

Politics of the Everyday: Sudhir Patwardhan

A self-taught artist and radiologist, Sudhir Patwardhan (b.1949) began to paint professionally when he moved to Bombay from his hometown Pune in the mid-1970s. The cosmopolitan city, its suburbs and neighbouring areas offered him new opportunities, as he began to participate in its emerging leftist subculture. His paintings frequently reflect his politics, his affinity with the working classes and his aspirations of being 'a painter of the people'.

Patwardhan conflates multiple moments of a narrative onto a singular canvas, representing life in the city. We see this, for instance, in *Accident on May Day* (1981), which depicts a crowded train platform with passersby carrying an injured man on a stretcher. Building off principles of realism, he represents his subjects and surroundings in an accessible manner. With *Street Play* (1981), Patwardhan offers perspectives on mill workers' struggles in the city in the early 1980s. Here he divides his composition into three parts bringing together disjointed segments of an urban panorama. We see a shadowed textile mill on the left, with a group of seemingly overburdened workers exiting the building. A car, possibly belonging to the mill owner, is split by a pillar, uniting the left and centre panels. Behind the pillar, we see a figure who bears resemblance to the artist watching a street performance by a leftist theatre group in central Bombay. The performance, likely focusing on social injustice, is seen by oppressed workers, upper-class citizens of the city as well as other passersby. Patwardhan continues the narrative through a reflection of the scene in a glass storefront in the right panel. Through this image, Patwardhan, who we see as a participant or observer, equates his own artistic practice with the role of the street performers, speaking up against the exploitation of textile labourers in the city's mills, foreshadowing the historic 1982 strikes.

Concerned with the interplay of intimacy and distance, Patwardhan chooses the style of narrative figuration to convey his messages. His works not only portray the masses, addressing local issues of social mobility, poverty, and urbanisation, but are also legible across class and educational divides.

The 1982 strike referred to in this video involved approximately 250,000 workers from 65 textile mills in Bombay. They demanded increased wages and bonus payments in light of their poor living and working conditions. This event resulted in the booming textile industry in the city disappearing, as over 80 mills in the city closed down, resulting in more than 150,000 workers being left without employment. Sudhir Patwardhan (b.1949) has frequently reflected on this aspect of the city's socio-political history by representing textile mills, workers, their families as well as living and working conditions to explore broader themes of urbanisation, labour and social change.

In 1995, the name of the city was officially changed from Bombay to Mumbai, as it is known today. Since this video discusses a time period before the official name change, we refer to the city as Bombay here.

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