



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CLOSING DOWN OF TEXTILE MILLS: A BREAK-THROUGH IN THE REAL
ESTATE OR A CURSE TO MUMBAI

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ABSTRACT

The central idea of this paper is to study the life of the Mumbai textile mills through a series of events that occurred, keeping the Great Strike of 1982 as the center point of all the events. The study would give insight in the internal conflicts, contestations and daily negotiations with life occurring in the mill land area. Along with this, the sudden growth of land values in the neighborhood and its surrounding areas due to the closing down of the mills play an important part in making arguments as to why private developers found this particular land a 'hot pot' for redevelopment into luxury spaces. All these put together resulted in the resentment and anger among the workers and the residents of the mill housing. In this paper, these aspects will be looked at as tension creating issues between developers, politicians, the elite class and more importantly the existing residents. How the area has been transformed throughout the years, reshuffling the socio-cultural structure of Mumbai would be used to base argument and points of interest throughout the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Shekhar Krishnan, an anthropologist, historian and a technologist writes, 'Liberalization and globalization have not only refashioned our lifestyle, but also our urban landscapes'.¹ What was yesterday, isn't there today and what is today will not be there tomorrow. The same was the case with the mill lands of Mumbai. In the 19th century, the textile mills of Mumbai were seen as the heritage of Mumbai, and today these same mills and mill lands are being turned into luxury spaces or some of them barely recognizable have been remote locations for negative activities. Many interpret the story of the textile mills of Bombay as one of blight and unavoidable closures, but the root cause of the rot of the textile mills lies elsewhere. On one hand the mill owners began to drain funds out from the textile mills to other commercial activities, while on the other hand, the Urban Land Ceiling Act of 1976² caused a drastic rise in the land values within the city.

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¹Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills*

(Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).

²The urban land ceiling and Regulation Act of 1976 stipulated that the government could take over vacant lands in cities for housing the poor by giving a nominal compensation to the owners of the vacant urban land. The Act was operated only in loopholes, and land hoarding remained untouched. The result intermittent enforcement was to push the prices of real estate skywalks as the Government of Maharashtra neither implemented nor rejected the Act.

This Act encouraged many businesses and industries to sell off their land for revenue and move to a new location. As per the Development Control Rules (DCR)³ of Mumbai the mill lands were reserved for industrial use, as they were by and large given to the mill owners at concessional rates by the colonial Bombay Government in the beginning of the century to promote industrial production, and to develop the city and its hinterland.⁴ Since the mills and the mill owners could not take advantage of this opportunity, both the industrialist and the Government retained the obligations of industrial use for the mill lands.⁵ It was because of these restrictions the textile mill lands could not be sold except by fraudulent and illegal means. The decline of the textile mills needs to be regarded under this background. Mill owners today are less interested in developing their industry than in profiteering from real estate, and the phenomenon of sick industries is not the cause, but a symptom of the fact that real estate has become more valuable than textile production⁶. The textile mills in Mumbai did not decline by themselves but it is due to the owners that have rendered them sick and caused their downfall. The textile mills that still function do so, because they can rent out textile production to low cost and unauthorized labor in power looms outside the boundaries of the city. (See figure 1)

³Development Control Rules (DCR) – Regulations that shall apply to development of any land situated within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region defined by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority Act 1974.

⁴Records in Office of the Collector, Old Customs House, and the files of the Revenue Department, Government of Bombay residency, Maharashtra State Activities.

⁵Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills* (Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).

⁶Ibid.

A brief history: The mill lands were considered as the birthplace of India's first working class and the Bombay textile industry was considered as the economic backbone of the city. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, the administrative and trading center in India since the time of The British had been in Calcutta, the wars with the Marathas and the lack of capital and transportation was liable for Bombay's growth. Along with these certain historical events such as the uprising of 1857, the settling of The British Raj in India after the defeat of the Marathas, global depression due to the American Civil War and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1860 stimulated the growth in the city. Over the years as inventions and technology caught up with the growth of the city, the opium trade in China declined miserably and the textile industry became the main industry in Mumbai. In 1854, the first textile mill chimney rose in the city and after that the city was blessed with inflow of major merchants along with their families who got into cotton textile production. The colonial authorities encouraged this industrial growth and urban development by attributing large portions of land in previously vacant or reclaimed land in the city for the aggrandizement of industry, offering work and accommodation to migrants from the countryside. ⁷Massive labor migration was discerned before Independence from the coastal belt of Western Maharashtra, mainly from Konkan region and this gave the city its unique cultural character. The textile mills functioned as an allurements for people who had nowhere to go or no livelihood or outbreak (see figure 1).

Mills and Chawls: The land or the village of mills went by the name '*Girangaon*' (*giran* – mill and *gaon* – village) or better yet, the abode of the mill workers. It stretched from Byculla and Chinchpokli in the south, through Parel- Lalbaug, Mahalaxmi, and Elphinstone Road to the perimeters of Dadar and Worli in the north. (See figure 2). This dense network comprised not just of textile mills but housing for mill workers (*chawls*), markets and maidans within the heart of Mumbai. As the city developed over the years, it came to rest between the elite and the commercial areas of the southern island city, and the newer suburbs which were planned further to the north and the west⁸. The housing for mill workers was called '*chawls*'. Chawls were an array simple one room unit with a small pantry attached to it and 4-5 common toilet and baths outside the array of rooms. The toilet-bath and rooms were generally separated by a long passage which functioned as a public space for the residents. Each room could accommodate about 10-12 workers. Since the workers came from poor/less fortune households they came to work in the mills leaving their family in their respective villages. The chawls served as an idea and economical facility for the workers. Over time, the workers asked their family to come and stay with them or some would bring their family along. The chawl system thus, became a residential typology in Mumbai.

Start of the decline of textile mills: Narayan Surve, a premier poet and also a member of the Communist Party in India accounts proudly of how the mill workers used to edge movements during the Independence Struggle without formal organization and with spontaneity. The strikes were mainly for demand of higher wages, better working conditions, and to protest against the colonial authorities in various ways. The first great mill strike occurred in 1919, when 150,000 workers struck work for 18 days to demand an increase in wages. The strike was successful despite the lack of an established union leader.

⁷Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills* (Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).
⁸Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills* (Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).

⁹After this strike many prolonged and hard-fought strikes were witnessed by Girangaon in the 1920's and 1930's. A culmination of these general strikes gave birth to the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU). The GKU was the largest organization of industrial workers and was also instrumental in initiating the trade union movements in India. Thus, the early strikes and protests along with the trade union movements were seen to be reason for the start of the decline of the textile mills in Bombay.

The Great Strike of 1982: In between 1919 and 1982 mill workers went on mini strikes and protests due to dissatisfied wages. And this was the start of the Great Strike of 1982. Dr. Samant ¹⁰led the protests and strikes and won over the mill workers through his dedication and determination for fighting for their demands. In 1972, Dr. Samant was elected as the mill union leader by the workers along with being elected in the Maharashtra State Legislative Assembly. These positions not only gave him power but also, the zeal and more determination to fulfill the demands of the mill workers. In late 1981, Dr. Samant led the Textile Mill Union in a perilous conflict with the Bombay Mill owners Association. Since the conflict did not go as per the plans of Dr. Samant, he planned a massive strike in January 1982, forcing the entire textile industry to support him. During this strike more than 250,000 workers joined Dr. Samant against the Bombay Mill owners Association. 58 mills were closed down and about 150,000 workers became jobless. The strike lasted for 18 months and resulted in social unrest not just in Girangaon but throughout the city.

The demands put forth by Dr. Samant were wage hikes, the Bombay Industrial Relation Act of 1947 be scrapped and the Rashtriya Mill Mazadoor Sangha (RMMS) no longer be the Official Union of the city. Although, Dr. Samant had links with the Governing bodies of Maharashtra and the country he was considered a serious political threat by one and all. It was believed that his control over the mill workers made politicians fear that his influence would spread to the port and dock workers and make him the most powerful union leader in Bombay¹². Thus, the government decided to reject the demands put up by Dr. Samant and refused to budge in spite of the economic losses suffered by the city and the textile industry. After prolonged attempts by Dr. Samant to negotiate with the government, the strike finally disintegrated and no compromise was obtained in favor of the workers.

This eventually led to closure of textile mills across the city and rendered innumerable number of textile mill workers unemployed. Taking an account of this situation the textile industry moved out and away from Bombay and the cotton textile industry was eventually taken over by power looms. The collapse of the strike was seen as a marker in the history of Bombay and in India's labor power as it marked the collapse of union power along with transformed relationships among business, labor, and politics. The downfall of the mills was seen not as a heritage loss for the city but as an economic boom in terms of new job opportunities in many nuances within the city.

⁹Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills* (Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).

¹⁰Dr. Datta Samant, a doctor by profession arose to become a powerful union leader in the city of Mumbai. He became popular by supporting the mill workers and worked towards securing their benefits and livelihoods. He opposed the sale of land which the industrialists resorted to reap profits through real estate development projects. As a result he was eliminated, and this has left a deep scar in the history of the textile industry.

¹¹Bombay Industrial Act of 1947 – The basic objective of this Act is to regulate the relations of employers and employees in the industries to which this Act applies and also to make provisions for settlement of industrial disputes. For the purpose of the Act, different authorities have been appointed or constituted under this Act.

¹²Gurmani, Reshmi; *The Murder of Mumbai's Mills and Marathon of Malls*, (Ulhasnagar, Thane: Smt. Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani College).



Figure 1. Condition of mill lands presently

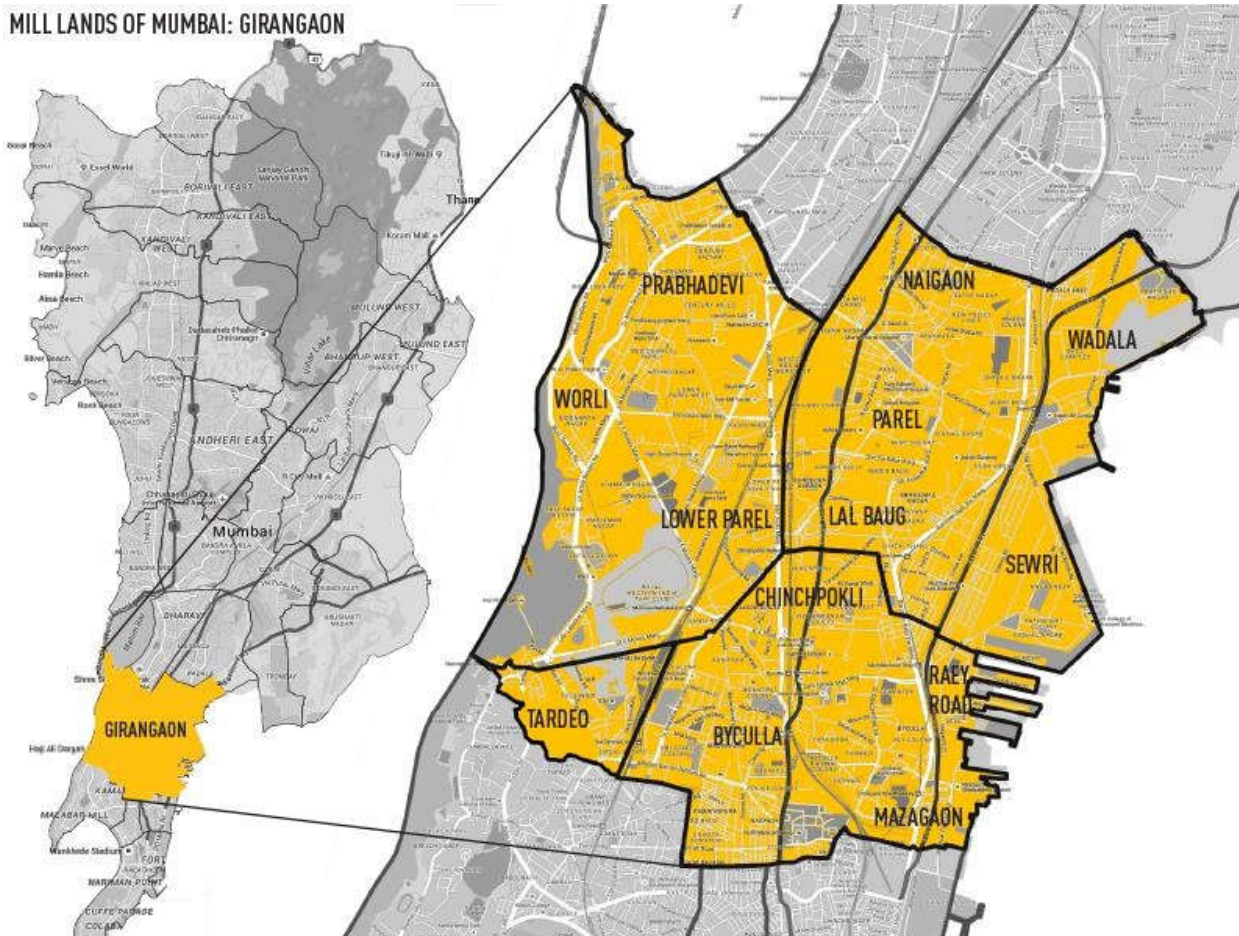


Figure 2. Map showing location of Girangaon in Mumbai and areas coming under Girangaon.

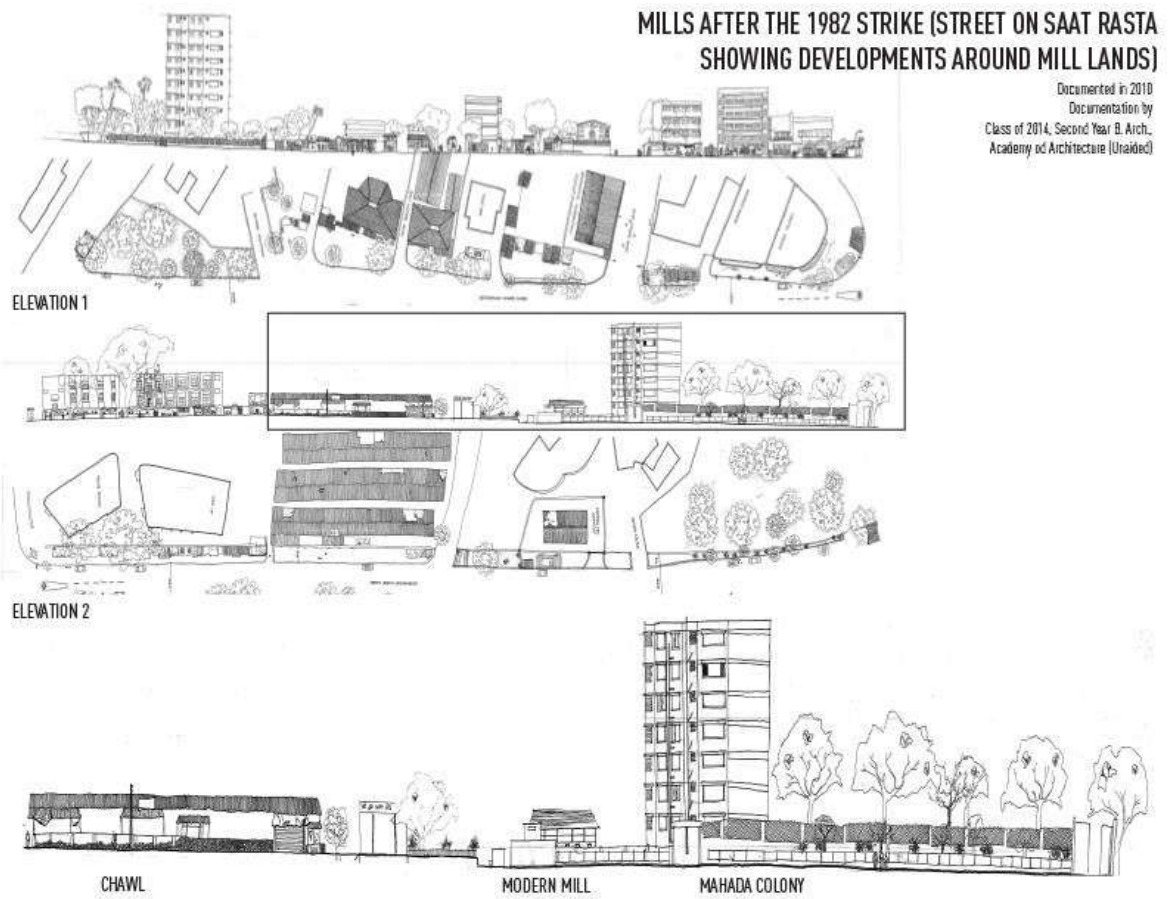


Figure 3. Change in land use from mill land area to mixed use development in Girangaon post the 1982 Strike

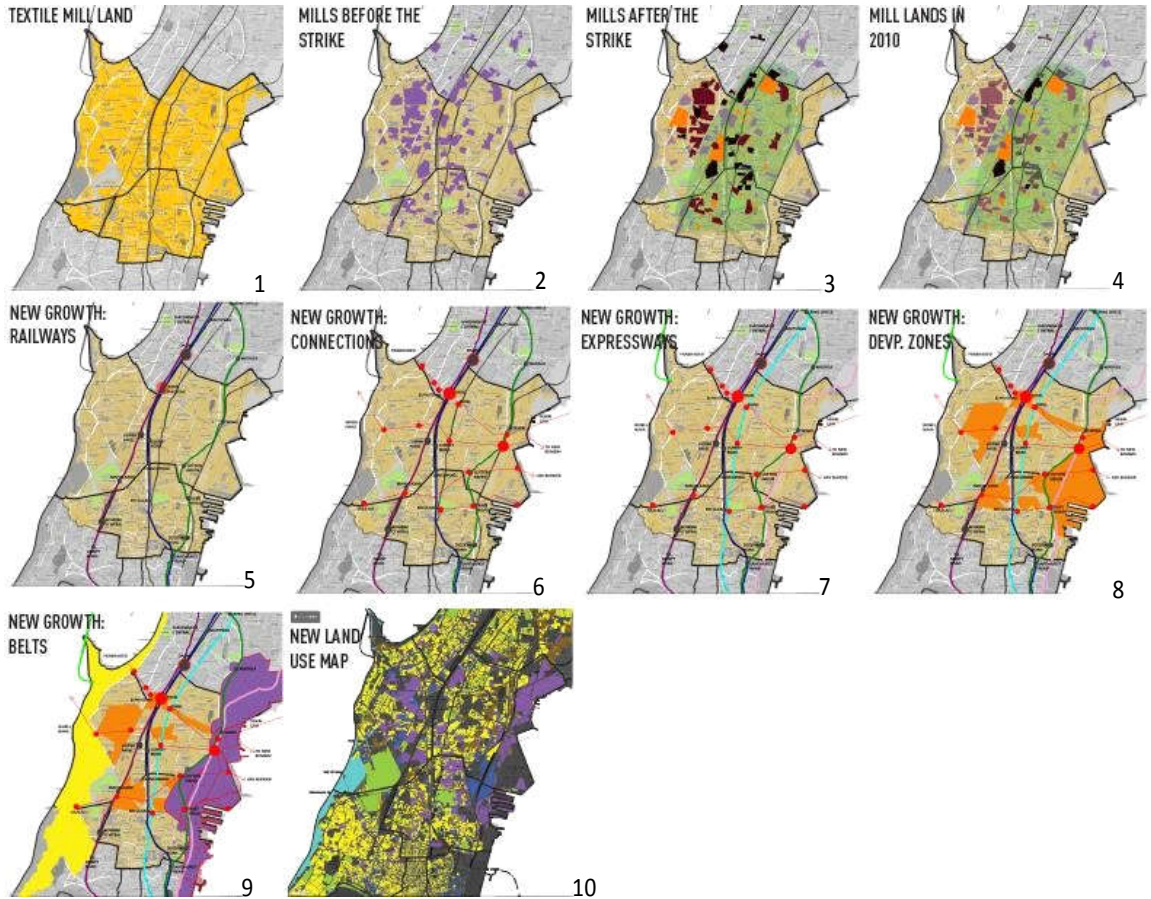


Figure 4. Overview of the change in the state of Girangaon from mill lands and chawls to luxury developments.(iv)

The Mumbai Human Development Report of 2009 published by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) read, ‘...the downfall of the mills inverted the city’s employment pattern. India has always had a large share of the so-called unorganized sector, but until the 1970’s Mumbai was different; in the city, the organized sector had always been the predominant employer. That changed as the textile industry withered...’¹³

Towards the late 1980’s the mill lands become valuable than the textile production, and the fate of the workers kept deteriorating. Their fate had already begun to undermine at the onset of the strike, it further went downhill with the new economic boom as the workers were unskilled and lacked the necessary education when they joined the mills. Thus, the workers found it more difficult to pick up new skills and find better paying jobs to sustain themselves.

The rise of a new political power: In all this hassle, a new political party was rising to power very tactfully. The contestations caused by this party along with the strike could be the main reasons for the decline of the textile industry in Bombay. Mid-1960’s onwards a political party by the name Shiv Sena¹⁴ slowly and steadily entered Girangaon and almost overthrew the Communist Party (initially known as the GKK which later turned into a full-fledged political party). Skillfully enunciating the interests of the workers and the neighborhood, the Sena shadowed the Left political party and gradually started reigning over all of Mumbai. In doing so the Sena allied with the political parties that considered the Communist Party a threat. The rise of the Sena was seen as an asset to industrialists as gangs were labored to create contestations and isolate the workers from one another on the bases of language (being the main criterion), caste, creed and region. Using all these factors along with its new formed political and industrial alliances the Sena grew stronger as a political party and began to embed itself deeper. By the 1980’s the Sena struck on its own¹⁵. The failure of the 1982-83 strike was followed by the immediate removal of most of the mill workers and the gradual eradication of the rest in the years to follow¹⁶. This period of melancholy and regret that the Sena, had been in eclipse, found a new purpose¹⁷. Not just this, but in May 1984, soon after the end of the great textile strike the Sena concocted communal riots in Bhiwandi, claiming their power over Mumbai and Maharashtra. The Sena came to firm power in 1995 on the pretext of opposing the sale of lands and closure of textile mills initiated by a previously elected political party in the Maharashtra Government. The pretext was promising to scrap the Bombay Industrial Relation Act (BIR Act¹⁸). Surprisingly, the Act remains intact but the mill workers of Girangaon continue to bear the brunt and be trampled by political connections, builders, mill owners and underworld mafias. Along with the Sena the underworld mafias found the mill lands an ideal place for their regular meets and gangsterism. The children of mill workers went on to become notorious gangsters while, others who had been staunch supporters of the Communist party turned into Sena street fighters¹⁹.

Rules and Codes: In the late 1980’s–early 1990’s the new DCR²⁰ for Mumbai wrote the fate of mill workers. Unusual yet not so unusual, the formulation of the DCR was by the last State Government party and the ruling party of Greater Bombay Municipal Corporation, Shiv Sena.²¹ The DCR permitted the sale of a portion of mill lands ostensibly to channel the funds into the revival of the industry.²² While, this investment never in fact occurred, the money earned from the lease and the sale of mill lands was instead siphoned off by the mill owners, and the mills were closed and their premises were/are being redeveloped into high rises, office spaces, discotheques, restaurants and malls in short into luxury commercial, residential and mixed used spaces²³. The new development control rules for the city formed in 1991 (DCR 58, 1991) permitted the redevelopment of the mill land by distributing it evenly amongst the developer/owner, BMC and Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA)²⁴ but the mill owners refused to go along with this (DCR 58, 1991) hence resulting in an amendment in 2001 according to which only ‘open land’ on which there was no construction, could be distributed according to DCR 58²⁵. By permitting the redevelopment of mill lands the DCR of 1991 meant that the mill owners could develop their properties provided they handed over a third of the land for low-cost public housing, another third to the BMC for open spaces, leaving the remaining third for commercial development²⁶. The loophole that was unnoticed was that if less than 15 per cent of the land was involved, it could be sold without regard to the one-third formula²⁷. The time between the late 1980’s and early 1990’s saw many loopholes in the DCR proposal. Darryl D’Monte author of *Mills for Sale* in his article ‘*Redevelopment of Mumbai’s Cotton Textile Mill Land Opportunity Lost*’ writes that the mill owners had borrowed crores or rupees from banks and FI’s which was public money. A study conducted by Omkar Goswami and others between 1981 and 1987 stated that the bank credit locked up in sick mills amounted to 9 per cent of all the advances to industries. Many people believed that the land belonging to mill owners was their private property and they had the right to decide what to do with it, the situation was drastically altered when it was realized that crores of public money was involved and had been sunk into running enterprises, the businessmen only had their eye on the land for the real estate deals²⁸. As a result of the alteration of the DCR in 2001, many private mill owners deferred their redevelopment plans, while 15 private mill land redevelopment plans were officially given the green flag. Around the same time National Textile Corporation (NTC) sought permission to sell a few out of their 25 mills but the land accounted for BMC and MHADA came up to 38 acres which was less than the one-third of what the NTC owned²⁹. Thus, protests against the NTC’s proposal were carried out and this just proved the failure of the DCR’s one-third formula for mill lands.

²⁰Development Control Rules (DCR) – Regulations that shall apply to development of any land situated within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region defined by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority Act 1974.

²¹Adarkar, Arvind; *Textile Mill Lands*, (Mumbai: MMRDA).

²²Gurnani, Reshmi; *The Murder of Mumbai’s Mills and Marathon of Malls*, (Ulhasnagar, Thane: Smt. Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani College).

²³Ibid.

²⁴MHADA – An apex body constituted under the MHAD Act 1976. Established in 1977 under the Housing Department Government of Maharashtra and integrated the activities and functions performed by statutory bodies to provide comprehensive, co-operative approach to the problems of housing.

²⁵Sankam, Sushma; *Mumbai – Mill Land Redevelopment*, (Mumbai, 2005).

²⁶Prakash, Gyan; *Tragic Fable of Mumbai Mills*, (The New York Times, 2013).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸D’Monte, Darryl; “*Redevelopment of Mumbai’s Cotton Textile Mill Land Opportunity Lost*”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 33, Issue No. 6 (February 1998): 283 – 290.

²⁹Sankam, Sushma; *Mumbai – Mill Land Redevelopment*, (Mumbai, 2005).

¹³*Mumbai Human Development Report 2009*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴Shiv Sena (army of Shiva) – Also known by the name Sena, is an Indian far-right regional political party. Its ideology is based on pro-Marathi ideology and Hindu nationalism.

¹⁵Purandare, Vaibhav; *The Sena Story*, (Mumbai: Business Publications Inc. 1999).

¹⁶Gurnani, Reshmi; *The Murder of Mumbai’s Mills and Marathon of Malls*, (Ulhasnagar, Thane: Smt. Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani College).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Bombay Industrial Act of 1947 – The basic objective of this Act is to regulate the relations of employers and employees in the industries to which this Act applies and also to make provisions for settlement of industrial disputes. For the purpose of the Act, different authorities have been appointed or constituted under this Act.

¹⁹Prakash, Gyan; *Tragic Fable of Mumbai Mills*, (The New York Times, 2013).

Probable solutions...

Late Arvind Adarkar, architect, urbanist and educationist in his paper 'Textile Mill Lands' writes³⁰:

'If one understands this whole scenario in proper perspective it will become very obvious that we are now witnessing the displacement of million people and therefore a successful Girangaon Bachao Andolan has to be launched. The agitation will have to consider some aspects such as to stop the sale of mill lands or come up with effective use of mill lands which will give justice to the mill lands and the workers or take necessary steps to preserve Girangaon, maintain and further the present cultural ethos. In order that the mill lands be saved they should become unattractive for the developers and builders. Thus, two probable solutions could be looked at:

- *Present urban ceiling act should be strictly implemented as a social measure in its original form discontinuing all the exemption that has been granted from time to time making it a failure.*

OR

- *Present urban land ceiling act should be abolished totally. In either case the available housing stock will go up and hence should ease the pressure presently felt by Central Bombay.*

Though either of the arguments supported will achieve the same result, the acceptance of any one argument needs to be discussed, pondered over and debated as it will send different signals.'

Darryl D'Monte proposed a strategy which would not only work in favor of the mill lands and the mill workers but in many ways a strategy to save the heritage of Mumbai. He proposes to not demolish mill lands but instead create job opportunities in small manufacturing or assembly occupations within sheds which are into garment making.

This proposition should be considered for mill workers and their children or relatives who are majorly dependent on mill workers for household income. In case, mill workers are unable to retain for such an occupation their next in kin could take it up and continue to serve the family. By developing such a strategy the city would be able to retain its working class character even as the mills modernize on their part. The area would thus be revived and the social heritage of the city could be retained in the form of chimneys and structures to distinguish the area. Along with this, merging mill lands close to one another instead of being let out for gradual redevelopment would also benefit the city in a way. By doing so the small scale garment making occupations could function in these areas and at the same time it could also serve as a shelter for the workers.

Twilight of Mills: Post the strike the land on which the mills stood became prized possessions to acquire, where space was a concern. It only drew the attention of one and all who wanted to show their power and claim the city. The mill lands thus became like the land in the game of Monopoly. Today and the years to come, Mumbai will be seen as the Monopoly City. The elite classes especially, find it prestigious to have property in the city. As of today having an apartment or even land in the city is considered as a status symbol.

The day is not far when the heritage of Mumbai will disappear and be replaced by luxury spaces developed and under the control of the elite class. If one drives or even walks through the Girangaon area, the redevelopment effects are abruptly visible.

The private capital driven gentrification has drastically changed the landscape of Central Mumbai and the neighboring area. Where mill workers once worked and lived, luxury apartments, high-end offices, hotels, malls and entertainment complexes are seen and a few still coming up, all steadily gentrifying the place. Gyan Prakash in his article 'Tragic Fable of Mumbai Mills' recalls this as a haphazard development that navigates through the thickets of litigation, the resistance of existing residences and civil society groups and market consideration³¹.

Globalization of Bombay: With the advent of the new DCR in the late 20th century, has enabled the closure of the textile mills and facilitated vast urban growth. The growth is in the form of appurtenant and service industry which is expected to lead to the 'Globalization' of Bombay. Currently, it is unnecessary to pinpoint what or who has been responsible for the decline of the industry. In spite of the fact that the competition today has become more stronger due to aspects such as cost of raw materials and transportation along with fuel, taxation and policies. And all this has been post the Strike in terms of the power looms. It needs to be understood that this is a case observed worldwide, but even so the conditions especially in Mumbai are different as compared to the ones in Manchester or Lowell. The existence of such a vast market needs to be the reason for the industry to flourish. Knowing very well all these aspects the mill owners and the state are thoroughly convinced that the only source for earning enormous profits is through the surplus mill lands. The changing landscape of Bombay is considered as a shift in the political economy of Bombay away from the industrial time zone marked by mills, chawls and chimneys of mills into a post-industrial highly service centered economy. Here, Bombay is seen to serve as a center for the global economy of the country. A place for international finance, trade and commerce, a new knowledge based and highly skilled economy more like the movement of the phase of liberation from the industrial era to the era of globalization. Many analysts call this the 'de-industrialization' of Bombay, emulating the closures of manufacturing and industries as existed in the city³². While arguing in favor of the mill lands, mills and the mill workers and castigating the redevelopment plans for mill lands it is not feasible to think of preserving these as a museum section. The heritage history needs to be preserved in a way that it is remembered for ages and not seen as stories of old Bombay. Alongside, the citizens should not give into post-liberalization doctrines that foresee the market forces as the only remedies to economic and social malaise. It is these rules made by the government along with the elite that are destroying the urban environment of the city dragging the labor class into offhand employment. The middle and the upper class are barely affected by these changes; the only ones bearing the thrust are forced into informal sector, criminal activity and made to live on a hand to mouth existence. These global processes only mark the onset of an urban crisis, favoring the class of highly skilled professionals related to the global finance, technology and other allied services.

³¹Prakash, Gyan; *Tragic Fable of Mumbai Mills*, (The New York Times, 2013).

³²Krishnan, Shekhar; *The Murder of the Mills: A Case Study of Phoenix Mills* (Mumbai: Girangaon Bachao Andolan, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, April 2000).

³⁰Adarkar, Arvind; *Textile Mill Lands*, (Mumbai: MMRDA).

Conclusion

It is sad yet true that the fate of the mill lands in Girangaon is unknown and scandalous to the Mumbaikars. Today where the heritage of the working class of Mumbai once stood is replaced with luxury residential, commercial and mixed used spaces. The lack of concern with which this formative change is taking place only indicates the desire and want of civic authorities, government officials and developers to clean Mumbai's historical pride. Deindustrialization and the innumerable insecurities linked to the issue have affected the city and continue to do so politically as well as socially. This situation/scenario that has been going on for years can be looked at as a classic example of a large urban crisis in urban planning. It has only caused social and environmental damage to the city in the form of new infrastructure and mixed used construction approved by the BMC.

The need of the hour is less planning and interventions based on what should be done but more of participatory planning strategies to avoid the evils of the new luxury spaces from enticing us. Development must be looked at not as imminent and unruly process having its own agenda, but a political one which has to be dealt with politically. No solid argument can be made in terms of this development, whether it is gentrification, revitalization, redevelopment or an urban renewal policy. Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon in their book *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices, The Millworkers of Girangaon: An Oral History* write, '...the battle for space, for jobs, for a future continues. It is payback time, they say, time for the city to acknowledge its responsibilities. Mumbai's millworkers are now waiting for the city to return some part of that history back to their children³³.'

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