

Critique

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Yet Another Mohenjo Daro



Ashok Rane receiving the National Award from the Honorable President of India for his Documentary Ankhi Ek Mohenjo Daro (Yet Another Mohenjo Daro, Marathi, 2020) on 8 Oct 2024 in New Delhi.

Over millennia, civilisations have taken birth, grown and prospered, then declined and passed into history. Mohenjo Daro (part of the Indus Valley civilisation) was sophisticated and scientific in its mature stage; scholars recognised its urban planning, brickwork, drainage system and city design as outstanding. Unlike some others, though (Egypt, for instance), it left behind no great architectural wonders; rather, we have recovered from small art and metallurgical works, jewellery and figurines.

For director Ashok Rane, the rise and fall of Mumbai's Girangaon (the hub of Mumbai's textile mills) is akin to Mohenjo Daro, a sad loss of the city's once spirited industrial-cultural space - a space with a personality of its own. Like Mohenjo Daro, it was

once a civilisation (a mini-mini one) which, at its dawn, beckoned people from near and far and provided them with jobs but, as time passed, became multifaceted and then moved briskly towards its own doom.

Ankhi Ek Mohenjo Daro (2022) won the 70th National Film Award for Best Biographical, Historical Reenactment and Compilation this year. Produced by Gayatri and Rajesh Pednekar and directed by Ashok Rane, it won the Best Documentary Audience Award at the Indo-German Film Week Festival in Berlin this year.

What prompted Rane to recreate a bygone era – but an era of our times, nevertheless? The reason is simple: his familiarity with it. “I have been closely

watching Girangaon as I was born and brought up there,” he says. “I know everything about this unique civilisation created by the working class. People came here from different parts of Maharashtra and the country.”

And how does he recreate this civilisation, which, for him, was “rich and vibrant”? Clearly, through an incredible amount of research and conversations with people who were associated with it. Girangaon’s demise is just four decades old today. Rane wanted to “document every aspect of life here,” to paint the larger picture as well as to get the little details right. That, he says, was his motivation.

It's a profoundly nostalgic tale of a community that gave Bombay (as it was then known) a meaning. And to do this, he has interwoven plenty of footage of a once-upon-a-time Girangaon and its residents with shots of what the place currently looks like; he has narrators describe – and even occasionally enact with great punch and fervour – what happened back then; he has interviewed scores of people across the board – scholars, activists, labourers, homemakers, vendors, sportsmen, artisans, artists, musicians, storytellers and many others to create for the viewer a picture of a central district of Mumbai, once its heartbeat.

Filmed in b/w and colour, *Ankhi Ek Mohenjo Daro* begins with a song about spinning and weaving, with labourers in the mills working on their looms and their cotton ginning machines. We see their slums and courtyards, their taps and stoves. And where all this once thrived, now stands the new Mumbai – glitzy, high-rise buildings in place of grey factories and shanties, and a man sorrowfully bidding goodbye to a place he knew and an epoch he lived in. “This decked-up Mumbai with make-up on her face is beyond recognition,” says a resident, pain and bitterness in his gaze. They hold no interest in him.

Wistfulness is persistent at all times.

We see shots of some slums and factories, houses and gullies that still remain—all old, run-down, dark, and uninhabited—and then one siren tower, which would once wake up the neighbourhood at dawn and has now fallen silent. People also appear to miss the political atmosphere of yore, the inspiring slogans and speeches of political leaders.

Rane gives the viewer a whiff of Girangaon's history: of King Bimba, who took over the seven islands that defined this district, the Portuguese, who gave the islands to the British as dowry, and how these islands were later acquired by the East India Company, which joined them to form a manufacturing hub. The first shipyard was built in 1775, the first cotton mill in 1854, and others followed quickly.

A quick recap of Girangaon's story is needed for the reader to understand and *feel* what the storytellers in the film narrate.

People – especially from the Konkan region – rushed here, first, the men looking for jobs, then their families, bringing their languages, dialects, customs and beliefs with them. The chawls were overcrowded, say those who Rane interviewed, but people were satisfied. The atmosphere was homely and congenial; families were large, caste and creed made no difference – everything seemed to glow with affection, togetherness, and helpfulness. Perhaps it was the crowded living conditions themselves which generated solidarity. Such was the response and the memory of even those who later left the slums and moved to a more prosperous life.

Is this picture too rosy, too romanticised to be true? Did other stuff happen behind the scenes, behind the togetherness of weddings and festivals, food and even illnesses? To be sure, a certain bonding happened through shared activities – games, cards, carrom, kabaddi, gyms, music, theatre, bhajan, religious gatherings, etc. But what of the financial hardships and poor living conditions (often ten to a room), the minuscule pay rise? Yes, these problems, too, dogged residents, as did violent gangs who indulged in street fights (often violent ones) with hockey sticks, cycle chains, tube lights and knives.

For all that, the mill workers never thought of moving elsewhere. They were also at the forefront of the freedom struggle, participating in the street protests in which many were injured and killed. But they hoisted the flag and chanted patriotic songs.

A tale of laughter, bickering and bonding...

Girangaon was also the driving force behind the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti—the United Maharashtra movement that advocated for a separate

Marathi-speaking state. This was the period of the rise of the Shiv Sena. There was a new atmosphere, a greater demand for jobs that had been taken by ‘outsiders’, better wages, and so on.

But the unending strike of 1982 proved to be Girangaon’s undoing. As politics entered the picture, the power play between various labour unions and political parties grew, and the workers lost out.

The world moves on, and towns and cities (or parts of them) wear a new look. In Girangaon’s downward slide (in many ways inevitable as polluting mills shut down and the economy and construction

moved on), however, Mumbai lost not just a look but a culture and a world. Little remained. Girangaon was poor; it may have had ups and downs but had grit and spirit. It faded before our eyes – or, as Rane puts it, “wiped away by the historic strike of 1982.” And that is what Ashok Rane’s narrative and images capture and document with compassion and a sense of longing.

There is no going back. Girangaon is today yet another Mohenjo Daro. At once remembered – and forgotten.

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