crime. But they didn't allow me. They promised to release me in the morning but they I was kept in jail for 27 days. Balasaeb called the police station and told the Commissioner not to harass us. We were 9 of us. When we went to Balasaeb for financial help he told us- wear bangles and then come to me for money (meaning don't be like women). He challenged us, see? So we had to collect money for the case ourselves. From whom? Naturally from the liquor and *Matka* operators. Who else? Nothing happened to me, and that was because of the clout that the Sena had. Because of this, I also got a job later as a fitter in the mill. But I started to feel differently. I felt all this was not right. The Sena called a strike in Hindustan Mills. Eight *Sainiks*, friends of mine were thrown out. I realised that if the organisation doesn't back you up all the time then the same thing will happen to all of us. The case went on for 2 years.

I was still in Modern Mills. I started becoming active in the RMMS. I told the *Shakha Pramukh*, Nigade about it and he gave permission. Sena did not have a textile union then. I wrote in my RMMS form that I belonged to the Sena. They did not object. In the evenings I would go to the *Shakha* and participate in its activities. We would solve domestic problems, say due to alcohol, things like that. We would advise them, try and resolve it amicably. If not then we would slap the chap around a bit and the problem would get solved. Then there would be cases of harassment on the road or at work; we would investigate, under the guidance of the *Shakha Pramukh*, then we would act. That's how the organisation grew. There was not so much of terror tactics then as there is now. There was some sincerity and honesty among the *shakha Pramukhs* and *Vibhag Pramukhs*. In those days, even if we stole a truck full of grain, we distributed it amongst the people. For instance in 1972, when Sena took up the issue of rising prices, there was shortage and hoarding, so we hijacked the lorries taking grain for the hotels, and sold it at the *shakha* at 2 rupees a kilo to people. But we could not distribute all the grain. So we handed the lorry over to the police.

Later things were different. The Mazgaon *shakha* was set up by Bhujbal on the basis of large scale extortion from the local liquor traders. The complaint went up to the Commissioner the Bhujbal was harassing people. Most of the old *Sainiks* have left and become domesticated.

I left all this after 1974.

## **Interview II**

### **Kumar Kadam**

Kumar Kadam is a former President, Mumbai Marathi Patrakar Sangh (Journalists organization). Kumar was in close touch with the striking police personnel mainly due to the family he comes from. In Bombay there are large number of police personnel in various capacity whose second name is Kadam. Kumar, being a journalist, naturally acquired a role of advisor to the agitating police personnel and eventually a mediator between police leadership and the government. He narrates his experiences in first person.

Much before the police strike, the police were in contact with me. Many people helped them form their organisation. I was one of them. I come from the Kadam family. Many personnel from the police fraternity bear this surname. There is at least one Kadam at every police station in the city, many of whom I have been closely associated. Almost 30% of the men in our family work with the Police Department. Hence I was fully aware of their problems. I wrote a number of articles on the problems faced by the police personnel. So before the organization was formed, the organizers contacted me for advice. After that in the agitation of 1982 I used to advise them about what to do and what not to. To protest against the government the police wore black ribbons at the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1982 flag hoisting ceremony. I told them to wear black ribbons after the flag hoisting to which they agreed and honoured the national flag. Sometimes they heeded my advice but on many occasions they did not listen to me.

The Indian constitution has granted the right of organization to the Police Personnel. After Emergency there was a Janata government formed at the Centre. At that time police personnel in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab had formed organizations and they were demanding recognition from their respective governments. Janata government implemented the provision to grant permission. It was then that the police in Maharashtra started demanding regarding an organization. The demand was pending since the time of Progressive Democratic Front government in Maharashtra. The then Antulay government accepted the demand of the police for organization, and Maharashtra Rajya Police Karmachari Sanghatana was formed. It is interesting to note that the organization of police officers was already functioning under the leadership of officer L.R.Tawde. and this organization had been already granted government recognition.

They were not asking for big monetary gains. They had small demands like removal of minor grievances. Their main demand was that they should have fixed hours of duties. They were told that they are on duty for 24 hours. They were not getting regular holidays like or leave like other government workers. Their allowances were very meager. Most of them were not provided with homes and the police quarters were in bad condition. One demand was for laundry allowance for their uniforms. But the higher-level police officers of that time took no cognizance of the demands of the constables. They totally ignored these demands.

The higher officers were not opposed to the demands of constables but they were opposing the formation of the organization. When Antulay (the then chief minister of Maharashtra) announced the recognition of the police organization and allotted office for their union, the officers, especially the IPS category officers strongly opposed this move. For the higher administrative police officers this organization was posing certain problems. For example there is one category of police personnel termed as orderly. These constables are attached to the officer. But in fact they have to perform the duties of domestic servants in the homes of officers. The officers, and their family treat them as their private domestic help. Police personnel protested against the insulting treatment meted out to the orderlies from the officers and their families. The constables posted as orderlies refused to perform domestic duties. This angered the officers' wives. This was reflected in the officers' behaviour against the police personnel. The police struggle finds its roots in the problems faced by the orderlies.

Antulay government had assured to accept the police demands. But the proposals and papers that needed to be prepared from the office of the IGP got delayed. The main demands were not considered seriously at all. Due to this there was an unrest in the police force. In addition to this the police personnel were acutely facing a problem of housing. Forty percent of employees from the police force have had no houses. They are forced to live in the slums of Mumbai. They have to attend duties for long hours coming in from far off places of residence. The problem was aggravated when there was a move to demolish the police chawls at Worli and giving that land

for the housing societies of the Members of Legislative Assembly, Indian Police Services and Indian Administrative Services officers. The government had issued orders for the demolition but the Police Sanghatana took up the issue opposing the order. This was the beginning of the police agitation.

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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 Dadar, Naigaum. Therefore Mumbai was divided into two parts due to the riots.

The courts also subsequently held the view that it was not a mutiny. After the agitation I started writing articles in newspapers. I met the then opposition leader Sharad Pawar and the ruling congress MLAs like Chimanrao Kadam, Shantaram Wavre, Bhavrao Patil and explained that this was not a police mutiny. Whatever happened on 17, 18, 19<sup>th</sup> August in Mumbai were riots. Many riots take place in Mumbai for different reasons. Note the sequence of events. The preventive action of arresting the police leaders was taken earlier and the riots broke out the next day or even afterwards. Police organization President Mohite, Secretary Tukaram Shewade, Yadwade were already under detention. When the matter was taken to the courts, they held the view that it was not a mutiny. High court judges Chandrashekhar Dharmadhikari and V.V. Joshi released the police leaders and observed that the government is ignorant about the term mutiny. The Maharashtra government appealed against the High court judgment in Supreme Court. But before the hearing could begin the appeal was withdrawn by the government of Maharashtra. Anyone interested in the agitation of police and how it was handled by the authorities can read 'Bullet for Bullet' written by Julio Rebiero the then Police Commissioner in which he has stated how he proceeded to take action against the police. He stated the same things in an interview to a news magazine. Babasaheb Bhosle was the Chief Minister of the time. IGP Medhekar wrote an article about him in which he has stated the action taken. It proved that the action was first taken against police leaders and then the riots broke out.

Efforts were made to bring the dismissed police personnel in service during that time but they were not successful. Because IPS officers always passed adverse remarks in their reports to the government, whenever the government asked for their opinion. That is why no government dared to review the action against the police leaders and strikers. But when Sharad Pawar took over as CM again I met him and put up the case. He said that those people should be taken back in the services. Pawar appointed them in the police dept. But they were new appointments. There was a break in the previous services of the police personnel. During the period some leaders of the police died of heart attacks etc. They were going through tremendous stress as their families were ruined due to the government action. They were thrown on the streets from their houses with their families at the time of the action. There were 350 police personnel who went through this ordeal. One of them a 32 year old man named Shinde died of heart failure. The continuity in the service was broken on the insistence of IPS officers when personnel were reappointed as new recruits. Police personnel appealed to the Maharashtra administrative tribunal against this injustice. The Tribunal ruled that the old services of the Personnel should be joined and continued. But the Maharashtra government had challenged the ruling in High Court. The police organization Vice President Jaisingh Bhosle was a freedom fighter. While struggling for justice he died but could not get a single benefit as a police personnel. His example is enough to demonstrate how the administration can destroy an individual's entire life. All the papers are still there but no one from the administration has time for them anymore.

Police organisations are still not granted government recognition. It is very difficult to say when the problems of the police will be solved. The people in the government have no time to give to such problems. Regarding the recognition the organization had moved court once again. But the

court said that the organization should approach the IGP. One of the former officer bearers Yadwade took it up with the government. but still there is no decision. After the 1982 action there is terror in the police department and the people who work under the officers are so frightened that they cannot do anything for the organization for fear of punishment and losing their jobs as happened in 1982.

The ordinary police of today are living a life of economic misery. Half the boys working with the criminals are from police families because there is no other employment. Even a constable is compelled to request the local matka operator to employ his son at his den. MLAs and the society should give some attention to solve the problems of police. Whether these should be police organizations or not is a different matter, but some forum to discuss the police problem is required in this situation. The textile workers are destroyed in Mumbai and so is the ordinary police personnel. I think they need help.

I must tell you about an incident during the strike that could have led to explosive situation. There are armed police personnel in Mumbai police force. The armory is stored at Worli, Naigaon, Marol and Tardeo etc. During the strike one day the striking armed personnel snatched the guns from the armories at Naigaon and their wives and families had gheraoed the Police Commissioner's office. There was an explosive situation. And the armed police were so angry that nobody, no officer dared to go near them to stop them. At this juncture the then home secretary Chowgule telephoned me at my home at 3 a.m. in the morning. Someone had informed him that only Kadam could stop the armed police. At 7.30 the next day I went to the Police Commissioner's office. I had imposed one condition that I would not go into the office of the Commissioner Kasbekar because he was mainly responsible for the police trouble. I met the police leaders in police custody, talked to them and conveyed their immediate demands to Chowgule. Then the CM, Antulay was contacted. The police leaders were taken to meet the CM. At that time the Police commissioner Kasbekar and IGP Chaturvedi were not allowed to participate in the discussions on the request of the police leaders. I was the only non-administrative person present but I took no part in discussions. Antulay accepted the demands. Then I went to Naigaum to the armed, striking police personnel and told them that their demands were met with. They had faith in me. They believed me and put down the arms.

### **Interview III**

#### **Gunvant Manjarekar:**

Gunvant Manjarekar is perhaps a pioneer of the art of Rangoli (making pictures on the ground with coloured powder). He took this form from the realm of the domestic, where women usually decorate the verandahs of their houses with various powders of different colours, to the public sphere. He is an old man now but his art has achieved some of the recognition it deserves. He himself is a respected artist in the city, and is a resident of the mill area.

I come from Vengurla in the Konkan. It is a beautiful town. I studied here until my high school-SSC. My family was poor. My father was an artist in the court of the ruler of Baroda- Sayajirao Gaekwad. He died when I was a year old. I was an only child, and my mother had to go through a lot of suffering to bring me up. She worked in the fields as a labourer. But she saw to it that I was educated. She wanted me to grow up to be an artist like my father. This was her dream. I was too poor to be able to go to art school. My mother used to wake up early and before going to work, she would pray to the tulusi and around the plant she would make beautiful rangoli patterns every day. I too would wake up early and watch while she executed these designs. There were no brushes or colours, so the only way I could paint were with the rangoli powder. When my mother went off I would amuse myself even as a child by drawing pictures with the powder. That was how I started. I never did traditional rangoli. That way all children draw the same pictures- two mountains, and a rising sun. That's what I did too. Then I started doing portraits in Rangoli. Of Shivaji, national leaders. No one was there to teach me. I just did these on my own. But I practised and developed my style. I started enjoying what I was doing. There was no one to appreciate what I was doing either, no relatives or friends. They were not so interested in art.

It was only in 1947 that got some appreciation. When my drawing teacher asked me to exhibit some of my drawings on Independence day. I said yes but can do some rangoli designs as well. He was amused that I wanted to do the rangoli that women do traditionally. I told him wanted to do a picture of Gandhiji. Nehru etc, He was surprised. I told him I had done it before but only at home. He wanted to know how much it was cost. I told him – about 32 rupees, so he said all right. We bought the colours. I did the rangoli and people were truly inspired and everyone appreciated what I had done. That was the beginning, They were amazed at how well I could do it, where I trained etc.

One of the parents who was a merchant who commissioned me to do rangoli during the religious

discourses. He wanted me to do pictures on Puranic themes. The pictures I did were on the life on Shiva. I copied it from a picture, because I had not yet learnt to make pictures from memory. I was only 14 years old. People would show their appreciation by giving me things to eat, or some money. I was encouraged. Then I was asked to create rangoli pictures in many places around my village. People had not thought that one could use rangoli to draw portraits and scenes. There was no black colour in rangoli, so I used to powder coal or use black ink mixed with sand.

When I came to Bombay at first it was for a job, so I did not get any chance to draw. I used to stay with my uncle. During Diwali my cousin sisters asked me to draw outside the house. I drew a picture of Subhash Chandra Bose. People were so impressed that they would stand in line to see it. I realised that this is a novel idea and I did my first exhibition on Sane Guruji's life. This was in Chabildas School and it was organised someone called Redkar in an organisation in Santa Cruz. Many came to see it. I thought to myself- I should take up issues and use my imagination to explain them. The issues I was interested in. This was the time of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement so I made this my theme. Acharya Atre opened the exhibition. Atre told me I should paint. He took me to his bungalow. I used to go to all his functions. He would always call me. There was a bust of him that I liked and he immediately told me to take it. He was a very warm and friendly man. I did many exhibitions after that. Most of them had political themes.

The firings during the Samyukta Maharashtra when 105 people died, this was such a terrible event. I drew a rangoli picture where Ram Shastri of the old days had come back to life and was accusing the government. This picture became very famous. I drew this in Shivaji Mandir theatre in the hall. My interest grew in political themes both national and international.

I still did not have any formal art education and no longer felt the need either! I did go to art school for two years. When I applied for a job in Hindustan Petroleum, in 1954 I told the American management that I had done two years of art school but I had not got my diploma. They said I did not need a diploma and gave me the job as an art publicist. In 55-60 the company asked me to do displays for the company which I did, in different parts of the country. In the Industrial Fair in Delhi in 1955 I was there for a month I also did some rangoli pictures. Many famous visitors came to see it- leaders like Nehru, Rajendra Prasad etc.. We had put a glass cover on the Rangoli so that it should not spoil. So I never finished my course. I worked in the company for 15 years. There was no scope for promotion and my boss said if I wanted a promotion I would have to change my line. There was another senior officer called Mody and he asked me to learn drafting and join the design engineering department. I said I did not know the ABC of drafting. He said I could learn. He said he would give me one more promotion. He was an admirer of my rangoli art. Sure enough I learnt the job and I later became the Senior Designer. I retired as Chief Maintenance Engineer.

I was close to the socialists and the communists and this influence is obvious in my art. I was in the Rashtriya Seva Dal. Every week end I would go for 'shram daan' – donating labour for a cause like working in the dalit bastis, building roads etc. There are certain values that one imbibes through one's intellectual and emotional responses, through contact with good people. This certainly influenced my drawings.

Rangoli is a popular art. It can be appreciated by rich and poor alike. It is a socialist art form. Abstract art is inaccessible to ordinary people. Only art lovers can appreciate it. For the rich it is often just fashionable to be art lovers even when they do not understand art. They say – wonderful wonderful and buy it to put it up on their walls. The real art lovers are different, those who understand and appreciate and enjoy the paintings. Rangoli is a popular art, a social art, one that is practiced by every woman rich or poor outside the house. The main limitation is that it is temporary and it cannot be put up on a wall. You would have to use chemicals for that. I have developed the art. When you paint with water colours you start from light shades and go on to dark. In oils you start from darker colours and go on to lighter shades. In Rangoli you use a combination. In some parts you use the former method and in other parts you use the latter. When doing portraits. This is not an art that is taught in art schools. I taught students, on the weekends in a four months course. I have taught about 10000 students but where is the encouragement? People like it but the those in power have never paid attention. So it has no future that I can see. I taught until 1975. What is the future for this art? I had some money because I had a good job, but if there is no support others will not be able to spend their own money and practice it.

There are 25 shades in Rangoli. Black was a problem. I had tried many things, and then I settled for chemical and vegetable dye mixed with rangoli powder. It is hard work. You cannot finish it over time like a canvas. Once you start you have to finish it. I work for 15 hours at a stretch sometimes in order to complete a painting.

There have been Rangoli exhibitions during cultural festivals, but it is not regular. I have had

exhibitions all over the country and it had received much attention. But there has never been an award for a Rangoli artist. Not one. There are very few people who are doing something to encourage the art. I am associated with some of them. We also help poor students, tribal youth etc. My art is not separate from my political opinions. I am not an activist, but my association with political leaders and organisations have been important to me. I even did banners for candidates. Once when I did a banner for Arjunrao Vichare, people who saw the banner started to ask who had done it. When Arjunrao saw it he came to see me. He wanted me to organise the party in my area. He was my guest so I could not be rude but I did say- I was active in the party earlier so I made the banner. Because the leaders starting from Ashoke Mehta have destroyed the organisation.

In the election between Vamanrao Mahadik and the communists there was a lot of support for him and from then on the communist lost their foothold. Now the Sena has left the cause of the Maharashtrians and they have started talking about Hindutva, etc. This is what the older generation feel. Shahir Sable is my neighbour and he too feels the same way. Artists and others were also inspired by the call of Shiv Sena but only for the cause of the Marathi people. But now the only cause is money. Did the Sena do anything for the artists and performers among the Maharashtrians? Did they come and say- do an exhibition for us or did they ask the shahirs- perform on our stage? So the artists distanced themselves later. The Sena which was an organisation of the Marathi people did not go on to do anything for that cause.

What does this generation want? They do not have political knowledge or interest. In the computer and technological age what is the political future?

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.

#### **Interview IV**

##### **Madhukar Nerale**

Madhukar Nerale is a 57 years old, owner of Hanuman theatre, Lalbag, producer of tamashas. 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 'ganagawlan' (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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

' My family came to Bombay when I was a baby. It was easy to get a place to stay then. My father started to sell vegetables. He would buy vegetables from the wholesale market at Byculla and sell in retail at Lalbaug. His was the only retail vegetable stall from Lalbag to Dadar. My grandmother used to help him in the business. Our customers were mostly workers, so the kind of vegetables that he sold were those that workers ate.

I could study only upto the 8<sup>th</sup> standard, because there was not much money.

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 6am 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.

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.

Bangdiwala Sheth was rich enough to take out a silver 'tabut' during Mohurram, but he was a big hearted man. When the collections came in all of it would be dumped into a box on which he would sit. When the artistes came to take money for their fees he would dip his hand into the box and take out money; and give it to them without even bothering to count it.

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.

The shahirs of Girangaon played an important role in all the political movements like Independence and Samyukta Maharashtra, especially the latter. This movement received an impetus due to the shahirs and poets. The poets would write and the bards would sing. Anna Bhau Sathe's song called 'Mumbaichi lavni' describing Bombay of those days was very famous. Pathe Bapurao had also written a song about Bombay but he described the Bombay of pre-Independence days. Annabhau wrote about the workers' Bombay.

The working class like light entertainment which does not strain the mind too much, while the middle class listen to classical music, they read books etc.. Workers favoured 'lok sangeet' while middle class people like 'natya sangeet'. Our theatre had nothing to do with any movements- it was purely light entertainment. The audience were mostly workers; when it was performed for the middle class it would be done differently- it was called 'baithakichi tamasha' in which the artiste sat down and sang, while the other usual one was called 'bahurangi tamasha' which had more songs and dances and dialogue. This form was most popular in the rural areas. There was a lot of ad-libbing and there was hardly any written script. For instance if it was a story of Harishchandra, the performer would know about the character so he would just improvise. So would Taramati because the actress would know how that character would respond to what Harishchandra was saying. There would be topical comments; the language and the lyrics were colloquial. The music was folk music. Earlier the system was for tamashas to be performed in open spaces during religious fairs and festivals. In Western Maharashtra. The elite in the villages like the Brahmins and traders and government officials hardly went to watch the tamashas there. The village would give 'supari'(betel-nuts) and a coconut to the tamasha party and that was the advance for the contract. The contractors came in later and became middlemen especially for the town performances.

The mill workers loved theatre. In the early days they were mostly from Konkan. They had little land and there was no employment either so their links with Bombay were close. Almost the whole family would be forced to migrate to Bombay. They formed their own groups to perform plays, which focused on various issues in workers' lives. The local Konkan form was 'dashavatar' which was closer to theatre. It would be based on epics and other popular folk lore which was familiar and part of our cultural heritage. Unlike in the tamasha male played the female roles. Even today it is mostly performed that way. Many legendary singers in Maharashtra like Bal Gandharva became famous for their female impersonations. Later after the advent of cinema, when the theatre went into a slump, women came in.

What was called dashavatar in South Konkan, was called naman in the North. In the Rajapur (Central?) part it was known as khele, but there was very little difference in the actual form. It is a narrative form. There was a kind of tamasha in the north part of Konkan which was called 'gammat'. They would also perform 'jakhadi' or balyadance as it is known in Bombay, a group dance, where they would tie one set of ankle bells to the foot and dance in a circle. The last

became most popular in the mill areas.

The people of Konkan brought these forms to Bombay. Dashavatar parties would be invited to Bombay and they would stay for a week or two during festivals like Holi or Diwali and there would perform every day. The form in the 'ghat' which was narrative like the dashavatar were the 'Vaghya Murali' 'Gondal or Bharood and Lalit. These troupes were also invited from the villages for pujas, naming ceremony etc. The areas in the Girangaon where the people of Konkan and Desh stayed were separate and distinct. The forms and performances were also therefore dependent on the area.

There were many bhajan mandals. There would be night long bhajan competitions. There was no need to take police permissions to put up performances then. Nor was there any danger to audiences returning home late in the night.

In Hanuman theatre we only held tamasha performances. Nothing else. The audiences consisted mostly of men from the ghat.. Some Konkani men would drop by just to see what it was like. Our tamashas would have as many as 10 or 12 groups or parties, called 'bari's. They would be identified by the main dancer, for instance Yamunabai Vaikar or Shevantabai Jejurkar- both women were famous tamasha artistes. The performances would go on from 8 in the evening to 4 in the morning when Bombay was already waking up. On holidays workers would queue up from 6 pm onwards sometimes even without having dinner. Or else they would eat early by 4pm. Our tamashas were on throughout the year, whereas dashavatari and naman would come only during festival seasons.

Women never attended. One reason was that most of the men were here without their wives who would be in the villages. In the villages women would also attend but very few, because there were very few avenues of entertainment. Besides there would be women attending the fairs where the performances were held. Then, there are many items in one tamasha performance. One was the sangeet bari where there would be the system of what is called daulatjada. In this members of the audience would proffer a coin and request a particular song or dance. The artiste would perform that number and then she would take the coin from the man.

The form of Loknatya was brought in by Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh. It was a combination of tamasha and theatre. Loknatya means peoples' theatre. That is why they used a popular form like tamasha. They would address social and political themes through this form. Writers like Acharya Atre or Narayan Surve wrote Loknatyas and they were performed by Amar Sheikh and others. He was a great performer. When he went on the stage this ordinary mortal became like a ball of fire in which everyone would be turned to ashes. These were not professionals like the other parties. They would not demand big sums of money. There were women taking part in these performances. They were party activists- both socialist and communist- from middle class back grounds. Dada Kondke who became famous later in cinema was from Girangaon. He used the form of Loknatya in his 'Vichcha majhi puri kara'. Cinema adopted and appropriated the tamasha form. Nilu Phule who was part of the socialist movement, used the form of in his 'Katha akalechya kandyachchi'. He used political satire to discuss political issues. In the 70's and '80's the Loknatya was still popular but now it has declined.

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.

So our audiences have almost become extinct. The tamasha artistes are unable to survive. This artistic tradition is likely to die out. The younger leaders of the political parties are inimical to these art forms. They have no concern. Even the maidans which were available to us are no longer available. There is no patronage either from movements or from the state, and the only live entertainment is orchestra in this area. The Sena government which talks of Marathi culture should have gone to court against the order but they never did. They never held tamasha or folk festivals to encourage Marathi folk forms.

We as artistes also have to adapt new forms, keeping what is important which appeal to people. We have to create new tastes also among people. Bring in expression and literary merit. Instead of filling our plates with 50 items we should restrict the number of those items, keeping only what is appetising.

I am now organising tamasha workshops for young people. I familiarise them with tamasha and I

call well known tamasha women artistes, and I am realising that there is still so much strength in this traditional form.

## Interview V

**Shahir Nivrutti Pawar:**

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

'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 Ganpati 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.

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