

DEMOLITIONS TO DIALOGUE:

Mahila Milan - learning to talk to its city and municipality

An imagery of good governance is a government institution ready and capable of listening, arbitrating and planning for equity for its citizenry. Often the reality is that government policies are often rammed down on poor communities on the basis of choices and decisions made by dominant groups in the city and government at local and other levels deciding what is good for the city. Therefore stereo type of governance at least among the poor and disfranchised in the city is that the dominant culture that bulldozes its way through (in reality and conceptually), making the very vulnerable feel that survival lies in accepting these choices however much you may disagree with them, and in some instances seeking to clone or copy that behavior. In many cities the angst and anger these create in marginalized populations form the seed of divisiveness, dissent and dissonance that burst into sporadic bouts of violence that paralyses the city. As more and more cities especially in the south house large populations of poor migrants who have come to city to seek livelihoods accommodating the reality of how globalization and changes in the character of cities is a challenge to the leadership at the helm of city management. Most cities are in search of real solutions to address problems of poverty impacting increasing numbers of its citizens and balancing choices for economic growth of the city. Clearly no one set of actors has the answers. City authorities and government can no longer believe they can find solutions by themselves. And yet there are no ready recipes of how this dialogue and conversation between the various stakeholders in the city will get initiated or reach any fruition.

One hardly hears of situations in these relationships where there is room for all actors to bring into the process what they are best at doing and in doing so celebrate the different capabilities and diversity and to create something new and evolve to a new level of problem solving that is inclusive, celebrates diversity, and brings in a balance in roles and relationships for all in the city to play their roles in addressing the challenges that cities have to face in the 21st century. There is a serious malaise that hinders the possibility of real conversations across different sections of the city, state and non-state actors. Similarly development experts who want everyone to think like them and city authorities want law-abiding citizens who buy into their dreams of what the city should look like. ‘ A clean and green and beautiful city. This paper and its presenter seek to present an opposing view. One of seeking to bring forth a problem solving mechanism about moving forward to a strategy that emerges from a city being able to identify different perspectives, different capacities and groups with differing vision and capacities, all being able to sit across a notional table to agree on collectively locating goals and priorities to produce win-win solutions that work for the city and its different populations. This we define as a proactive and forward looking “ local to local dialogue”.

What is very special about this presentation is that this strategy and solution to address the problems of how the city deal with the poorest in the City of Bombay was designed... not by the city fathers or city administrators... but by poor and illiterate women living on pavements who were all first generation migrants whose marriages to men in the city brought them to the pavement of Mumbai. Their strategy has subsequently inspired a whole movement of the Urban poor in India and formed the basis of explorations for many other poor communities in Asia and Africa.

In 1985 there was a Supreme Court judgment that gave the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai the right to demolish structures of the households living on the sidewalks of the city known popularly as “pavement dwellers” While the city was ready to evict them, many NGOs and CBOs planned to undertake mass action to confront these demolitions planned to take place from 1st November 1985. SPARC activities working with women from pavement settlements found that women they spoke with had a different perspective and did not want confrontation. Their view was that somehow they needed to work out a way that the city was able to coexist with them. Until that happened, they said “the city will demolish our houses and we will rebuild it there or elsewhere because we have no other choice”. The challenge was how to communicate with the city whose officials were now gearing up their machinery to undertake demolitions.

*Between July and October that year, together with SPARC they conducted a survey of pavement slums in a particular district called E ward and the main arterial roads and presented the findings to the press and to the city and government officials. That survey showed that pavement dwellers were not transient populations but people who had lived for over two decades in the city, that they all worked and that most walked to work because they earned almost half what was considered minimum wage. They came from the poorest districts of India, victims of underdevelopment. Communal violence, floods famines and other crisis. This was published in a document called *WE THE INVISIBLE*. They suggested to the city that both the Government of Maharashtra and the Central government of India need to participate in this rehabilitation, and that unless the city acknowledge the reality of their situation, this war of attrition would continue.*

There were no mass evictions that winter, by March 1987, they had set up their organization called Mahila Milan which began to help poor illiterate women in each settlement understand the politics of why they cannot get land in the city for their house, and to develop a strategy to present to the city. They located vacant land in the city and began to ask questions why none of those vacant lands were earmarked for the homeless? They began to save money and talk to banks about why the poor could never get a loan? They designed their future home and began a dialogue with professionals about how they could reduce the cost of the house through self-management and began to examine the impact of relocation on their livelihoods and how they could possibly mitigate those difficulties. As they designed strategy they would talk about it with government and Municipal Corporation officials who began to accept the logic of the solutions they were recommending but initially just stopped evictions with no promises.

NSDF affiliated federations initially from all over Mumbai and later from other cities in India, began to visit these women, fascinated by these strategies of self education, increasing confidence to explore a dialogue with city officials and the sheer patience when solutions did not occur immediately. They began to participate in exchanges and visited other cities and assist other communities to do what they had done. Between 1985-1995 these practices have become the rituals that federations across many cities undertake and they form the basis of a discussion between informal settlements and cities. The formula is simple and powerful. The state provide land at subsidized costs, the Municipal Corporation provide off site infrastructure like it does to all its citizens, and communities design and manage their settlements spearheaded by

the women in the settlements, who having built their capacity to manage savings, create a database of residents and supervise construction undertake these activities.

In 1995 the government of Maharashtra enacted a law called the Slum Rehabilitation Act in which it integrated pavement dwellers for the first time into the classifications of households that were entitled to land for relocation. The women from Byculla who form the core of Mahila Milan now have a piece of land on which they are building the houses for the first 536 households, and the government of Maharashtra and the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai have set out a special policy for planning the relocation of the 20,000 households whose census the Mahila Milan and NSDF have undertaken in 1995.

Such kind of policy outcome has clearly been the outcome of the ingenious strategy of these women who began inventing the local-local dialogue concept long before the development discourse coined this term. While reflecting on how simple or complex concepts form the content of such dialogues we need to examine what makes such dialogues successful, and what should the stakeholders in such dialogues do to prepare themselves to use such dialogues to solve problems.

Ingredients for this Dialogue to happen as seen by SPARC Mahila Milan and NSDF

Space for a dialogue not linked to specific agenda: Have a conversation with the city on various issues and not wait for a crisis. Or enter into a situation where you only implement a project. This ability to be able to have conversations with your city is something that takes a while to develop but it is long-term investment.

Don't clone those who dialogue with: The challenge is to be able to get the city to begin to look at the different skills and capacities that are available among the urban poor and other classes in the city. In doing so the city begins to learn to celebrate the diversity of skills, capacities and resources that are available.

Locate areas where your interests converge with the city for specific issues. This way you position yourself in a dialogue on issues where you converge with the city. You may not agree with everything the city does but you can focus on the things that you can work in partnership and contribute and lock yourself into that so that you are able to make a shift in the relationship.

Power of Public opinion : There is a need for a public opinion which is larger than your own process .A larger echoing from the general public that it is something that also benefits the city gives the case of the urban poor a sound footing and they face fewer impediments.

To find win-win solutions that work both for the city and for poor communities. This way there is a greater acceptance of what poor communities bring into this process. Apart for the fact that such solutions get notice, they help the city look at the poor as partners and not beneficiaries.

The history of how we began this talk

Regular demolitions of structures on the pavements of Bombay pushed both SPARC^{1[1]} and the women's collective^{2[2]} to find a new way of talking to the city. It was necessary to create a new language to communicate the issues that confronted poor communities through the eyes of these women. It was also important for all of us both within SPARC and Mahila Milan to first learn how to identify these issues among ourselves and later be able to represent them to the outside world. Not by being victims and complaining or by being defiant, but by making statements about what their aspirations were and by building on the strengths communities pooled together. This way we slowly built the confidence to talk about the process internally first. What began in 1984 as fear of the city and the state, began to give way to a confidence of being able to participate in a dialogue and finally to driving solutions with the support of the city. So with every victory you built the confidence to move a little more forward.

We realized that dealing with demolitions was the most sensitive and politicised of all the other issues the pavement dwellers were grappling with. The issue impacted the women and their households most. Yet, with no easy solution we had to begin to undertake activities that communities could take on immediately to establish their identity and location in cities and then move to other forms of entitlements. It was therefore easier for us to begin from simple to complex, from the non-controversial issues to the more controversial ones of asking for land. We also soon got a sense that the skills one built in the process whether it was the simple or the complex issues were -- the same. One of the first issues that the women spoke about was their inability to procure rations cards.

¹ Ration cards: In the early 80's if any pavement dweller wanted a ration card you had to bribe to get one. Only 1 or 2 persons on a pavement managed to get it. By talking to the rationing controller, we were able to create a system where by all the families on a pavement were able to get ration cards. This process got the community to begin to do things as a collective and not individually. This also made it easy for the rationing office to administer because instead of the rationing inspector visiting individual homes, he could carry out an inspection of the entire pavement at one go.

The community learnt new skills on how to make list of their whole settlement. They learnt to do a count of adults and children to determine the total rationing units, they were able to see the difference in the attitude of the rationing officials when they went individually with some agent and when they went as a collective. For the first time they saw the power of coming together as a community and saw the link between their ability to organize and their ability to negotiate with government. These skills later came to use when the community had to learn to manage their demolitions.

^{1[1]} SPARC is an acronym for the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers .It is an a Non –Governmental organization that was founded in 1984 .It works in partnership today with the national Slum Dwellers federation and Mahila Milan (women together) which are both organizations of the Urban Poor.

^{2[2]} Before Mahila Milan was actually formed in 1986 what we had is the first pavement dwellers women's organization.

While we were doing this we were also getting sharper about our separate roles as SPARC and Mahila Milan. We began to slowly celebrate the different skill we had and began using them complementarily with each other. These were our first lessons in accommodating different ways of doing things and understanding that there was room for both.

From Invisibility to Visibility

From being invisible, the pavement dwellers went through a phase of becoming visible. In 1981 there was a major demolition of pavement dwellers from Tulsi Pipe road that were overnight thrown out of the city by the then Chief Minister Mr. Antulay. This was preceded by a writ filed by public interest litigation groups. The outcome of this was the Supreme Court judgement of July 1985, which for the first time brought the issue into the limelight.

There were NGOs, trade union groups and political parties who organized mass scale demonstrations in response to the judgement. Men and women from the pavements would take a day off from work to attend these rallies. At the end of the day if you asked them what they would not know what their demands were as they never involved in drafting these demands, it was always the trade union, and political leadership who decided the list demands. There was something intrinsically wrong with this way of mobilizing and this is when SPARC decided to talk to women. We began to understand the survival skills at work among the women and men in these settlements.

From a history of having to bribe and pay for the services to middle-men the community began to taste the power of coming together.

In 1995 SPARC and the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) chooses to work with each other

In order to be able to reach out to such a large population of the urban poor we knew that we needed to have a CRITICAL MASS to be able to create a large enough momentum. This is when we began to work in partnership with NSDF. Together we chose to create a separate space for the women leadership among the urban poor. This way the male leadership and the women's collective were complimentary to each other by the very nature of the skills and energy they bring into this process.

Mahila Milan means “women together”. It was formed in 1986 as response to the constant demolitions faced by pavement dwellers during that time. The NGOs at that time dictated the tone of the language. Their language was based on demonstrations and agitation strategies. The belief being that the state needed to change legislation and policy. Mostly these battles had NGO leadership in the forefront. Within SPARC there was a discomfort about this approach as it did very little to actually shift the relationship between the city authorities and the poor. It had the reverse effect and very often shut the doors for any possible dialogue.

The women pavement dwellers gave this whole process a visibility they had never experienced before. They were tired of the promises made to them by different actors who appeared and then disappeared when the crisis was over. Both politicians, ngo's and trade union leaders had a similar pattern. While the politicians only surfaced during elections, NGOs surfaced after an eviction. They made a noise and disappeared after the crisis subsided. There was nothing that was left behind for communities in order to be able to manage the next crisis better than the last one. The only thing the communities did learn over the years was that all these people were not consistent and reliable. While all of them came with the best intentions of helping the cause none were able to stop demolitions or provide houses or even finding basic amenities for them.

It was focussing on what did not work that pushed the women and us at SPARC to seek a new way of speaking to the city. The logic of this was based on the stories women told us of how and why they left their villages to seek an option in the city. They were not here in such of the glamour of the city but in search for something very basic like food and money to feed their children and themselves. The men can sleep eat anywhere, the women's arrival demands for a space to call "HOME". For those who cannot opt for better shelter options because of lack of money, the pavement provides the space. Often the first few days are spent using 6 yards of the woman's "sari" to create the walls of privacy. They usually choose pavements, which are close to their place of work.

For these families it was like living in two cultures. They have to make transition from a village culture to a city culture, which is hostile and alien. The repertoire of skills learnt in a village context is different from the skills required in the urban context. The women very often by their presence are able to make this transition easier for their men by finding jobs as domestics in the near by buildings and negotiating for a space on a pavement. By being the front they very often protect their men from a lot of the hostility even during demolitions. The men in turn give the women the protection required by them to live on the streets. It has always been more difficult for single or widowed women to cope all alone on the streets.

Once they find a secure space on the pavement, they begin to find a job, a place where they can collect water, the public toilets. These services normally come for a price. Each time they use the public toilet they pay one rupee for every use. They pay up to five rupees for every bucket of water. If they have want an electrical point they have to pay up to 300 rupees per point. The monthly outgoing per month works out much more compared to a middle class family. Yet this money never goes to the city exchequer and instead goes to middlemen or local politicians who make a living out giving these services illegally.

Mahila Milan and Evictions

On the 14th October 1986, a fleet of municipal and police vans came to demolish the huts at **Apna zopadpatti**- a pavement settlement in Byculla comprising of 100 huts. Demolition squads usually plunge people into panic and confusion. At Apna, women and children encircled the police. Stunned and unsure of how to respond, the police sought a dialogue. They said they had orders to demolish. The women replied, "It is

unfortunate, the BMC will not listen to us. But since you must demolish –let us dismantle our own huts”. The women from other pavements joined them. Not one pot or pan was misplaced. The families were fed by other pavement dwellers the locality that put their resources together to make a meal. It was the day people till today remember as the **“turning point”**.

For the first time they also tasted the power of coming together as a collective and using the power of this coming together to stop the demolition squad from breaking their huts The women and children had a lot of fun pulling down their houses. They role played the police and the municipal officials. When the vans went back at the end of the day, they rebuilt their structures.

This entire exercise from the time the municipal notice was pasted on the wall, the meeting the ward officer, giving him a letter, sending a letter to the additional municipal commissioner. Daily meetings among themselves, repeating the line of events that had happened so far and things done. Meeting the police and rehearsing their role during demolitions, all these formed the beginning of their training to talk to officials. From the lowest man down the rung in the demolition squad to the peons and the encroachment departments at the ward level and then to the Additional municipal commissioners level and the municipal commissioners level they met with everyone and began to understand this hierarchy.

The collective response to the demolitions is what made the shift in the relationship between the women on the pavements and the Municipality.

Similarly, they began to understand the role of the local Municipal Corporation representatives and proved to themselves that once elections were over these guys never supported them. They also began to understand the hierarchy in the police department from the Deputy inspector general of the Zone to the senior inspector to the hawaldars (policemen).

They soon understood the role of the state government as being different from the city. An understanding of these differential roles and functions also equipped them to plan ,strategize and negotiate better.

At **the Sophia Zubair**, a pavement settlement at Nagpada in the same municipal ward as the Apna zopadpatti, (These are all localities and neighbourhoods where the pavement dwellers resided) the community decided to go to court after a demolition as all their personal belongings were taken and not returned. They were able in court of law prove through photographs taken that this misdeed was done by the BMC. The confidence and honesty with which these women spoke in court help them win the case and even get compensation.

Going to court has never been the first option but has been used at times when all other options for dialogue shuts down.

We gradually understood that in order to speak to government we had to speak the language of government. We had to go with a solution in hand before talking to government but even before that we needed to our own internal

homework and build the capacities of these collectives of women to be able to negotiate with the city.

These were the areas that Mahila Milan built its capacities around before talking to the city

1. *Survey of Vacant lands in the city. They identified 70,000 hectares of vacant land all over the city. This way they prioritised land that were not reserved for any other purpose. This also broke the myth for all of us that they were no vacant lands in the city available.*
2. *Mapping of all pavement settlements in the city ward wise.*
3. *Hut count/ structure count ward wise for each pavement.*
4. *Settlement surveys of every pavement*
5. *Daily Savings*
6. *House model exhibitions*
7. *Exchanges with other pavement dwellers and slum dwellers in the city.*
8. *Creating a network of Mahila Milan all over the city between all pavement and slum settlements.*
9. *Working closely with the federation in 40 cities in India building capacities of poor communities to talk with their city.*
10. *Exchanges internationally with communities with countries inside Asia and Africa to strengthen the local process of negotiating for land and shelter. Many times these exchanges are also used to begin to have a dialogue with the city or strengthen and build existing negotiations that the local federation has with its city.*

Today Mahila Milan can confidently negotiate directly with the various municipal departments like the water works, BEST, local ward officer, health department, land, estate and planning department. This also creates a new precedent inside these offices where officials also have to begin to learn to talk this class of people who seek an engagement with the city.

The Pune Sanitation Project

In Pune City Mahila Milan has worked with the Municipality on a city wide sanitation project. They were contracted totally 110 toilet blocks. This partnership transformed this relationship between the Municipality and these community women. The women came in with their own social equity. On the job they learnt new technical and financial skills. The city engineers and corporators took a while to believe that these “Annadi” (Illiterate) women as they refer to themselves were able to manage the construction, the finance, liasoning with the city officials right from the level of the municipal commissioner, city engineers, and architects. They learnt to juggle with the not so cooperative corporators

*and in the process became more confident of handling the difficult situations they were put into. Today they are more closely involved with creating a maintenance system for the caretakers of these toilets. They have influenced the way in which the Mahila Milan in Bombay has begun to relate to the **Bombay Sanitation Project**. The process in Pune today along with the Bombay project has directly influenced a central policy on sanitation called the **Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan**. These Mahila Milan leaders have already begun to plan a strategy by which they will create teams that go to each of these cities, create a Mahila Milan base and open up spaces for them to begin a dialogue with their respective local municipality and the professionals.*

The point is to be able to demystify these concepts to local communities and the municipality that are still caught in the old patterns of these “beneficiary” and the “city authority”. This definition is slowly shifting to the “user of a service” and “partnerships”.

