



# From Shared Spaces to Shared Struggles: The Political Role of Mumbai's Chawls

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## Abstract

Mumbai's chawls, first built in the late nineteenth century to house mill workers, soon became the heart of the city's political life. Their shared corridors, courtyards, and proximity to textile mills created spaces where workers not only lived but also discussed their struggles, organized unions, and planned protests. Chawls played a central role in nationalist activities, hosting meetings addressed by leaders like Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi, and became grounds for cultural initiatives such as Tilak's Ganeshotsav, which carried strong political meaning. These spaces fostered collective consciousness and gave ordinary workers the confidence to participate in larger social and political movements. Over time, chawls became the strongholds of trade union activism, labour strikes, and reform movements that defined Mumbai's working-class identity. They were central to the rise of the Mill Workers' Union, the 1982 textile strike, and also provided the setting for Ambedkarite struggles against caste discrimination. Chawls further shaped movements like the Samyukta Maharashtra campaign, where mill workers and residents were at the forefront of protests. By combining lived experiences with political action, chawls transformed from simple tenements into extraordinary centres of solidarity and resistance, leaving a lasting imprint on both Mumbai's history and India's larger political journey.

**Keywords:** Freedom struggle, labour movements, mill workers, Mumbai chawls, Nationalist activities, political mobilization

## Introduction

Chawls have been central to Mumbai's history, not only as housing for mill workers but also as spaces that shaped political life. Built during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to meet the housing needs of the growing workforce, chawls soon became more than shelters. Their shared corridors, courtyards, and close living arrangements created strong bonds among residents, which naturally extended into collective thinking and action. These communal spaces played an important role in the rise of labour movements, particularly in Girangaon, the heart of Mumbai's textile industry.

Chawls became gathering points where discussions on working conditions, wages, and rights led to organized trade union activities. They also served as bases for social reform campaigns, protests, and political mobilization, giving workers a voice in the city's changing industrial and social environment.

Mumbai (then Bombay) was one of the key urban centers of the Indian freedom movement. While elite politics unfolded in legislative chambers and urban clubs, much of the grassroots mobilization took place in working-class neighborhoods—especially the chawls of Girangaon, the city's industrial heart.



The dense living arrangements, shared spaces, and collective labor identity of chawl residents made them highly receptive to political messages and capable of rapid collective action.

By looking at chawls through this political lens, this study highlights how ordinary housing blocks turned into extraordinary centres of resistance and solidarity. They not only gave shelter to workers but also supported the development of a strong working-class identity that continues to shape Mumbai's political history. This study aims to trace their role in the rise of working-class politics, examine how chawls became centres of collective mobilization, and explore how their physical and social spaces shaped solidarity and a lasting political identity in Mumbai.

### Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach, focusing on the political contribution of chawls in Mumbai. The aim is to understand how chawls became spaces of labour struggles, trade union activities, and collective mobilization. To achieve this, both primary and secondary sources were used, combining oral narratives with historical records.

### Methods of Data Collection

The study used both primary and secondary sources to understand the political role of chawls. Primary data was gathered through interviews with chawl residents, former mill workers, and historians, which provided personal accounts of strikes, union meetings, and collective struggles. Field visits to areas like BDD chawls, BIT chawls, and Girangaon helped in observing the spaces where such activities took place. Secondary data included books, research papers, old newspapers, and government reports that documented labour movements, trade union activities, and social reform campaigns. Together, these sources offered a clear picture of how chawls became centres of political mobilization in Mumbai.

### Historical Context

The word chawl is derived from the marathi word 'चाळ', which originally referred as anklet and by extension, came to be signify corridors or galleries. The growth of chawls in the late nineteenth century

went hand in hand with the expansion of Mumbai's textile industry and the consolidation of British colonial rule. As textile mills multiplied across Girangaon, thousands of migrant workers from Maharashtra, Gujarat, and other regions flocked to the city in search of employment. To accommodate this influx, chawls were built near industrial zones such as Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, and Naigaon, creating dense working-class neighbourhoods within walking distance of the mills.

For colonial authorities, chawls represented both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, they ensured a steady supply of labour essential to the city's industrial productivity. On the other, the high concentration of workers in cramped spaces made them fertile grounds for unrest. Shared corridors and courtyards became natural meeting points where grievances about wages, working hours, and living conditions could quickly turn into collective demands. Chawls thus became important sites for strikes, protests, and nationalist demonstrations, worrying the colonial state that saw them as potential breeding grounds of resistance. By the early twentieth century, chawls were firmly linked with trade union activities, social reform initiatives, and political mobilization. They reflected the paradox of the colonial city spaces that sustained industrial growth while simultaneously nurturing the seeds of organized opposition and anti-colonial struggle.

### Chawls as Political and Social Hubs

The rapid industrialization of Mumbai in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to the establishment of numerous textile mills, which attracted a large influx of migrant workers from across India, especially from Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh. Most of these workers came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and were accommodated in cramped chawls multi-storied tenement-style buildings that offered only the most basic living conditions. Despite their poor housing and inadequate sanitation, chawls evolved into more than just shelters; they became vibrant, close-knit communities where workers shared both their hardships and their aspirations.

In the mills, labourers endured extremely harsh conditions marked by long working hours, meagre



wages, and a complete absence of social security or welfare provisions. This gradually gave rise to widespread dissatisfaction among the workforce, prompting them to form trade unions to collectively fight for fair wages, improved working conditions, and labour rights.

One of the most prominent and influential of these unions was the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), established in the late 1920s. The GKU played a pivotal role in mobilizing textile workers, leading protests, and negotiating with mill owners. Since the majority of workers lived in chawls, these spaces naturally became centres for political discussions and union meetings. Over time, chawls were transformed from mere residential quarters into hubs of political consciousness and activism, significantly shaping Mumbai's larger labour movement.

### **Role in Labour Strikes**

The 1982 Mumbai textile mill strike stands as a landmark episode in India's labour history, particularly for the city's working class. Led by Dr. Datta Samant, a charismatic and militant trade union leader, the strike mobilized over 250,000 textile mill workers from more than 50 mills across Mumbai. Lasting for over a year, from January 1982 to 1983, it sought higher wages, better working conditions, and recognition of independent unions most notably a break from the Congress-backed Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), which at the time was the officially recognized union.

At the centre of this movement were Mumbai's chawls, densely populated working-class tenements where mill workers and their families lived. These chawls became spaces of political awakening and collective resistance, where solidarity, planning, and struggle became part of daily life. The Girni Kamgar Union, along with other grassroots organizations, played a crucial role in mobilizing workers and amplifying their voices against both corporate and state opposition.

The strike left a deep imprint on Mumbai's economy, effectively bringing the once-thriving textile industry to a standstill. It also drew international attention, highlighting the precarious conditions of industrial workers in developing economies and exposing the fraught relationship

between capital, labour, and the state in postcolonial urban India. Yet, despite its scale and intensity, the strike ultimately ended in defeat. Mills began shutting down one after another, and many workers were never reinstated. This marked the decline of Mumbai's textile industry and paved the way for the city's transformation into a hub of finance, services, and real estate. For the working class, it was both a moment of heroic resistance and a profound loss, a pivotal chapter in the long and complex history of labour struggles in India.

Mr. Kiran Baliram Jadhav, a resident of Kondaji Chawl in Parel, shared a moving account of his family's struggles during the strike. His father, a mill worker, had joined the strike, leaving the household without an income. As a result, Kiran was unable to pursue his dream of studying B.Sc. Engineering due to financial constraints. Determined to continue his education, but with no means to pay his fees, his mother sold her gold jewellery so that he could carry on with his studies.

During an interview with our team, researcher Riddhi Joshi shared her insights into the 1982 strike, which is regarded as one of the largest in Asia. She emphasized that the strike was never officially called off; it simply faded away over time. She also noted how films have depicted its devastating impact on workers and their families. For example, in the Marathi film *Aga Bai Arechha!* the strike, though not the central theme, serves as a significant backdrop. Actor Dilip Prabhavalkar plays the role of the protagonist's father, a union leader who joins the strike, inspiring many others. When the mills eventually shut down, mass unemployment follows, and his character, devastated by the collapse, stops speaking altogether, symbolizing the deep emotional toll of the event. Though it vanished from the streets, the strike remained etched in the hearts and minds of those who lived through it. The closure of the mills devastated countless families, often erasing the livelihoods of generations.

### **Role of Chawls in the Indian Freedom Struggle**

Shantaram Chawl and Keshavji Naik Chawl hold significant historical importance in India's freedom struggle. Shantaram Chawl, located in Girgaon, Mumbai, was a hub for political activities during



the early 20th century. It hosted prominent leaders like Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi, who addressed large gatherings to inspire the masses. Annie Besant's All India Home Rule League meetings drew 10,000-12,000-strong crowds, and it was here that Jinnah was lustily cheered when he criticized a proposal to build a public memorial for the Governor of Bombay, Lord Willingdon.

Similarly, Keshavji Naik Chawl in Girgaon is renowned for being the site of Mumbai's first public Ganeshotsav, initiated by Lokmanya Tilak in 1893. This event was a strategic move to unite people against colonial rule through cultural celebrations. Ganpati Utsava was the symbol for an independent India.



**Shantaram Chawl**

Tilak's visit in 1901 further cemented the chawl's place in history as a symbol of collective resistance and community spirit. Both chawls exemplify how ordinary spaces became extraordinary platforms for India's fight for independence. They not only hosted influential leaders but also fostered a sense of unity and purpose among residents, leaving a lasting legacy in the annals of Indian history.

During the Quit India Movement (1942), chawl residents participated in strikes, protest marches, and acts of sabotage against colonial infrastructure. Chawls offered shelter to underground activists, and women in these communities played active roles as messengers and organizers. Recognizing the political potency of chawls, colonial authorities often kept them under close watch. Police informants infiltrated union meetings, and leaders were arrested from chawl premises. Despite repression, chawls remained difficult to control due to their tight-knit social fabric and the solidarity of their residents.

The traditions of collective action and political

mobilization nurtured in chawls during the freedom struggle carried into the post-independence era. Many union leaders, municipal politicians, and social activists of independent India emerged from chawl communities, influencing housing policy, labor law, and local governance in Mumbai.

### **Chawls as Centres of Communist, Socialist and Dalit Struggles**

Mumbai's chawls have historically functioned as vital hubs of political activism, labour struggles, and social reform. The economic hardships and working-class challenges faced by chawl residents made them particularly receptive to leftist ideologies, especially communism and socialism. At the same time, chawls played a significant role in the Dalit and Ambedkarite movements, serving as spaces for mobilization against both caste-based oppression and economic exploitation.

With a large proportion of residents employed in textile mills and factories, issues such as low wages, unsafe working conditions, and lack of job security generated deep dissatisfaction making chawls fertile ground for socialist and communist movements. The Communist Party of India (CPI) gained considerable influence, particularly in neighbourhoods like Girangaon, which housed thousands of textile mill workers. Prominent leaders such as S.A. Dange and Dr. Datta Samant used chawls as key platforms for organizing strikes, protests, and trade union activities. The historic 1982 textile mill strike, led by Samant, saw over 250,000 workers many of whom lived in chawls-participate, effectively disrupting Mumbai's industrial sector and drawing global attention to the struggles of the working class. Organizations like the Girni Kamgar Union (Mill Workers' Union) played a pivotal role in advocating for better wages and improved working conditions, turning chawls into centres of political consciousness and working-class resistance.

Simultaneously, chawls were crucial in the Dalit and Ambedkarite movements. Many Dalit workers who migrated to Mumbai for jobs faced not only economic struggles but also social exclusion. Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emphasis on education, self-respect, and political empowerment, chawl residents actively participated in Ambedkar's movements,



including the fight for reservations, equal rights, and the historic mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 at the Nagpur Diksha Bhumi. Dalit organizations held meetings and awareness programs in chawls, educating residents about constitutional rights and resistance against systemic oppression.

A significant part of Ambedkar's early life and activism was rooted in Mumbai's chawls. From 1912 to 1934, he resided in BIT Chawl Number 1 in Parel, one of six chawls with 80 rooms. Room 51 was his home, where he lived with his wife, Ramabai, while Room 50 served as his study. It was here that Ambedkar formulated his thoughts on social justice, caste discrimination, and economic equality, which later became the foundation of his political and legal work.

### **Samyukta Maharashtra Movement and involvement of Chawls**

The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement of the 1950s was a significant political campaign that demanded the creation of a separate Maharashtra state with Mumbai as its capital. Rooted in linguistic and regional identity struggles, the movement gained widespread support from workers, intellectuals, and political leaders. Chawl residents, particularly Marathi-speaking mill workers and labourers, were among its most active participants, playing a vital role in organizing protests and mobilizing mass support.

Chawls became centre of political mobilization, hosting discussions, meetings, and strategy sessions. Political leaders, including Prabodhankar Thackeray, a senior leader of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, frequently visited chawls to rally support. Chawl dwellers participated in strikes, marches, and demonstrations, reinforcing their role as the backbone of the movement. A defining moment came in 1956, when mass protests saw textile mill workers and chawl residents leading demonstrations. On January 16, 1956, police fired on protestors, killing 106 martyrs, many of whom were from chawl communities. This tragedy further fueled the movement, intensifying demands for statehood.

The relentless participation of chawl residents strengthened the movement, ultimately leading to Maharashtra's formation on May 1, 1960, with

Mumbai as its capital. Their role in the agitation showcased the power of grassroots activism, and even today, chawls remain a symbol of Mumbai's political and social struggles.

### **Conclusion**

Originally constructed as utilitarian housing for Mumbai's mill workers in the late 19th century, chawls gradually developed into far more than mere tenements. Their shared corridors, courtyards, and collective living arrangements fostered a sense of solidarity that soon translated into political awareness and activism. These spaces became laboratories of resistance shaping labour struggles, social reform campaigns, and regional as well as national movements. Chawls provided the stage for critical moments in India's political history. They hosted nationalist meetings addressed by figures such as Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi, became organizing grounds for unions like the Girni Kamgar Union, and played a decisive role in events such as the 1982 textile strike. Equally significant was their contribution to Ambedkarite politics, where chawls nurtured campaigns for caste equality and social justice, and to the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, in which chawl residents were at the forefront of agitations that ultimately secured statehood for Maharashtra with Mumbai as its capital. Chawls were more than industrial housing; they were living political institutions that played a decisive role in the Indian freedom struggle. Their contribution lay in their ability to combine everyday social solidarity with organized political action. The physical and social structures of chawls allowed nationalist ideas to be disseminated rapidly and gave workers the organizational strength to challenge colonial power. Preserving the historical memory of chawl politics is essential to understanding Mumbai's role in India's liberation. Thus, chawls must be understood not only as an architectural response to industrialization but as catalysts of political mobilization and social change. Even though many are now under threat of demolition or redevelopment, their historical legacy as crucibles of working class identity, resistance, and collective action continues to resonate in Mumbai's political culture.

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