



COMMENT, VIDEOS

“Builders of your Grand Edifice”: The memories of Narayan Surve

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*The blue sea, like an inkpot
upset by a naughty child
brings back old memories
and I cry, the child in me sobs.
At the dock, wading in the water
I hear the foot-falls
where dark, sweaty legs
unload the goods.
Hearing the muezzin’s azaan
I got gooseflesh.
The fakirs and the maulvis
sent me scurrying home.
It is people like me
builders of your grand edifice
who add to your glory*

day after day, O City.

— Narayan Surve, translated from Marathi by Abhay Sardesai. As featured in the film

A Clip from Saacha (The Loom)



An excerpt from Saacha (The Loom), 2001

Saacha (The Loom) sifts through the historical and cultural space occupied by the industrial working class before the decline of the textile mills in the 1980s and the aftermath of the mill shutdowns. The 2001 documentary by Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar take us through the memories of Naryan Surve and Bombay-based artist Sudhir Patwardhan. Surve, one of the foremost contemporary Marathi poets, found his political moorings in the ranks of the trade union movement and the Communist Party of India. Abandoned as a baby by his biological parents, he was raised by a mill-worker. He himself joined the mills of the 30s as a child worker. He grew to play a significant role in the Left-led trade union movement, alongside prominent Marxist activists.

Surve recites his poems and tells anecdotes to the camera. With lively humour,

he draws the distinction between book-learned communism and what working as a Doffer boy in the mills and his time with the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) taught him. "I've always believed that one should read people, read the conditions in which they live and if you have time left, then read books!" It is easy to imagine him as a kind and popular teacher, gently passing on ideology and wisdom to a generation that hasn't witnessed the history he has; who knows that political consciousness awakens upon contact with the real world, beyond literacy and academia.

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Surve pivots easily between his own poetry, recollections of strikes and rallies, memories of workers' drama movements, writers and poets in Mahim, Tardeo, Byculla and Delisle Road. These were all working-class areas, he remembers. His words haunt the images on the screen. "Working with... powerful artistic registers allowed for an embodied relationship with the images and sounds of the city, enacting both our abiding affection and our deep sense of loss, as the proletarian spaces of the city have been gradually edged out, to be replaced by a shiny new Mumbai, built on multiple erasures", Anjali and Jayasankar write

about *Saacha* in their book *A Fly in the Curry*.

The film works fiercely against the wilful “invisibilising” of what the city was built on: physical, social and cultural labour. The scaling back of economic rights, the mill shutdowns, and communalism (especially in the Riot years), have led to [stakes in the city-spaces migrating to the economically powerful](#).

Also read: “So you think you are free?” – A discussion on *A Fly in the Curry*: Independent Documentary Film in India.

In “[Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter](#)” Jaysanakar tells film studies scholar Anne Rutherford, “... one can discover fragments of one’s memory in every space that one encounters...and you are looking for those fragments that begin to instil in you a cinematic experience.” As Anne points out later in her article, “memory and feeling” is how the city of Bombay is navigated in *Saacha*, but also what is lost or deliberately overlooked.

Surve has a breathtaking knowledge of Bombay’s history and the making of the city which he weaves into stories from his own past. This is how cities are chronicled, in the lives of its builders.

A Clip from Saacha (The Loom)



Saacha has had many screenings across the world. It has also been made [available for public viewing](#) for anyone who wishes to watch it. An installation based on the film was displayed at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2018. *Saacha* is now is a part of [Giran Mumbai](#), an audio-visual web archive put together in memory of the mill lands of Bombay.

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