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Grist for the mills

Mumbai Mirror / Updated: Jul 12, 2015, 09:32 IST

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By Bhavya Dore

At around 7 pm on a Friday evening, men and women began to gather outside BDD Chawl in Worli.

Vaishali Girkar, a bespectacled 60-year old woman in a pink sari was getting ready to address them. Girkar had just returned from the office of the mill workers' union, and was all set to "motivate" the men and women, all former mill employees on their rights and continuing struggles.

Girkar, herself a mill employee at Worli's Shriram Mills, started a small business selling lunch to office-goers soon after the mill closed down in 1995. Joining the mill in 1979, she spent 12 years as a temporary employee, never sure of getting a wage or even retaining her job. Four years after she secured her job, the mill shut. Girkar, like more than two lakh other people who lost their livelihoods, struggled, then sought alternative work. "I am a tigress," she says. "My whole life has been a life of fighting."

The fight of Mumbai's mill workers -first in striking, then struggling to keep their jobs, and finally in lobbying for the compensation owed to them -is well-known. But hidden in the crevices of that larger story are the specific struggles of the women who worked in the mills. Many, simply went back home. Others found jobs as domestic workers or in garment factories.

Girkar and two other women feature in HerStories, a short film made by students of the School of Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

HerStories, along with other films, seeks to map the lives and livelihoods of those affected by the mill lands by excavating personal, untold aspects of the closures. These have been gathered together in GiranMumbai MillMumbai, a yet-to-be-launched online archive.

A multi-media repository including photographs, interviews, films, poetry and essays culled from activists, academics and others who have been working on the mill lands, GiranMumbai, which will be launched on August 4, is the second of its kind under the school's citycentric DiverCity project.

"The decline of the mills was a watershed event in the history of the city," says KP Jayasankar, the dean of the school. "They were an important resource the city had; the city's prosperity was in large part because of them."

Jayasankar, along with Anjali Monteiro, also a TISS professor, began this project about two years ago. It will be officially launched next month. The films showcased online include a three-generational exploration of a family affected by the closure, documenting the few remaining akhadas, spaces for the tradition of wrestling that migrants brought with them, and a look at the life of Marathi poet and working class champion Narayan Surve.

"The mills were the raison d'être of the city," says Jayasankar. "Without the mills it would not have been possible. The mills undoubtedly shaped the city, giving it its secular, proletarian character." The working class culture of the city was itself born in the mills as migrants flowed in from other districts to work in the rising commercial capital that was Bombay. The first mill opened in 1854, with more than 100 at its peak, spread over 600 acres in the heart of the city. By the 1930s, two thirds of the city's work force was employed at the mills, according to GiranMumbai.

The 1982 workers' strike that lasted a year marked the beginning of the decline of the mills, with owners gradually closing and corporate offices and gated communities springing up where cloth was once spun.

Estimates put the number at about two lakh mill workers in the city just before the strike, including 15 per cent from Uttar Pradesh and three per cent from Andhra Pradesh. Of the rest, a significant chunk came from western Maharashtra and the Konkan region, some of whom returned once they found themselves out of work. "This is an important project," says Datta Iswalkar, 66, secretary of the Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti. "When something happens, it appears in the papers, but what is the long-term, detailed history of these events? You don't get that picture. That is why this is a good resource."

An interview with Iswalkar is also contained in the archive. Alongside it are recordings of poet-singer Shahir Amar Sheikh and the poetry of Surve -a child labourer in the mills who was raised by mill workers after he was found abandoned as a baby on the footpath.

The archive is rich with the political and economic dimensions of the mill lands story, operating as a resource for academic studies with a detailed bibliography and also a document of the social and cultural life spawned around the mills.

"How the state and owners colluded to deprive the city of its open spaces is set out and made accessible to a range of audiences," says Anjali Monteiro. "We hope (the archive) continues to grow."

Monteiro and Jayasankar's previous project under DiverCity dwelt on the 1992-93 riots, and the enterprise aims to catalogue student and faculty engagement with different aspects of the city's rich and vibrant communities, histories and lives.

Mills dotting the central land in the city now wear rusty padlocked gates, overgrown creepers or have a lone chimney sticking out in the skyline amidst glass-encased high rises. Through the archive, history hopes to recover what has been lost through geography. "We wanted to look at the importance of these spaces and remember the history of these spaces," says Jayasankar. "The idea was to resist the process of erasure."

Mill workers too, continue to resist that process. Life remains, as Girkar says, one of contestation and continuous engagement with the government.

The struggle for the union has shifted into another gear; seeking to ensure that the housing promised to the workers is delivered to them, a scheme first announced in 2010. Almost 8,000 people have been granted housing on the mill lands so far, says Iswalkar, of the nearly 1.5 lakh claims made to the government when the policy was first announced.

Hemant Hanjankar, who worked for 22 years at Swan Mills at Sewri, is one of those claimants. Hanjankar, 55, moved from Malvan village in Sindhudurg district to Mumbai and got a job in the folding department of the mill. When in 1999 the mill shut, he was earning Rs 4,000 a month, and found parttime jobs as and when they came along; sometimes as a courier delivery man or other odd jobs in factories. "We were happy working in

the mills," he says. "It was a steady job."

The last few decades have been rife with uncertainty for former mill workers, many of them now in their sixties and seventies.

"The Internet has made the world a smaller place," says Iswalkar. "Our struggles should be known."
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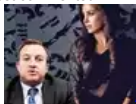
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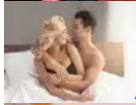
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