

Diwali brings cheer to Mumbai textile mill workers

Exactly 25 years after the 12-month mill workers' strike dealt a fatal blow to the historic textile industry in Mumbai, a few thousand surviving workers and their families will have reason to smile this Diwali.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh will lay the foundation stone Wednesday to construct 24-storeyed buildings to house 5,588 mill workers on a three-acre plot that belongs to the New Hind Mills Complex in Mazagaon, south Mumbai.

Each mill worker -- based on eligibility criteria to be decided by the state government -- will get a 225-sq ft tenement, according to Nationalist Congress Party legislator Sachin Ahir, who is also president of Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) and chairman of [Mumbai](#) Repair and Reconstruction Board.

The tentative cost of building each flat is estimated at Rs.360,000. The new owners will pay in monthly instalments.

Ahir explained that since this is a special initiative by the state government independent of any existing official scheme, the mill workers would only have to pay the construction cost.

'Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Board will bear the land cost and appoint the builders,' Ahir told IANS.

The textile strike, led by the late union leader Datta Samant, hit a majority of the 62 mills occupying nearly 200 acres of land, worth an estimated Rs.200 billion.

At that time the textile industry employed about 250,000 people.

Apart from spelling doom for the industry, famous for over two centuries and having persons like Dhirubhai Ambani associated with it, the strike proved to be disastrous for workers and their families.

Unable to withstand the pressure, within months many of them returned to their native villages or did odd jobs to merely survive in Mumbai. Many perished.

When the strike fizzled out after a year, less than 100,000 mill workers were left in the city.

Dada Samant, president of Kamgar Aghadi and brother of slain Datta Samant, said that his union and the Sangharsha Samiti along with the RMMS pursued the matter of providing housing to the surviving mill workers for more than two years.

'Finally, it has borne fruit and we fully support this move. But we want all the textile workers to get homes as soon as possible as per the assurance given by the government. It is time consuming but the process is on,' Samant told IANS.

The new scheme will be applicable to the eight mills owned by National Textile Corp (NTC), which have been shut down and their properties sold.

Of the 26 NTC mills, eight more are awaiting buyers. 'With a few private and NTC mills, today there are barely 15,000 mill workers left in Mumbai. We have realised that the textile mill industry in Mumbai will not last too long, so we have to make the best of what we can get for the poor workers,' said Samant.

Though bound by many regulations, several mill owners sold their prime properties to builders, both making astronomical profits in the process. Although workers' unions cried foul every time, they could not achieve much -- given the involvement of various factors, ranging from politics to the underworld.

The proposed towers, two to begin with in this pilot project, shall be ready for occupancy within two years. The project will cost Rs.600 million.

The flats will have granite flooring, granite kitchen slabs, option of common or separate bath and toilet and a storage loft.

Quaid Najmi (© IANS / India eNews)