

# Beyond The Rubble

## The Awami Idara's Fight Against Urban Erasure

### Summary

*This documentary film takes a look at the Awami Idara - a 72-year-old communist library located in a working-class Muslim neighbourhood in Mumbai - and the distinct changes it has undergone in response to the sharpening rise of a neo-liberal urbanisation agenda.*

### Proposal

*In the Awami Idara's visitors' book, writer-film director Khwaja Ahmed Abbas remarked on 1st May, 1975: "The Idara will go higher than the soaring Qutub Minar".*

Formed in 1952 by a group of cotton mill workers living in central Mumbai, and supported by the Soviet Union, the Idara quickly became an important cultural and political hub for the men and women in the neighbourhood. After finishing their day shifts, the labourers would retire to the Idara to read, listen to speeches and watch free plays by the Indian People's Theatre Association.

However, over the past few decades, the library has evolved in tune with the demands of the times. The Idara today expands on traditional expectations of a library, also serving as a community centre - one that conducts sewing lessons for young girls, sets up TB camps, gives out free eye-wear and helps setup Aadhar IDs.

What is the relationship that the families of the neighbourhood share with the centre now? What does it mean for a library, an archive, to transform literary and cultural traditions of the past to hold social relevance in today's political climate? How does a working class community with minimal resources build a bottoms-up knowledge centre? And how does their praxis evolve over time to respond to rapid urbanisation and the newer crises it imports to their lives and routines?

When one goes to the Awami Idara today, they will find it surrounded by rubble on all 4 sides. In the name of "development", the BMC has razed the surrounding buildings to the ground, with plans of building sky-high builder apartments. In fact, the BMC had tried to seize the land that the Idara was built on too - the only reason they failed was because the community took the matter to the high court and they ruled in favour of the Idara just 4 months ago.

To some, the Awami Idara today sits seemingly forgotten - an old building of dusty books visited by retired workers - but this film intends to explore how the Idara represents a **collective (and inspired) response** to the retreat of state welfare mechanisms and the rise of hyper-urbanisation. Khwaja Abbas might have been right all along - and the film hopes to conclude that the Idara, while never having reached the soaring heights of the Qutub, still managed to cast a wider shadow from where it stood.

**The central questions that the documentary shall explore are the following: Who is it that ultimately manages (and profits most from) this urban "redevelopment"? Why is the logic of urbanisation not able to appreciate and preserve rich historical legacies that are left behind in the pockets of our cities? And what exactly are we losing as we raise old buildings to the ground so unthinkingly? These are some of the questions that my documentary aims to explore.**