

## Matunga Labour Camp History



### TRUE FOLLOWER OF AMBEDKARISM

The story of Bhagwat Jadhav is the story of the Matunga Labour Camp itself. His family was one of the earliest folks to have settled down in the camp; and, his nostalgic reminiscences and fond memories would take any listener back in time in an instant. The Labor Camp is where he spent his childhood after he moved from his hometown Nasik at the age of four. He continues to live here with his wife Janabai. The Matunga Labour Camp is like any other government colony. Most residents who moved here from their native villages hail from districts such as Nasik, Satara and Nagar. Initially, the Labour Camp was strictly a colony which housed only the migrant working class; where mostly people were employed either in the Railways or in several textile mills scattered all over Mumbai.

Jhadav who used to work at the Worli Milk Factory as a class four employee, spoke of the past with much affection. "The rent used to be 50 Paise when we moved to the camp. Thereafter, it was increased to Rs.5 and today the rent is Rs.48. At that time, the Pathan used to collect the rent and later the BMC appointed a rent collector called Gomes. They used to come late at night and we used to hide in other rooms where the rent collector could not find us", he said.

Another one of Jadhav's early memories is of the *Ambedkar Chowk*- a place where domestic conflicts used to be discussed amongst the entire community- and a united solution was meted out by the elderly and experienced individuals. "On most occasions", Jhadav said, "It was the woman of the house who used to take the matter to the *chowk*, where her husband was confronted by others and had to oblige the public decision". However, the *Ambedkar Chowk* today is an abandoned spot where only Ambedkar's statue is planted and the space serves no communal function like it used to earlier. Jhadav lamented that in the present times, all the matters in the camp are supervised by the police, and he feels that there is no need of any police to solve the problems of the community.

There are four public schools in Matunga Labour Camp out of which, only one is open now. Jhadav along with others started a "*Balwadi*" or a pre-nursery school where a minimal fee of Rs.2 was charged so as to pay for Chalk, Blackboard and other such facilities. "Often, we used to distribute chocolates to the children in the community so that they would come and study at the *Balwadi*", said Jhadav. During the early days, most of the children in the camp could not afford the luxury of

education and saw it as a waste of time. Most of them simply wanted to look for a job either in the Railways or the Mill.

However, the situation is drastically different today as the education system has become more and more commercialized- and most students are enrolled in coaching classes which require huge amounts of money- as parents don't have enough time to look after their children's education.

The change in the Labour Camp is not only occurring at a social level, but also on a purely tangible and geographical level. In 1950, Jhadav along with his family moved to a ground-floor *chawl* constructed by the BMC; which built five buildings in all called 'ABCDE'. In 1960, another five were added and finally in 1963, ten more buildings were built.

Meanwhile, the political situation in the camp is primarily dominated by the Dalit Movement. People are united against injustice in the name of Babasaheb Ambedkar and share a strong sense of community and brotherhood.

The organization of the Dalit community in the Matunga Labor Camp is centered around Ambedkar and his ideas. The *Ambedkar Jayanti* is celebrated with much gusto in the camp and is a week-long affair. In the past, each household used to donate up to Rs.2 for the celebrations where artists from all disciplines used to sing, act and perform for the entire community. The Dalit Movement was in its full vigor during the lifetime of Ambedkar. After his death, it was under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaekwad, but it became fractured and fragmented, and consequently led to the formation of the Dalit Panther Movement in 1977.

Moreover, the *Sayunkta Maharashtra Movement* which was started in 1957 as an anti-inflation movement also managed to influence the Dalit community who supported the movement completely. It was the coming together of two strong ideologies that influenced both communities mutually and inspired many artists such as Annabhu Sathey, Ahilya Ranganekar and Balraj Sahni.

Jhadav's father was the ward president of the Schedule Caste Federation, which was a party started by Ambedkar in 1930. Before every public meeting, the shahir i.e. the poet used to sing the *ambedkari jalsa* which is a ballad composed in the praise of Ambedkar.

"The Matunga Labor Camp and Dharavi have grown up together, like *bada bhai* and *chhota bhai*," said Jhadav. There is a certain amount of reciprocity which the two share; but there are major differences in their respective ideologies as well. Whenever the question is raised about redevelopment, the camp has always supported the people of Dharavi who have reciprocated by participating in the *Ambedkar Jayanti* celebrations and lending support on any other cause as well. Moreover, the Labour Camp regularly celebrates the *Periyar Ramaswamy Jayanti*, which is a significant festival for the Dravidian community in Dharavi. However, Jhadav is quick to point out that the relationship is far from being smooth and there are certain points of disagreement between the two as well. For instance, "The leather community in Dharavi called '*Charmkar*' do not interact with the Dalit community in the camp as they nurture a sense of superiority", said Jhadav.

The change in the Labour Camp has now become constant. Most of the families are moving out of the camp to live in various suburbs in the city such as Badalpur and

Virar. Many have sold their houses as joint families are rapidly breaking up and children moving out. Moreover, the camp is also changing in terms of its demographic composition as it is becoming more cosmopolitan and is no longer a place solely for the Dalit community of Mumbai.

Posted by [Ajit Abhimeshi](#) at [12:57 AM](#)