

Unheard Voices: The Migrant Workers of Mumbai's Cotton Mills and Narayan Surve's Poetic Legacy

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Abstract Migrants play a key role in Mumbai's dynamics, shaping its identity through cultural fusion. This paper shifts focus from the city's colonial legacy and Dharavi to overlooked cotton mill workers, mostly migrants from nearby villages. Recruited by 'jobbers' and housed in cramped chawls, their lives mirrored subaltern destitution. Narayan Surve, an orphan poet raised by mill workers, captures their struggles in his Marxist poetry, giving voice to the marginalised and highlighting the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by Mumbai's migrant labourers.

Keywords Mumbai migrants. Cotton mill workers. Narayan Surve. Subaltern studies. Urban identity.

Summary 1 Introduction: Cotton Mills and Mill Workers. – 2 Mill Workers: Economic Migrants. – 3 Narayan Surve: a Poet of 'the Politics of People' and of Marginalisation. – 3.1 Surve's Life, Poetry and Subalternity. – 3.2 Poems. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction: Cotton Mills and Mill Workers

This article shifts the focus from the commonly studied slums, such as Dharavi, and the colonial history of Mumbai, to the experiences of cotton mill workers in the city. These workers, primarily economic migrants, faced significant violence and discrimination yet played a crucial role in the city's development. By integrating into Mumbai's fabric, they contributed to the formation of distinct identities through the fusion of diverse cultural elements.

The first part of the article offers a socio-historical analysis of the experiences of these migrant workers within the context of their identity. Most of these workers migrated from surrounding villages, recruited by intermediaries known as 'jobbers', and lived in cramped quarters called *chawls* (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 31-2).

The second part of the article presents a literary analysis of Narayan Surve's poetry, sourced from the site-archive *GiranMumbai/Mill-Mumbai: Revisiting the Mill Lands of Mumbai and its People*. Through Gramsci and Guha's theories, this section addresses migrant-cotton mill workers as subalterns. Surve's poetry, marked by Marxist ideology and a profound empathy for the working class, articulates the voices of the marginalised and underscores the socio-economic and cultural challenges they faced in Mumbai.

When engaging with Narayan Surve's poetry, one must immerse oneself in the grim realities of the cotton mills, as his works offer a poignant and vivid depiction of the lives of Mumbai's cotton mill workers. His poems, while being artistic expressions, also function as historical and social documents that capture the essence of mill life. As Mumbai transformed from a modest fishing village to a bustling metropolis - a metamorphosis vividly described by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981, 121-2) - the rise of the cotton mills, fuelled by colonial intent, played a crucial role in shaping its industrial and socio-economic landscape. By delving into themes of labour and exploitation, the migrant experience, social marginalisation, economic hardship, and the resilience of the human spirit, Surve's poetry provides a critical perspective on the cultural and economic transformations that have defined Mumbai and offers a powerful critique of the injustices endured by cotton mill workers while celebrating their contributions and enduring spirit. Thus, understanding the figure of the cotton mill worker as an economic migrant integrated into the social fabric of Mumbai is essential.

The transformation of Bombay, now Mumbai, into a major industrial hub began in 1854 with the establishment of the first cotton mill by James Landon and Ranchhodlal Chhotalal, which became operational in 1855. This marked the beginning of a significant demand for cheap labour, met primarily through the 'jobbers' system" (Chandavarkar 2004, 32). Jobbers played a crucial role in recruiting workers

and maintaining discipline within the factories. They navigated the challenges of ensuring a steady supply of skilled labour and upholding workforce discipline by leveraging extensive networks based on kinship, caste, and village affiliations (31). In Girangaon, the bustling cotton mill village, they held significant sway, acting as both recruiters and mediators in social and economic interactions. As labour dynamics shifted, jobbers faced scrutiny from mill owners, particularly during general strikes when their ability to manage unrest was questioned. By the 1950s, their influence had diminished, shifting from recruitment to supervision within the mills, yet they continued to hold sway in working-class communities.

The permanent establishment of cotton mill workers gradually faced a crisis due to socio-political issues in the latter half of the twentieth century with the rise of the Shiv Sena, a right-wing political force in Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena's agenda included reclaiming Mumbai's authentic identity and that of Maharashtra. The renaming of Bombay to Mumbai, in homage to the goddess Mumbaiadevi, aimed to liberate the city from its colonial legacy and reaffirm its pre-colonial roots (Hansen 2001, 11). However, this quest for authenticity among the 'Marathi Manoos', the inhabitants of Maharashtra (Parkash 2010, 26; Adarkar, Menon 2004, 331), also led to the marginalisation of cotton mill workers, who were often discriminated against and perceived as 'outsiders' (Finkelstein 2019, 118).

2 Mill Workers: Economic Migrants

To understand the identity and background of cotton mill workers, consulting Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's introductory chapter in *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices: The Mill Workers of Girangaon. An Oral History* (2004) by Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon, along with his work *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (1994) is essential. First of all, he notes that:

In public discourse, the term 'migrant' can be applied both to workers who depend entirely on the city for their livelihood but retain some ties to the countryside, and to workers who migrate seasonally. (Chandavarkar 1994, 125-6)

According to this definition, mill-workers can be characterised as migrants. They constituted the predominant workforce in Bombay's burgeoning urban industrial sector, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the city's socio-economic landscape. They were drawn by employment prospects and maintained strong ties between their urban neighbourhoods and rural origins. Initially settling in the "native

town” (30) of northern Bombay, they later gravitated towards Girangaon, the cotton mill village. Limited infrastructure in Bombay led to harsh working conditions, irregular employment, and low wages, prompting workers to live near the mills. Hiring practices were flexible, often conducted daily at the mill gates. The majority of workers were migrants, with 84% of Bombay’s 1921 population originating from outside the city, a trend lasting fifty years (125). Migration was driven by economic necessity rather than social mobility aspirations, with workers supporting their rural families through urban employment. Social networks based on caste, kinship, and village affiliations facilitated employment, housing, and credit access, forming the basis of workers’ welfare and collective action for rights and livelihood protection in working-class neighbourhoods (30-2).

The ascendancy of the Shiv Sena in the late twentieth century intensified the scapegoating of migrants for the unemployment of ‘Marathi Manoos’ (Parkash 2010, 26; Adarkar, Menon 2004, 331), thus stigmatising the term ‘migrant’ within Mumbai’s socio-political landscape. This rhetoric likely heightened discriminatory attitudes toward mill workers and other migrants alike. Therefore, it can be stated that:

The term ‘migrant’ thus signified within the dominant discourse an ideological conception of the nature of the working class, the processes of its formation and its implications for the social order. (Chandavarkar 1994, 145)

As noted by Maura Finkelstein (2019), cotton migrant workers have reported instances of “isolation, alienation, discrimination, and threats of violence” (117). Despite considering the city their home, migrants from North and South India encountered inhospitable conditions. Indeed, during Finkelstein’s interview with Kishan, a migrant from Bihar, he points out:

That [Bihar] is my birthplace, but this [Mumbai] is my workplace. This is where I belong. This place has given me work. I am here now, so this is where I belong. (118).

This sentiment emerged following the Great Textile Strike of 1982-83, which resulted in the establishment of a policy that allocated 80% of jobs in mill lands in Maharashtra exclusively to the Marathi population. The remaining 20% was designated for individuals classified as ‘outsiders’ (118):

When Bombay’s cotton mills closed and many a dream died amongst the cotton littered mill floors, the unemployed workers drifted into taking whatever jobs they could land. “If people

are lucky they become taxi drivers”, a maid sagely informed me. (Sarukkai, Taylor 2014, 85)

Consequently, this measure gave rise to the development of “a powerful identity-based hierarchy” within the region (Finkelstein 2019, 119). This change in perspective concerning migrants has resulted in a notable increase in xenophobia, as well as various forms of discrimination and violence. Finkelstein further highlights the importance of taking into account the viewpoint of a Marathi individual, Raj, within these accounts:

When Biharis come to Mumbai... they are a problem. They are taking over jobs... When you have people from your own country [desh], why don't you support them and give them jobs? Everyone needs a job, but your residents should be given preference. (124)

The perception of migrants as ‘other’ has intensified. Bombay’s cultural identity, once celebrated for its cosmopolitan ambiance, has transformed into a more provincial character as Mumbai. This shift has triggered an identity crisis, resulting in migrants, now recognized as genuine residents, struggling to reconcile their present reality with their prior perception of the city.

Finkelstein’s question on the legitimate stakeholders of Mumbai’s textile industry, historically dominated by labourers from Maharashtra, North and South India, poses a complex challenge (139). Exploring the Shiv Sena’s history reveals its use of coercive tactics to establish dominance in Maharashtra. Founded in June 1966, shortly after the establishment of Maharashtra as a state, the Shiv Sena placed significant emphasis on regional citizenship. They advocated for the recognition of Maharashtra as the rightful domain of Maharashtrians. Their ideology centred around preferences for job allocation to Maharashtrians (80%), discouragement of migration from other Indian states (20%), promotion of local industrial expansion, and espousal of Hindu nationalism, which clashed with communist ideologies.

Disparities in the labour market fuelled tensions within the social fabric of Mumbai. While migrants from coastal and mountainous regions of Maharashtra had historically moved to the city, rural Marathi-speaking migrants of the 1950s and 1960s faced economic disadvantages compared to skilled migrants from outside the state. Despite political changes, the Marathi-speaking middle class continued to experience economic frustration. This sentiment was expressed through Bal Thackeray’s cartoon weekly, *Marmik*, which was launched in 1963.

The Shiv Sena’s nativism targeted outsiders, particularly South Indians, derogatorily known as *lungiwalas* (Sarukkai 2014, 80), in the 1960s, amidst waves of North Indian migration that exacerbated

housing and job shortages. The party emerged as a response to the anxiety of marginalisation, as non-Maharashtrian migrants strained the city's resources. Thackeray's definition of a 'Mumbaiker' included Marathi speakers and others who considered Maharashtra their homeland. This fostered a sense of belonging that bridged the gap between insiders and outsiders, but excluded non-Maharashtrian working-class migrants. This sentiment laid the groundwork for the contemporary Sena's platform, which focuses on development and replaces older regionalist and xenophobic ideologies (Finkelstein 2019, 136-7).

3 Narayan Surve: a Poet of 'the Politics of People' and of Marginalisation

1.1 Surve's Life, Poetry and Subalternity

After examining the origins of the cotton mill workers' migration to Bombay/Mumbai, it becomes evident that their settlement in the city set the stage for the harsh living conditions they would endure. These economic migrants, drawn to the city by the promise of work, found themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, with limited job opportunities, and subjected to communal violence and discrimination. Surve's poems vividly capture this reality, depicting the social and economic hardships faced by these migrant workers within the city's cotton mills. This reality is also reflected in Narayan Surve's own biography. As a cotton mill worker himself and the non-biological son of two cotton mill workers, Surve's experiences are intimately connected to the harsh living conditions and systemic marginalisation endured by these migrant workers. His poetry encapsulates the essence of the worker experience, shedding light on the struggles and resilience of these economic migrants. Through his poignant observations, Narayan Surve, a leading figure in modern Dalit poetry, brings to the forefront the plight and perseverance of Mumbai's cotton mill workers.

Born in 1926 and passing away in 2010, Surve was raised by cotton mill workers in a Mumbai chawl. His early life challenges and factory experiences profoundly shaped his literary work. His poetry, known for its simple language and emotional depth, explores themes of rebellion against oppression, including the caste system, gender inequality, religious prejudice, and the harsh urban living conditions in Mumbai in relation to cotton mill workers. His portrayal of marginalised women highlights his dedication to exposing societal injustices. Surve's poetry, shaped by his keen observations on the *pavement*, which he describes as his 'university', reflects the complex

social dynamics of race, religion, gender, class, and caste. His verses, marked by stark realism to the detriment of sentimentalism, portray the resilience of society's most impoverished against adversity in slums, chawls, cotton mills, and the streets, offering lessons on overcoming challenges and promoting social justice. While not focusing on conventional themes, Surve's work possesses clarity and lucidity, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the human condition. Ultimately, his poetry stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, urging readers to confront societal injustices and strive for change.

Thematically, Narayan Surve's poems align with the experiences of cotton mill labourers as migrants and marginalised individuals, portraying their struggles against social and economic injustices in the urban landscape. Surve's poetry illuminates the lived experiences of marginalised communities, particularly highlighting their resilience amid systemic oppression and exploitation in the urban environment. This resilience is vividly illustrated by the struggles of the cotton mill workers, who, to paraphrase an article from 1924 whose description is still relevant, were "proverbially underpaid and overworked, with the result that they are always heavily in debt to the money-lender. Their right to organise into trade unions is not legally recognised; they have no regular labour organisations and no union fund" (Roy 2007). Consequently, it can be stated that Surve's themes resonate with Ranajit Guha's concept of "dominance without hegemony" (1997), depicting these individuals as subalterns, lacking recognized identity by the dominant other. Before delving into Guha's concept, which holds significant relevance in this discourse, it is essential to trace its origins back to Antonio Gramsci.

The ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha are explored to explain the mechanisms of power and domination in society. According to Gramsci's insights from his *Prison Notebooks*, the ruling class maintains its dominance not only through coercive force, but also through the dissemination of its ideology and values, which are internalised as common sense by the wider population. This process of cultural domination, known as hegemony, is facilitated by institutions such as the media, education, and religion, which shape the beliefs and values of the masses and secure their consent to be governed. Gramsci argues that cultural hegemony is crucial for the stability of the capitalist system, as it discourages the oppressed classes from challenging the existing order. However, Gramsci also emphasises the role of intellectuals, particularly "organic intellectuals" from the working class, in challenging hegemony and driving social change (Gramsci 1999, 142). As summarised by Ramos:

An organic ideology was formulated by these "organic intellectuals" through an "articulating principle" which, upon unifying

the various ideological elements from the discourses of subaltern groups (classes and individuals) and forming from them a unified ideological system, became a “hegemonic principle”. Indeed, since two classes or, for that matter, two members of different classes, could adhere to or advocate the same ideological element and articulate it in their particular ideological discourses, it was conceivable for a solid class alliance to be forged through this process of ideological absorption. (Ramos 1982)

Ranjit Guha’s work challenges the conventional understanding of hegemony proposed by Gramsci. Guha suggests that, in specific contexts like colonial India, dominance can be maintained without cultural hegemony. According to Guha, political coercion was more prevalent than persuasive cultural hegemony in colonial India. He argues that the divergent interests of the post-colonial elite, including wealthy capitalists and landowners, hindered the establishment of cultural hegemony over subaltern groups. Guha contends that the failure of the colonial state and subsequent independent nation to assimilate civil society into political society meant that dominance was exercised without hegemonic consent. This challenges the notion that cultural hegemony is essential for maintaining power and control in society. Guha’s scholarship provides a critical perspective for examining power dynamics in colonial and post-colonial settings, shedding light on the complexities of domination and resistance beyond Gramsci’s framework of hegemony.

Whichever version one takes, it is the civilizing or institutionalizing function of the regime that figures as the generative impulse of Indian politics and its unifying force in this neocolonialist view. The nationalist standpoint shares the same assumption, but turns it to its own advantage by defining the content and character of politics simply in terms of the indigenous elite’s response to colonial rule and the sum of all the ideas and activities by which it dealt with the government of the day (Guha 1997, X).

In the context of Indian politics and historiography, both the neocolonialist and nationalist perspectives recognize the important role played by the colonial regime in shaping the political landscape. The neocolonialist perspective argues that the colonial regime’s efforts to civilise or establish institutions were crucial to the development of Indian politics, serving as a catalyst for political activity and unity. On the other hand, the nationalist perspective agrees that the colonial regime had a foundational role, but offers a different interpretation of its influence. Nationalists frame the political narrative around the responses of the indigenous elite to colonial rule. They define the essence and trajectory of politics based on the collective reactions,

ideas, and actions of local leaders and intellectuals as they interacted with and resisted the colonial government. If we consider Guha's assertion that the voice of history should be articulated by the subalterns, who are often marginalised and silenced by dominant hegemonic forces, Narayan Surve emerges as a quintessential representative of the subaltern experience. Surve's poetry serves as a powerful medium through which the voice of the subaltern can be heard, offering a poignant narrative of their struggles and resilience in the face of oppression and adversity. Through his verses, Surve gives voice to the lived realities of the working class, particularly migrants and marginalised individuals, who grapple with the harsh realities of urban life in Mumbai's chawls, cotton mills, and streets, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs. So, he can be identified as an exponent of what Guha terms as "the politics of the people" (X).

1.2 Poems

Surve's poetic corpus, featured in the *GiranMumbai/MillMumbai: Revisiting the Mill Lands of Mumbai and its People* project, an archive/website specifically dealing with cotton mills, cotton mill workers and their living conditions, focuses on the experiences of cotton mill workers who migrated and settled in Mumbai. This collection, originally written in Marathi, has been translated into English to reach a broader audience. His work serves as a poignant testimony to the subaltern existence of these cotton mill workers, who are depicted as migrants grappling with the harsh realities of a metropolis dominated by communal violence. Narayan Surve masterfully captures the existence of migrants in a city that they attempt to make their own, but whose natives continually deny them full acceptance. In Surve's portrayal, the migrant remains perpetually an outsider, forever marked by their migrant status.

Because of the unavailability of chronological data, the poems have been listed in a thematic sequence to underline various aspects of Narayan Surve's poetic exploration. This thematic approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of Surve's diverse themes, spanning from the harsh realities of labour and urban life to profound social and political commentary. The sequence progresses to introspective themes touching on existential questions, highlighting the breadth and depth of Surve's literary contributions and showcasing how his work resonates with the complexities of human experience in urban settings.

The first poem to be examined is "Mother", characterised by powerful imagery. This poem reflects on themes of loss, childhood innocence, and the harsh realities of life, especially for marginalised individuals. It begins with a vivid description of the stars fading and

the sirens of the cotton mills singing, possibly indicating the end of the day and the start of a difficult night for the mother. The mother's repeated turning back "again and again" as she leaves for work highlights her reluctance to separate from her children and her continuous concern for their well-being.

She used to keep turning back again and again.
"Don't fight", she used to say tenderly.
Thus, she used to earn her two-penny.

Later in the poem, the mention of "Dashera", a festive period, sharply contrasts with the everyday struggle, highlighting moments of joy and togetherness when the mother takes her children through the departments, observing the decorations. This brief escape into a world of play and imagination, where the children "turned into birds", serves as a strong metaphor for freedom and happiness.

However, the poem takes a tragic turn with the sudden and violent death of the mother, depicted through the stark image of her wide-open eyes and blood flowing from her mouth. The confusion and search for their mother shown by the children represent a desperate longing for security and comfort that has been abruptly taken away.

It so happened once,
They brought her in a car.
Her eyes staring wide open,
Blood streamed out of her mouth.
Her co-worker, Salu drew me close.
I was watching with restless eyes,
Was looking for the roof above.
We were looking for our mother.

The final stanza is heart-wrenching as the children huddle together under a bed-cover, seeking solace in their mother. The realisation that they are now "completely destitute" without her conveys the extent of their loss.

Upon closer examination, Surve's poetry explores themes beyond personal and familial narratives. It delves into struggles faced by the working class, the impact of industrialisation on households, and the mother's role as a resilient and nurturing figure. This poem can also be interpreted as a sincere tribute to the mother and a reflection on the void left behind by her absence. It lays the groundwork for understanding Surve's subsequent political activism, as personal sorrow and societal conditions often compel individuals to seek change.

The next poem, titled "Sheegwala", is closely connected to the previous one since it narrates the story of another female figure through the character of Dawoodchacha, a butcher. The poem begins with a

simple interaction between Dawoodchacha and a young boy, possibly his son, who is practising writing. This ordinary activity sets the stage for a profound reflection on the values of integrity and the challenges of adhering to one's principles.

Keep this in mind, son!
It's so easy to write a word,
And so hard to live for it.

Dawoodchacha, a Muslim, recounts a harrowing incident where he took a stand against communal violence directed at his wife, who is presumably Hindu, indicated by her name, Kashibai. Despite his religious identity, he never compromised on his moral principles, such as refusing to slaughter a pregnant cow, which exemplifies his reverence for life.

Just look at my leg...
Your mother, Kashibai's my witness.
I'm a butcher, son... but
Never slaughtered a pregnant cow.

The poem then takes a sombre turn as Dawoodchacha describes how he was attacked by a mob for defending his wife and for being perceived as a traitor to his own community. The attack left him physically disabled, having lost a leg. However, it also symbolises the loss of humanity and communal harmony that once prevailed ("Allah-ho-Akbar walas" and "Hinduwala").

The concluding lines of the poem lament the decline of values in society, where money has become the predominant force, overshadowing virtues such as compassion and solidarity. Dawoodchacha's darkness encompasses not only physical violence but also the ethical decay that has resulted in a society where people no longer champion what is right. Therefore, Surve's poem serves as a potent commentary on communal tensions in India and the erosion of moral values in the face of materialism. It reminds us of the human toll of communal violence and the imperatives of empathy and unity in a diverse society. It calls upon us to remember the significance of keeping our word and the courage this necessitates, particularly when we are confronted with adversity.

The poem "Okay, Kiddo?" captures a moment of personal triumph and reflection within a broader social movement. It takes the form of a monologue by a father to his son in which he recounts an experience of leading a large group of people, epitomising his role in a socio-political cause.

Papa was talking...
All of us were listening; those at home,

In the chawl, from tomorrow's world!
The water in the gutters of the chawl was glistening in the
[floodlights.

The father describes his journey from chawl-dweller to leader, portrayed as an "ocean" that "pierced the skies", pointing to a rise in status and influence. The mentions of telegrams from England and the fall of the "queen's minarets" can be interpreted as metaphors for the far-reaching impact of his actions and suggest the end of colonial influence and a significant change in the socio-political landscape.

The blood "glimmering across the darkness" creates a serious tone, hinting at the cost and sacrifice of this transformation and activism. The poem also conveys pride and accomplishment, as the father is recognised as a leader by his neighbours.

The neighbours whispered,
"Look, Atmya's father... a leader"

The scene of the son sleeping in his mother's arms while the father waves to them contrasts the public and private aspects of the father's life. It highlights the personal sacrifices made by individuals involved in activism and the complex nature of their struggle.

The sentence "You know what, son" is used repeatedly throughout the poem to emphasise the father's desire to share his experiences and lessons with the next generation. The mention of memories related to May Day, a day associated with labour movements and workers' rights, suggests that the father's activism is rooted in these causes.

Memories of that May Day well up in my heart.
You know what, son!
You know what, son...

This poem combines personal narrative with political discourse, reflecting on the complexities of leadership, the sacrifices made in the pursuit of activism, and the hope for a better future.

Surve's poetry undergoes a noticeable transformation as it moves away from subjects related to parents and adults and delves into the realm of labour. His verses take on the perspective of a labourer, invoking imagery of strength and perseverance ("I am a worker, a flaming sword"). This shift in focus reflects Surve's personal experiences and observations within the labour sphere, allowing his poetry to resonate with the hardships and successes of the working class. His poetry gains a newfound depth and emotional power, offering a compelling depiction of the challenges and aspirations of labourers who strive for dignity and justice.

“A Beginning” is a powerful expression of working-class consciousness and the personal journey of the poet. The poem addresses the daily struggle for sustenance, exemplified by the recurring theme of “bread”, which represents essential needs and survival.

The struggle for the daily bread is an everyday question
At times outside the door, at times inside

Surve metaphorically describes himself as a “worker, a flaming sword” that embodies the labour force’s power and resolve. The irony of “committing a crime” implies that the act of demanding more than subsistence is seen as rebellious by the elites.

I’m a worker, a flaming sword
Listen, you intellectuals! I’m going to commit a crime.

The poem reflects the poet’s journey through adversity and learning, and the ways they shaped his outlook and literary voice. He values the essential need for bread but also advocates for dignity, respect, and justice, represented by a “royal seal”. His poetry, depicted as flowers turned into swords, embodies both elegance and strength, with the power to incite transformation. The closing warning of a storm hints at a rising collective force and a profound change in the socio-political landscape.

It’s here that I drop flowers into the palms of my words
It’s here that I give swords into the hands of my words.
I haven’t arrived alone; the epoch’s with me
Beware; this is the beginning of the storm

Surve’s poetry centres his worker identity to provoke intellectuals to heed the changing times. The “crime” stresses his poetry’s role in empowering the working class, potentially sparking a revolution.

I’m a worker, a shining sword
Listen, you intellectuals! A crime’s about to happen.

It marks a bold beginning to a series of poems delving into the life and activism of Narayan Surve.

Surve’s ‘university’ is the pavement and the streets, which offer deep life lessons and contrast sharply with formal academia. His poem “From My University” authentically depicts slum life as an unconventional classroom. It opens with the speaker’s homelessness and kinlessness, yet celebrates the liberty to roam and find solace in places like “shop sheds” and “municipal footpaths”. Furthermore, it vividly portrays the slums with “red bulbs on the doors”, hinting

at brothels, and “noisy throngs” in the evenings, infusing the scene with a chaotic energy.

The essence of the poem is captured in the bond between the speaker and Yakoob, the horseshoer. The speaker, likely a young boy, is introduced to labour by assisting with the horseshoe box, while Yakoob’s laughter and the swapping of a *beedi* for a *jalebi* represent a friendship that softens their tough surroundings.

“Come, catch the rope... yes, pull hard...scared? Are you a
[Brahmin’s son or what?
We’re workers; hold the horse; ya, that’s good, my little
[horseshoer!”

The poem’s tone shifts to sombre as it recounts Yakoob’s death in riots, alluding to sectarian strife. The speaker’s mourning, devoid of familial bonds, highlights the deep connections made through common hardships. Joining the ‘Milad-Kalama’ funeral chant represents a unity beyond religion. The concluding verses ponder the insights gained in the “world of the unclothed”, which symbolises the poor and overlooked. These experiences, etched in memory, are cherished as profound teachings. The poem stands as an ode to the enduring human spirit and the priceless knowledge gained from life’s experiences.

“Karl Marx” is a pivotal poem in Narayan Surve’s collection, reflecting his dedication to Marxist thought. Surve uses vivid imagery and emotive language to express defiance and resistance to the dictatorial power of factory owners. The poem emphasises his firm disapproval of the widespread poverty and subjugation of workers, and his staunch commitment to Marxist ideals is clear in his depiction of the fight for freedom from exploitative socio-economic structures.

The poem opens with the narrator’s crucial experience of joining his first strike, where he adopts Marxist ideology by literally carrying the Marx banner.

Right at my first strike
I met Marx so...
At the centre of the procession
I held his banner on my shoulders.

Janaki Akka introduces Marx to the narrator as “Marcus Baba”, a term that conveys endearment and respect, and provides a brief overview of Marx’s life and work. Drawing a parallel between the narrator and Marx, particularly by noting their shared experience of having four children, humanises the philosopher and establishes a connection between his struggles and the struggles of the working class.

Janaki Akka said, "Know this chap -
This is our Marcus Baba.
He was born in Germany, wrote a sackful of books
And passed away in England.
You know, for a mendicant
All lands are the same...
Like you, he too had four kids".

As the poem progresses, Marx personified guides the narrator, addressing the roots of poverty and despair, and his enduring ideas inspire resistance to economic and social injustices.

Later: I was speaking at a meeting,
- So, what's the cause of this depression?
What's the source of poverty?
Again, Marx came up; I'll tell you, he said
And went on speaking incessantly...

The poem concludes with a rally at the gate, where the narrator proclaims workers as "the heroes of history". Marx's applauding presence validates the narrator's odyssey and poetic voice.

"Now we alone are the heroes of history
And of all the biographies to come too."

The final lines, in which Marx appreciates the narrator's poetry and mentions his own fondness for Goethe, bridge the divide between the intellectual and the worker, emphasising the universal appeal of art and the shared human experience.

"So, do you write poems or what...?
Great!
I, too, liked Goethe."

"Bigari Naka" delves into the lives of day labourers and portrays the bustling street corner of Bigari Naka as a microcosm of the labour market, where workers of various skills gather for daily jobs. Surve's narrative captures their collective struggle, resilience, and camaraderie as they face the uncertainties of urban employment. As Adarkar and Menon point out:

The mills hired labour according to need, which varied not only from day to day but at times also fluctuated on a single day within the same mill. Notionally at least, workers were hired at the mill gates each day. (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 31)

The poem begins with a diverse group of individuals, including men, women, and a child, drawn together by their common pursuit of work.

Right in the morning,
They get together
From no one knows where
At the street corner.

The labourers are depicted as rural migrants with their “dark glistening bodies”, emblematic of both their strenuous toil and enduring spirit. They await, eager for work, ready to take on tasks like “painting, masonry, or simply cleaning” to secure their daily bread.

Surve highlights the collective spirit of the workers, especially the women who find unity and comfort together. They are depicted as unsung builders of the city, their hard work unrecognised. The precariousness of their existence is emphasised by their homes on the city’s margins, often razed first for urban development, reflecting their perceived disposability by those in power.

They set up shacks
Anywhere...
Raising brick on brick
They build houses for others,
Dig holes,
Haul the muck from the deep manholes.
They live on the margins of the city,
Yet they are no citizens.
They stay for months together
Untouched, neglected...
With faith...
But, for the progress of the city,
Their shacks are demolished the first.

Indeed, as Adarkar and Menon note, the cotton mill workers, despite facing significant challenges in a city like Bombay/Mumbai, had to work tirelessly to build their lives. They highlight that

for over a century, the textile millworkers held centre stage in the history of Bombay. They were among the first migrants who came to the city, braving the arduous journey to work under extremely adverse conditions which included sickness and inhuman living arrangements. They put down roots, evolved social institutions and associations, fought great political battles, entertained and educated the city with their plays, their music and verse, and influenced its economy, politics, culture and space in innumerable ways (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 14).

The poem conveys the labourers' bewilderment at the city-dwellers' indifference, despite their vital role in the city's construction, highlighting the stark social disparity and the affluent class's lack of compassion.

Why do they act like strangers?
After doing so much for them,
Why are they so rude?

The poem ends with labourers creating makeshift homes by creeks and railways, returning to Bigari Naka daily, emphasising their ongoing marginalisation. Surve's poem is a powerful plea to recognize and value the labour force's humanity and contributions, often overlooked in urban development narratives. It underscores the critical need for solidarity and justice for workers, the unsung pillars of society's progress.

"I Don't Want Your Melancholy Nights Anymore" expresses a desire to break free from the heaviness of sadness and the repetitive routine that perpetuates it. The speaker's departure from a *mehfil*, a gathering often associated with poetry and music, stands for a rejection of the gloomy atmosphere that has affected the event.

I don't want your melancholy nights anymore
I don't want your melancholy nights anymore
Just about now I walked out of a mehfil
I felt so melancholy, I walked out...

The poem reinterprets the moon, often a serene symbol in Indian poetry, as tarnished, mirroring the speaker's disillusionment. The day's flags fluttering signify a shift from nocturnal gloom to daytime hustle, a metaphor for transitioning from despondency to activity.

Jivba, gathering funds at the gate, embodies life's relentless grind. His gritty remark, "We eat fire and shit embers", captures the working class's gritty endurance.

Jivba sat at the gate
On a bench
Collecting subscriptions
The lantern burned still...
"Hey Jivba, ... how long would you stay up man?"

The poem ends with a resolute dismissal of despondent nights, highlighting the speaker's resolve to break free from despair. It is a call for transformation and a life driven by meaning and energy, not melancholy.

Really, I don't want your melancholy nights anymore.
Truly, I don't.

"It's Getting Tough..." starkly portrays the ongoing battle to sustain hope and resilience amid life's trials. The poem narrates the challenge of self-comfort during tough times. The "howling heart" symbolises deep emotional distress, while the "grain-sack stuffed with sawdust" represents deceit and disillusionment. The repeated line "it's getting tough" underscores the growing hardship of enduring and adhering to the ethos of coexistence. Affirming one's being and integrity is depicted as a relentless struggle.

To deny one's existence; it's getting tough...
I understand and convince myself, but even after that if I
[don't fall in line...

The poem's conclusion uses the allegory of a "lit matchstick" near a warehouse to highlight the risk of catastrophe without constant vigilance. It underscores the delicate balance of life and the ongoing diligence needed to keep chaos at bay.

Surve's poem "A Measured Life..." critiques the constraints of living by others' expectations, depicting a life confined within rigid societal norms. It portrays a life where everything is calculated and restricted and where there is a lack of freedom and spontaneity. The repetition of "measured" emphasises monotony and restriction. The speaker conforms to a prescribed path, the "measured track", which leads back to a "measured home," symbolising a cycle of conformity.

A measured life; at the moment of birth...
Glowed a measured light
Spoke measured words. Whining
Walked the measured track; walked back
To the measured home; lived a measured life

The speaker challenges the notion that conformity leads to spiritual rewards, rejecting the idea of a higher plane for those who follow a measured life. The poem shows disdain for the constraints imposed by "the four measured pillars", representing societal, cultural, religious, and moral limitations.

The final line, "And, I spit on it all", is a defiant rejection of the prescribed order. It also expresses the speaker's desire for a life beyond measurements, one that is genuine and self-determined. Surve's poem questions the structures that govern our lives and encourages us to seek a more authentic existence defined by our own values and experiences.

"The Time Nehru Died..." captures the collective sense of loss and the dark mood that enveloped the city upon Nehru's death. It

describes the city's transformation, with colours shifting from grey to brown, and darkness symbolically engulfing the "ruby", which represents the life and vibrancy Nehru brought to the nation.

The tenements that sat warming their backs clamoured
The city slowly turned grey
And then brown
Then... darkness swallowed the ruby.
The mills wearing their stone-gowns
Lit their cheroots and
Drowned in their thoughts.
Later..
With wet shirts thrown across their shoulders
The workers turned towards their shacks.

The poem depicts workers returning home, their routines disrupted by Nehru's passing. A conversation between Sundri and another character shows how the news spreads, leading to a spontaneous day of mourning.

"Hey Sundri, what's happened...?"
"...Don't burn the incense today... Nehru's dead!"
"Really... then, it's an off tonight...!"
The women who comfort the weary slumped on the cot.

The poem's atmosphere is heavy with grief, and the city's desolation mirrors the speaker's emotions.

I walked on despondent... depressed
The roads seemed so desolate

The image of a man carrying a paper lantern in the darkening city streets is poignant, suggesting the need to persevere and find light in sorrow. The man's response to the speaker's question about the lantern - "Up ahead darkness would be baring its fangs!" - serves as a metaphor for the uncertain future without the leader, delivering a powerful conclusion to the poem and leaving a profound impact on the nation and its people.

Bearing a paper lantern a man pushed his handcart.
I asked,
"Why are you carrying the light now?"
"Come on sir;
Up ahead darkness would be baring its fangs!"
It was the time Nehru died...!

4 Conclusion

Narayan Surve's poetry provides a profound and intimate glimpse into the lives of Mumbai's working class. It reflects the historical development of the city through the perspective of migration and labour. His verses effectively capture the essence of Mumbai as a city where dreams and struggles coexist. It is a place that draws people from diverse backgrounds with the promise of opportunities, only to confront them with the harsh realities of urban life.

Surve's poems are not only personal stories; they represent the collective voice of marginalised individuals, labourers, and migrants who contribute to the city's foundation but remain on its fringes. Through his work, one can witness how Mumbai, often referred to as a "world-class city" (Parkash 2010, 328), is shaped by the labour of countless unnamed workers:

Mumbai is just a *mahanagari*, a metropolis that poor immigrants endure to earn a living. They may live two or three generations in slums, but home is still the village or the small town they came from. Belonging is a complex emotion for those who struggle to survive amid daily injustices. (332)

The historical context of migration in Mumbai is deeply intertwined with Surve's writing. The city, known for its cotton mills and factories, attracted waves of migrants in search of employment and a better life. Surve's characters, often migrants themselves, navigate the complexities of this new world, facing exploitation, communal tensions, and the constant threat of displacement.

However, amidst these challenges, Surve's poetry also celebrates the resilience and solidarity of the working class. His portrayal of their daily lives, hopes, and defiance serves as a testament to their indomitable spirit. The poems serve as a call to acknowledge the dignity of labour and the humanity of those who toil in obscurity. As Sarukkai argues:

Mumbai can be repulsive yet beguiling, inviting all to enter its porous skin and become an implant in its body. [...] Mumbai is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow even if it is a slum with beds rented out on twelve hour shifts. (Sarukkai 2014, 80)

In conclusion, Narayan Surve's poems provide insights into the city's character and migrant experiences. They highlight the human endurance and pursuit of justice underlying Mumbai's economic growth and architectural marvels. Surve's legacy lives on in Mumbai's streets and slums, amplifying past voices and inspiring future generations to continue the fight for equity.

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