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THE STORY OF INDU 2 AND 3

The weaving shed of India United Mills no 2-3 at Bycull, where a museum on the textile history of Mumbai and Maharshtra is set to open next year. PIC/SHEKHAR KRISHNAN

As two of the India United Mills get set to re-open as a 15-acre museum, a historian traces the memories that Bombay lost when the shutters came down »P18

BY SHEKHAR KRISHNAN

Back from the dust

In its new avatar as a museum, India United Mills nos. 2-3 will reconnect the city with its vanishing industrial heritage

SHEKHAR KRISHNAN
smdmail@mid-day.com

The India United Mills no. 2 and 3 were handed over to the BMC in 2009; (left) ED Sassoon building today is called NTC House. It was the head office of ED Sassoon Sons from 1926 to 1944, of Indu Fabrics from 1944 to 1974. Since 1974, it's been the headquarters of NTC (Maharashtra)

IN the past 20 years, as most of Mumbai's 60 cotton textile mills have closed or redeveloped, a vast heritage that was always invisible to the public has almost entirely disappeared from the city.

Hidden from view behind massive compound walls — until the coming of flyovers and high-rises in the 2000s — the mills of mid-town Mumbai were some of the first factories of the global Industrial Revolution, when Bombay was known as the "Manchester of the East". While most of these enormous compounds have since gentrified into the offices, malls, banks and towers of a new global economy, a handful of Mumbai's most historic mills remain managed by the Centre-owned National Textile Corporation (NTC).

The erstwhile India United Mills nos. 2-3 in Kalachowky are now being planned by the municipal corporation as the city's newest and largest museum. Devoted to the history of textiles and industry, the restored mill compound is due to open in phases beginning next year. This will give most citizens of Mumbai their first view past the gates of one of the city's earliest cotton mills — and into the rich industrial heritage earlier only visible to the workers, staff and owners who built India's first modern industry in Mumbai.

From Manchester to Byculla

Exactly 150 years old, the site of the planned museum was once known as the "Chinchpoogly Oil Mills", a workshop for pressing vegetable oils. Even as owners and names changed, this lent it the name by which it remained known to mill workers and locals for over a century — Telachi Giran (oil mill). Originally located near the suburban bungalow of Parsi merchant Nusserwanji Tata (1822-1886) in Byculla, it caught the eye of Tata's enterprising son Jamshedji (1839-1904), recently returned from a trip to England to study the new technology of spinning and weaving cotton with steam power.

ED Sassoon was the city's largest private employer, with over 30,000 workers, managers and staff in their textile and woollen mills, dye works, offices and shops in Bombay City, supplying military and civilian demand. At their peak, their 15 mills produced over 26,40,000 yards or 1,500 miles of cloth per day

With help from his father and a Bohra Muslim merchant Sheikh Adam, whom he had met during a visit to Manchester, Jamshedji Tata bought and expanded the site, stocking it with imported machinery. In 1869, he inaugurated his first mill, named for wife of the British King-Emperor Edward VII, the new Princess of Wales, as the "Alexandra Spinning & Weaving Mills".

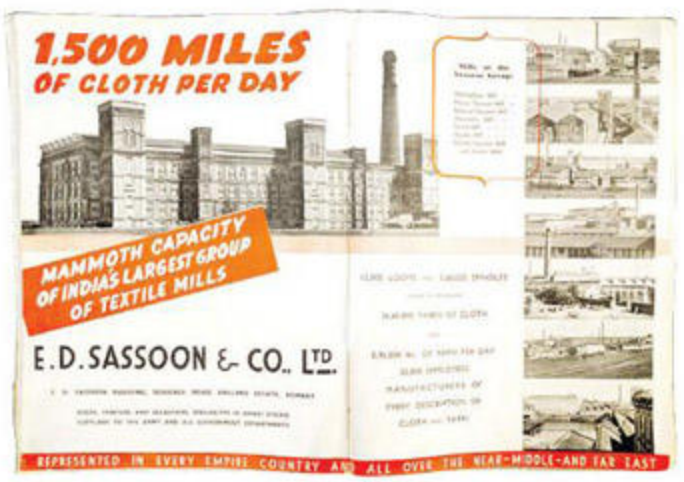
In less than three years, JN Tata sold the site, buildings and machinery for a healthy profit to a Bhatia Jain builder and speculator, Keshowji Naik, who was then busy erecting a factory on a neighbouring site in Kalachowky, which he called the "Kaiser-i-Hind Mills" after the King-Emperor. But while he copied Tata's penchant for bold ventures named for royalty, Naik's stint in the mill industry was short-lived. He went bankrupt in 1875, falsified his accounts to his co-promoters, and was tried and convicted for fraud in 1878.

The Sassoons and the Tatas

The winning bidder in the insolvency court auction in 1879 for the shuttered Alexandra Mills was Elias David "ED" Sassoon (1820-1880), the son of the Jewish banker and merchant David Sassoon (1792-1864). The wealthy Sassoon family had fled Ottoman Baghdad in the 1850s, spreading across the emerging port cities of the East India Company in India and China, in search of new business being opened by British shipping, telegraph and railway networks.

ED Sassoon inherited and built on his father's far-flung business, much like Nusserwanji Tata, a fellow migrant entrepreneur and trader who had settled in Bombay in the same period when trade in opium, tea and cotton was eclipsed by industrialisation. Also like Tata, who sent Jamshedji abroad, ED sent his two sons, Sir Jacob Sassoon (1844-1916) and Sir Albert Sassoon (1853-1924), to China and England to learn the family business. He died in Colombo in 1880, a few months before the refurbished and expanded mill started by JN Tata was re-opened by his sons, now styled the "Alexandra and ED Sassoon Spinning and Weaving Mills".

Sir Jacob's elder brother Sir Albert — who had built the Sassoon Docks in Colaba, and sold them to the newly-formed Bombay Port Trust — moved to England in the 1890s, leaving Sir Jacob in charge in Bombay. By the turn of the century, with over a hundred mills whose combined capacity and output exceeded all other mills in the rest of British India, Bombay was Asia's "Cottonpolis" and ED Sassoon Sons its leading industrialists. Reputed for their advanced technology and production processes, ED Sassoon grew into India's single largest textile group, with agents across India,



Advertisement from the Indian Textile Journal 1940 Souvenir Edition

Asia, the Middle East and British Empire.

After constructing an advanced chemical and mineral plant, the Turkey Red Dye Works on the waterfront at Dadar in 1890 (India United no. 6), Sir Jacob built his eponymous flagship Jacob Mills (no. 1), which opened in Lalbaug in 1893. Rachel Mills (no. 4), named for his wife, launched in 1895. In the 1900s, he bought over and launched the Edward and Meyer Sassoon Mills in Lower Parel, named for his cousins. But Sir Jacob, who had transformed his father's trading firm into an industrial giant, had no children to inherit his intricately managed business and philanthropies in India.

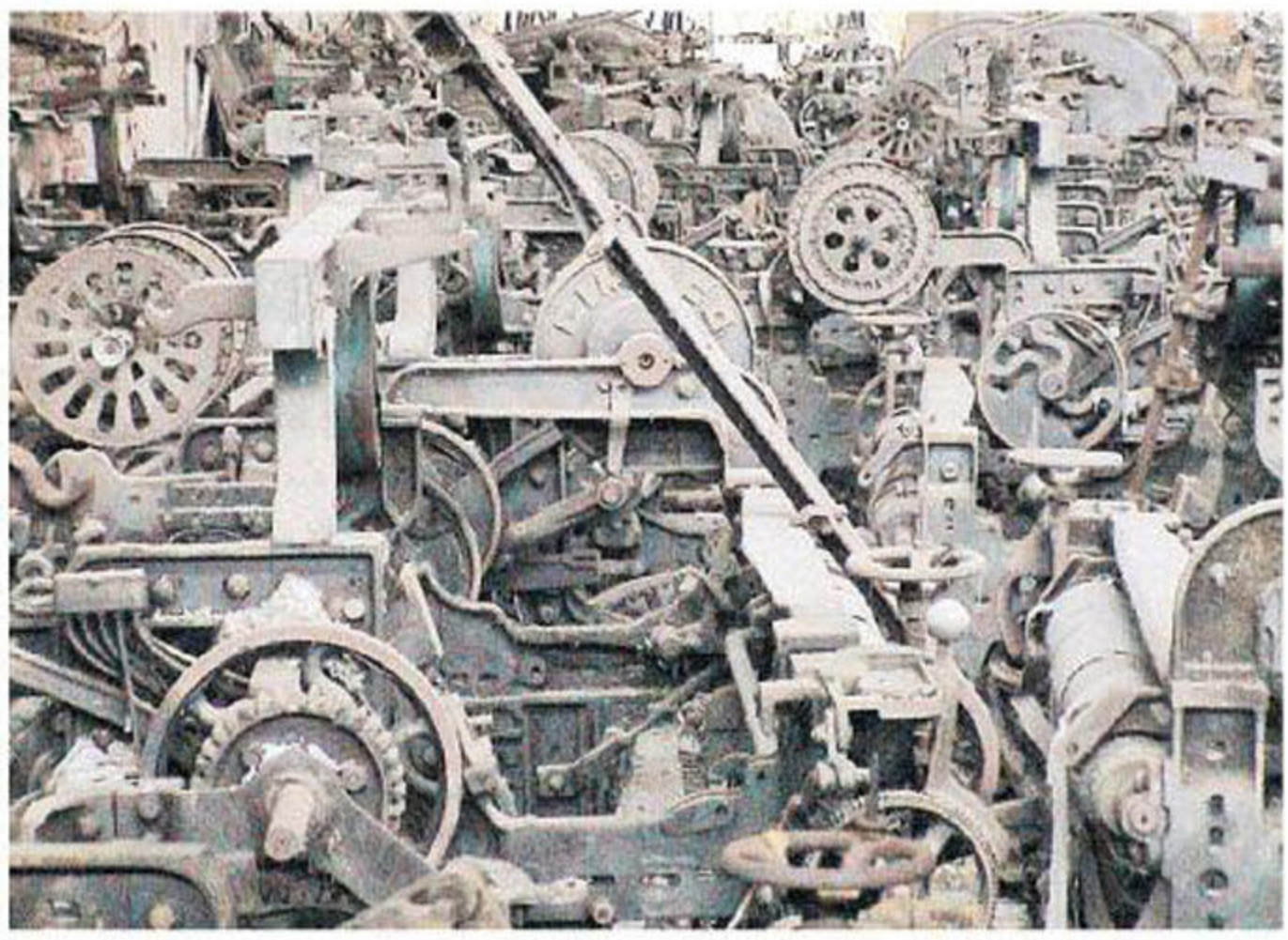
India's largest textile group

Injured as a pilot during World War I, Sir Victor Sassoon (1881-1961), an aviation enthusiast and real estate baron who managed the family firm in Shanghai, was persuaded by his dying uncle to take the reins. Restless and ambitious, by the mid-1920s Sir Victor had rationalised the firm's management, modernised and expanded plant and machinery, and fully electrified the family mills from steam drive to electric traction.

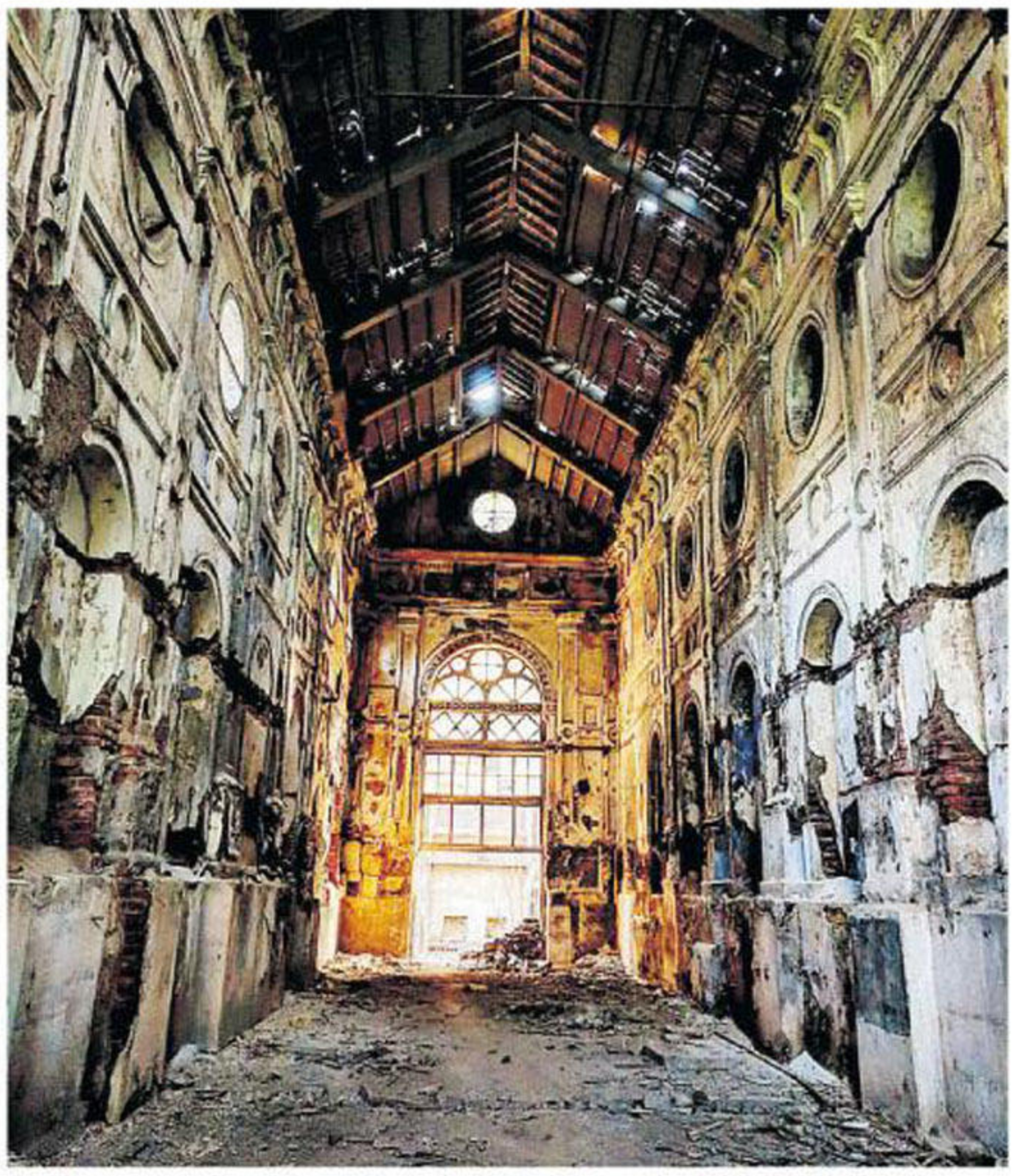
In 1926, from his new head office designed by renowned British architect George Wittet at the Port Trust's new Ballard Estate, ED Sassoon Building (today NTC House), Sir Victor took the firm public, 60 years after his family had migrated to Bombay. As the fashion for royal titles and foreign names waned between the wars, Sir Victor centralised the six original mills named after his uncles, aunts and cousins and renamed them the "United Mills".

While the worldwide Great Depression in 1929-30 drove his biggest competitors to bankruptcy — ED Sassoon & Co. led by Sir Victor took over or bought out ten additional mills in Bombay City, including the Elphinstone, David, Apollo Mills, Manchester (India United no.5), and the India Woollen Mills.

As World War II raged across the Middle East and Asia, ED Sassoon was the city's largest private employer, with over 30,000 workers, managers and staff in their textile and woollen mills, dye works, offices and shops in Bombay City supplying military and civilian demand. At their peak, their 15 mills produced over 26, 40,000 yards or 1,500 miles of cloth per day.



Spinning machinery from NTC India United Mills no. 1 in Lalbaug.
PIC/DR SHEKHAR KRISHNAN, 2001



First weaving department shed of the Alexandra Mills (India United no. 2) built in the 1870s by JN Tata and ED Sassoon

Recouping his losses in luxury hotels and real estate in Shanghai — which he had just lost to the Japanese Army invading China — Sir Victor finally sold off the family business at the end of WWII, and lived his final years in the Bahamas. He once said that "I gave up on India, and China gave up on me". In 1945, Messrs Aggarwal & Co., Indu Fabrics, a firm of Marwari merchants, bought and again renamed the company, as India United, or "Indu" Mills.

From mill to museum

While run profitably until the 1960s, the group of mills were nationalised by the National Textile Corporation (NTC) in 1974, and over the past decade wound down. In a plan first proposed in 2009 — when NTC gave the India United Mills 2-3 to the city as a reserved public space — the Municipal Corporation will open the 15-acre compound to the public in 2019, a century and a half after its launch as one of the city's first mills.

The museum is planned with exhibits on the history and future of textiles in Mumbai, Maharashtra and India, from handlooms to mills to modern powerlooms. Sadly, NTC still has no clear plans for its 12 remaining mill compounds in space-starved Mumbai, including three other Sassoon-Indu mills.

The group's flagship mill, known as Jacob Sassoon or India United Mills no. 1 (pictured in a 1940 advertisement) was once the city's largest factory. Today, it is crumbling in full view of the Lalbaug Flyover, a silent monument to an earlier stage of technology which connected the city with the global economy, and laid the foundations India's industrialisation by the Tatas and Sassoons. The new museum in their first mill is an opportunity for citizens to reclaim this lost industrial heritage, without which Mumbai's famed entrepreneurship and cosmopolitanism would be hard to imagine.

BUT, while Keshowji Naik copied Tata's penchant for bold ventures named for royalty, Naik's stint in the mill industry was short-lived. He went bankrupt in 1875, falsified his accounts to his co-promoters, and was tried and convicted for fraud in 1878

Dr Shekhar Krishnan is a historian and social scientist who works with the Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation Estates Department. You can follow him on Instagram and Twitter @bombayologist