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SANITATION AND CREATIVITY THE CASE OF THE DINDOSHI SLUM'S FAMILIES

Mahua RAY CHAUDHURI

The Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centre (SPARC) is a registered non-profit society (NGO) based in Bombay, which began work in 1984 with communities to improve their homes, neighbourhoods and employment opportunities. Its name derives from one of its founding objectives, "Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centre" that serve the needs and priorities of local inhabitants.

SPARC works towards fulfilling four basic objectives :

- to support organisation of the poor both by creating and strengthening community-based organisation, to look to their rights, with and for them;
- to undertake training to strengthen the collective leadership capacities of organisations of urban poor;
- to ensure that women have equal rights to participate in decision making;
- to create an information base, through participatory research on the poor and their problems, so that it can become the basis for dialogue, planning and action for change.

Working with pavement dwellers in Bombay

Pavement dwelling is probably as old as cities themselves. Bombay has around 1,5 million pavement dwellers who literally stay on the pavements, erecting small temporary shelders. Most of

these people come from rural areas, where driven out by hunger and poverty, they leave for the big city with dreams in their eyes. Dreams do not take long however, to turn to dust, as they hover on the borderline of survival. They take to staying on the pavements as a temporary measure and they end up spending their whole life there.

SPARC's first interaction with these communities was through Mahila Milan (Women Together), a women pavement dwellers organisation of Central Bombay, which whom we are working closely since 1985. This first contact led to the census of pavement dwellers. Through a process of debates and discussions, possible solutions emerged. This process has created a battery of trainers who impart training to other communities. For instance, an early problem identified was the lack of ration cards. Women of one of these communities learned how to obtain them and demonstrated to the others what to do. SPARC's role has been to clarify Government's regulation, supporting women to identify a successful strategy and giving them confidence to carry it out.

Saving and credit

Saving and credit are an important element of development efforts. Poor communities have a never-ending requirement for crisis credit : medical and health related, for travel to get employment, to start a business, to pay a fine or even to buy the day's vegetables. Looking around for sources to borrow money, they invariably fall into the evil hands of the money lender. While Mahila Milan was exploring options for shelter, women worked out, among other things, how much money they would need to put aside for the payment of a loan. Since ongoing crisis always ate into their savings, they decided to start a crisis credit scheme. They started collecting 1-2 Roupies (3-4 US Cents) which gradually turned into a fund, from which an individual could borrow money when in

crisis. Since the women were illiterate, they used different colored slips for counting (1Rs=pink...etc.), so that the collection could be registered, with the help of SPARC representatives. Gradually, a loan committee was formed which decided, among other things, on the rules and regulations. Mahila Milan has trained women in other Indian cities to initiate such saving programmes. This has given them the confidence to handle external credits more knowledgably and efficiently. Women have been encouraged to have bank saving accounts for their housing.

Housing is critical for the urban poor and an urban address is the basis of asset accumulation for those living in the city. For over 20 years the pavement dwellers invest in the equivalent of a mortgage on a small apartment, by repairing their shelders. At the end of this period, they are unable to obtain a credit and are left with nothing more than what they started with. The idea of saving exclusively for housing works is based on the principle that communities should create elasticity in their monthly expenditure to put aside a sum of money. Initially, this served the purpose of down payment for loans they might take. By putting this house savings in the bank, it served the purpose of developing linkage with a large number of banks who now consider the alliance to be an important client, to whom they might consider lending money for house construction.

SPARC, along with its partners, has created 5 housing cooperatives with loan finance being provided through formal housing finance institutions. The alliance has identified minimum requirement essential for developing a solution for shelters. People will build houses financed by saving and loan capital. Loan capital pays for building material and skilled workers. Anyone earning less than the minimum wage can work on the site, thereby receiving income and upgrading skills.

The initiatives of women in Dindoshi : the case of sanitation

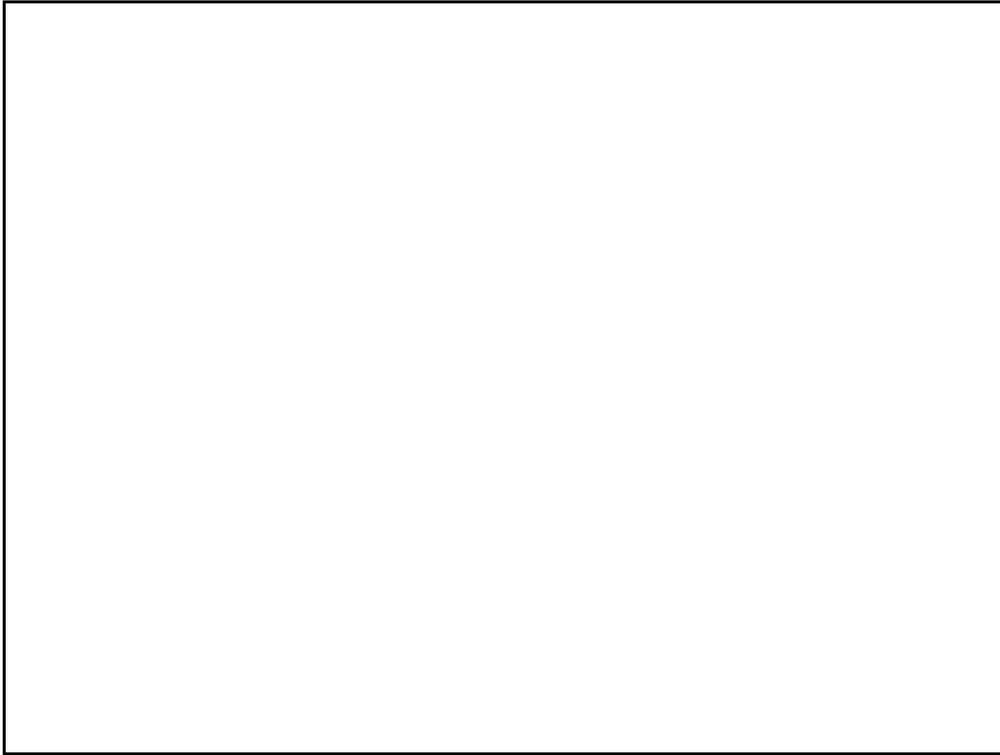
Dindoshi is a Bombay Municipal Corporation resettlement colony. In 1986, people squatting a BMC land all over Bombay, were brought into Dindoshi which seemed as it was : the middle of nowhere. Plots were marked out on open land and allotted to families. There was no electricity, no pathways, no drains, though water taps and toilets were being provided on an adhoc basis. Mahila Milan created a women's collective and explored options for better living conditions. Mahila Milan has, since, grown stronger and has negotiated with city authorities for provision of basic amenities (and obtained them in some cases). Today Dindoshi continues to grow and will slowly merge with other informal settlements surrounding it. However, as it grows, a lot of problems remain unsolved and new problems crop up. One nagging problem remains the toilets : the toilet blocks are surrounded by garbage over which there hovers a cloud of flies and rats. Septic tanks overflow and ventilation pipes are broken.

A survey conducted by SPARC gives some quantitative data about the real condition : with 4038 dwellings, there are an estimated 30,119 individuals. 36 toilet blocks with a total of 362 seats have been provided by the BMC, which means 83 person/seat. This is even higher, if one takes into consideration that some toilets are completely unusable; the real situation varies between 170 and 222 person/seat, depending on the sector. BMC has a service of 24 people for cleaning and maintaining the 36 toilet blocks; they are efficient workers but the perception of the problem by the women is that there are "too many people who use the toilets and nobody responsible for what happens".

Facing these problems, some of the Mahila Milan women thought of a very simple solution : forming toilet committees who assume full responsibility for the management of it and on the other hand

restrict number of users (on an average of 3-4 women/family for a single toilet), by locking the doors. There are now 45-60 people for each seat who are responsible for any damage to their asset. Along the same lines, some families collect 10-15 Roupies in order to clean, repair and lock the toilets, providing acid water and some extra money when some deep clearing is required.

Thus there is a strict control by the women, it guarantees regular cleaning and maintainance of the assets and buildings. Moreover, lockable full length doors have been put up by the community, assuring security and privacy. For works of exceptional maintenance, BMC personnel are put under pressure from toilet committees. Moreover, new toilets are being locked, new committees are formed and new toilets for construction are identified in collaboration with the rest of the community. The women keep continuous contact with the administrators to contribute to the construction of toilets and take charge of the future.



Keeping in mind that a lot of basic design related problems are impossible to overcome, the hygienic standard of the community is now much higher than average. There have been tangible changes, changes for everyone to see and appreciate. Women have taken a first step towards solving the problem. They have demonstrated that their idea of community management of toilets is viable and sustainable.

But to be sustainable on the long term, every actor has to play his role. These women do not want to substitute the municipality but to take part in the process by contributing whatever is in their reach. On the other hand, administration have shown evidence of realising that a flexible attitude ought to be adopted towards people's solutions.

Women and the local government

Women in Dindoshi have managed to build a direct channel of communication with the officials in charge of sanitation. They

started by applying to the local BMC office for maintenance. Subsequently, they obtained official support from the BMC and the police for locking the toilets. Women are now negotiating at higher administrative levels. On their side, the officials have recently started encouraging women to constitute toilet committees and managing the blocks. Thus, a way seems to be prepared for a new symbiotic relation between people and the administration. The municipality is realising that traditional systems of delivery are unsustainable and unappropriated. A possible solution consists in leaving more space to develop and sustain people's initiatives. Ultimately, this means participation in decision making at all the stages of the service delivery.

Through their role in maintenance of toilets, women's attitude is changing and they are ready to bear more responsibilities since they have learned how to manage them:

- their credibility has increased at the community and governmental levels;
- they are exploring other areas for management such as garbage disposal and water supply;
- finally, by struggling to lock toilets, women are learning procedures, are growing stronger in their statements and gaining new experience, which help them find practical solutions to other problems.

In the long term, these women with necessary help from SPARC, intend to adopt a three-pronged strategy :

- facilitate women collectives to manage blocks and ensure full coverage of Dindoshi;
- seek construction of new toilets, repair of unused blocks and general upgrading of all others, so that no one is excluded;
- help settlements around Dindoshi to do the same.

However, even though people are ready to step forward - contribute to the cost of the construction of new toilets, decide on

the site and the appropriate design, give labour for the construction - unflexible BMC regulations still stop them.

On the brighter side, new solutions are emerging at grassroot level. People are realising that instead of depending on traditional agencies to deliver, they can live a better life if they take a small step forward to find solutions to problems but long term solutions need the administration to work in closer collaboration with the people, keeping in mind a wider context than just the settlement itself. When solutions are emerging from people, it is for the government to sustain their initiatives to initiate better lives for them.