

# Mohalla Committees of Mumbai

## Candles in Ominous Darkness

*Mohalla committees, a civil society initiative that involved members of the police and the public, helped heal some of the severe communal wounds of the 1992-93 riots in Mumbai. The experience of the committees has important insights to offer to democracies in a plural, diverse society. In the case of Mumbai, participants drawn from the police and from among the public turned out to be not adversaries in opposite camps but partners involved in a symbiotic relationship to maintain peace and harmony in an area.*

USHA THAKKAR

Civilisation is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing things historians usually record. While on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry. The story of civilisation is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore banks for the river.

– Will Durant

The demolition of the Babri masjid in December 1992 and the ensuing riots brought to surface the inherent tension and turbulence of the system, which never tires of raving about the great culture of centuries and boasting of democratic secular values of the Constitution. Devastated communities, lost lives and ravaged homes raised some fundamental questions about ethnic conflicts in India – about their reasons and roots, about the main players and the processes, and above all about the credibility of the state and the fragility of the civil society. Formation of such questions and search for their possible answers is a difficult but important exercise, which has involved scholars and concerned citizens. Equally important is the intensely felt need to work to heal the wounds and to try to resolve the conflicts emanating from ideologies and engulfing the daily lives of the people. Some efforts in this direction are undertaken by different persons and groups at different levels. The present paper aims to study one of such efforts undertaken by sensitive persons with the support of the police force, an important agency of the state. It is a case study of the mohalla committees in Mumbai, initiated after the 1992-93 riots and committed to the principles of peace and harmony. The paper is divided in four sections. The first section provides the context of the conflict, the second outlines genesis of the mohalla committees in the metropolitan, the third gives an overview of their working, and the fourth presents an evaluation of the efficacy of such positive steps in the building up of the civil society.

### Context of the Conflict

Contrary to the propagated popular belief, conflicts and especially ethnic conflicts have been endemic in India. The land of Buddha and Gandhi is not immune to the all-consuming fire of hatred and violence. A dispute over an old mosque almost 500 years old and the demolition of this seemingly insignificant mosque (Babri masjid) in Ayodhya, the holy place for the Hindus, in December 1992 became the epicentre for waves of violence

throughout the country. The right wing Hindu organisations claimed that the mosque (Babri masjid) in Ayodhya was built after demolishing a Hindu temple on the site, and its demolition was an affirmation of the Hindu faith and right over the place. The Muslims claimed their right over the place and criticised the complacency of the state. The issue was exploited by the fundamentalist elements on the side of the Hindus as well as the Muslims.

The metropolitan city of Mumbai experienced one of the worst outbreaks of violence towards the end of 1992 and the beginning of 1993. The animosity between Hindus and Muslims and the inability of the state to respond effectively were demonstrated on a scale never before witnessed in the city.<sup>1</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, over a thousand people were killed and tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands fled the city (1995:26-27).

Disturbed at the horrendous devastation, some concerned citizens and members of the police force in the city, decided to quench the fire of hatred and the destruction caused by it. Their steps, small but firm, ultimately resulted in mohalla committees. The importance of such action at local level cannot be neglected in the building of the civil society. As pointed by Ashutosh Varshney, in societies where civic organisations are decimated by the state and no autonomous public space for human organisation and deliberation exists, almost the entire society can go up in flames when the state begins to weaken. Alternatively, the entire society may look very peaceful when the state is strong. A totalitarian polity, normally opposed to autonomous non-state spaces, is thus typically a clay-footed colossus, as so many states of the former Soviet bloc discovered after the late 1980s. Civil society, if present and vibrant, can provide self-regulating mechanisms, even when the state runs into a crisis [Varshney 2002:286]. Varshney emphasises the importance of civic networks, and draws our attention to the fact that to dwell on the failings of the state and to remind the state authorities about their duties may often be necessary, but such approaches have so far yielded limited returns. Tens of inquiry commissions and even more numerous findings and critiques of researchers since 1947 bear testimony to the ineffectiveness of a method that is directly exhortative. It is an insufficiently imagined intellectual stance. An integrated civil society seems to have much greater potential for changing the behaviour of the state than a critique that demands but is unable to procure such a change [Varshney 2002:289].

An overview of our history brings before us a very important insight. As articulated by Varshney, India's repeated encounters with ethnic violence of all kinds (religious, linguistic, caste) and

its equally frequent returns from the brink have a great deal to do with the self-regulation that its largely integrated and cross-cutting civil society provides. Local structures of resistance and recuperation, as well as local knowledge about how to fix ethnic relations, have ensured that even the worst moments – 1947-48 and 1992-93 – do not degenerate into an all-out collapse of the country into ethnic warfare [Varshney 2002:286].

Recognising the role for smaller acts of human agency in the building of civil society, Varshney maintains that on the basis of available evidence, smaller acts of human agency can be divided into three categories: movement politics aimed at electoral politics, non-electoral civic interventions, and initiatives led by the local administration. Of the three, the first two are civil society-based, and the third state-based. Since the state and civil society are fundamentally different from, and sometimes opposed to, each other, the third category is by far the most counter intuitive and quizzical [Varshney 2002:290-91].

The mohalla committees in Mumbai present a site for the interface of the civil society and the state, where local initiative and local efforts have made a difference.<sup>2</sup>

### Genesis

As soon as signs of the 1992-93 riots appeared to recede in Mumbai, efforts were initiated by citizens and various organisations to heal the wounds of the displaced and devastated. Relief camps were organised in different riot-stricken parts of the city, and many were busy for more than a year for relief and rehabilitation activities. The government too realised that it had suffered loss of credibility vis-à-vis people, and decided to channelise its resources and efforts through the non-government organisations. The thought that something meaningful and substantial was required to mend the ruptured social psyche of the inhabitants had germinated, especially after the serial bomb blasts, in the minds of several persons with a humane perspective, who loved this cosmopolitan city.

The office of then sheriff of Mumbai, F T Khorakiwala, launched a project to set up citizen police committees in the 72 police stations of the city with the aim to establish communal harmony. It was, however, soon realised that the task was by no measure easy. Months slipped by. In April 1994 Khorakiwala requested Julio Rebeiro (former director general of Punjab and former Indian ambassador to Rumania) to take up the challenge. Rebeiro readily accepted the challenge and asked the assistance of Sushobha Barve, a social worker. Barve, a committed activist, was happy to provide help. They called on Satish Sahney, the then police commissioner. The discussions started, and their transparency and forthrightness helped to form congenial environment, where people could feel at ease. It soon became clear that the earlier plan to form the citizen-police committees did not take off because the police did not command the trust of the people.

Remembering those days Sushobha Barve muses, "It was then decided that the first aim should be to open up channels of communication between the police and citizens and particularly the minority Muslim community to restore trust and confidence. The second aim was to bring the two communities nearer. With this background, in June 1994 informal meetings were initiated with the Muslims to start with. Commissioner Sahney joined in these meetings along with his senior officers. Julio Rebeiro who is respected and trusted in Bombay chaired those meetings. People were encouraged to express all they felt and suffered

during the riots and the role of the police and their grievances" (Barve). It soon became evident that bringing the people and especially the grieved people to such meetings was not easy. They had lost their faith in the system, the state had suffered enormous loss of credibility. Consequently, those early meetings were quite remarkable, says Barve. "Anger and bitterness against the police was real and people expressed it frankly. Sahney through his patient hearing and sensitivity encouraged people to unburden. His attitude was sympathetic, open, and not defensive about the role of the police during the riots. This interaction then was beginning of the process of psychological rehabilitation of the minority community in particular and people in general" [Barve 2003]. Slowly distrust was replaced by a feeling of being reassured and hostility was replaced by a feeling of congeniality. There emerged a tacit understanding that in the day-to-day life of the people, it was important to have an action-oriented plan that can show results, and on the other hand such plan required theoretical understanding about the role of the state in betterment of the society. This kind of understanding could emerge mainly because of the solid and sensitive efforts put in by the top officials of the police, social workers, and concerned citizens. In the words of Barve, "Experience has shown that trust and confidence building does not come from public statements. It is built through personal contacts, openness and honesty. Symbolic gestures are important but not enough. Reconciliation is not about confessions and words only. It has to be given flesh. Reconciliation also implies sharing in the socio-economic and material resources of the country. Forgiveness without sharing will otherwise be empty" [Barve 2003].

A quick look at the riot-affected areas in the metropolitan shows that inhabitants in most of these areas suffer from economic deprivation. Civic amenities are not to be found and even opportunities to earn a decent living are not on the horizon. Addition of the communal animosity added fuel to the fire. To quote Satish Sahney, "The two communities were never so divided as they were in 1993. Police credibility was at its lowest, particularly among the Muslims. They were not willing to even take a complaint to the police, which is a very dangerous situation." Realising the urgent need to bring a change in the attitude of the police, the police commissioner started dialogues with the constables. He remembers, "I used to implore the constables that once they donned the police uniform, they had no caste, no creed and that they had to deal with the people...Initially, I used to get very little response because constables are not used to this sort of exercise. But gradually, I found that they were being targeted for being partisan. The issue is of sending the right signals. All said and done, the Indian police looks up to its leadership."

The challenge of bridging the gap of communication between the police and the people was certainly a formidable one. Once again it was proved that a small but a firm step taken in right direction can make a difference. Julio Rebeiro, Satish Sahney and Sushobha Barve had initial discussions with the police and then it was decided to open the dialogue with the aggrieved people. The process demanded patience and openness on the part of the initiators, but ultimately the prejudices started melting. Sahney remembers, "The first meeting was held in a Mahim school with a group of 20 well-educated Muslims... At times the statements were very provocative... The aggrieved persons had come to the conclusion that the exercise was eyewash. Three days later, there was another meeting at Mahim with another set of Muslims... the hostility was much less... The third meeting again

at Mahim, was exclusively with women. It was here that I first spoke out; I told them that I had not come to defend what had happened, my purpose was to ensure that such things would never happen again." His faith in the power of the patient hearing on the part of the police helped and his assurance that not one person without a criminal record would be locked up in the name of preventive detention generated confidence especially among the Muslim women about the safety of the men of their families. Co-workers like Barve, P P Jamkhedkar and Bhau Korde were instrumental in organising meetings in communally sensitive localities of the city, slowly the people (Muslims) started unburdening and there was a change in the attitude. As they shed their inhibitions and fears, the concept of the mohalla committees emerged from the process of interaction and sharing thoughts. The people experienced the importance of their initiative and the police officers, including the sub-inspectors and inspectors, realised that their work would be very difficult without the public support. The formation of 24 active mohalla committees in the communally sensitive areas of Mumbai opened a new chapter in the history of the city. Rebeiro insisted on the initiatives taken by the citizens themselves, free from the influence of politicians and anti-social elements. He emphasised the need to remove politicians' control over the police and to put the latter under a body governed by apolitical people respected by the society as in the UK. This step had been recommended by the National Police Commission before years, but no step was taken to implement the recommendation.

The idea of the formation of the mohalla committees by itself is not a revolutionary step, nor do the initiators claim so. In fact, the most important fact about their formation remains that openness and transparency on the part of the initiators coupled with a genuine desire for peace among all concerned provide an atmosphere congenial for the formation of such committees. The initiators of the experiment had before them the example of the successful working of the mohalla committees in Bhiwandi, a town near Mumbai with a record of violent communal riots. After experiencing one of the worst riots in 1984, some thinking started about the ways to establish peace. Suresh Kapade, the deputy commissioner of the police appointed soon after the riots took up the challenge. After studying the history of the communal riots in the area, he evolved a scheme for peace. Initially, he set up a central peace committee and 75 local committees in each of Bhiwandi's municipal wards. Thereafter he coordinated the functioning of these committees, each comprising of 12 members, the Hindus as well as the Muslims. Slowly but firmly developed the concept of collective responsibility and the understanding of religious amity.

The mohalla committees in Mumbai have evolved their own pattern and have started attracting the attention of the academics and activists. As the very name of the mohalla committees suggests, these units are located in the neighbourhood evoking the spontaneous links among the people forged by their living together. Care was taken not to turn them into formal organisations. Members were concerned citizens of the area who were non-political and non-controversial in their working method and non-communal in their approach. Every police station has some beats based on the size of the area within its jurisdiction, and each beat would have a mohalla committee headed by the beat officer. Members would be the persons from all the communities of the area who would devote some time for such work without any motive and with devotion and courage. Professionals like doctors,

lawyers and teachers as well as duty conscious citizens and women come forward to contribute their time and energy. There would be a facilitator also, chosen by the citizens, who would work with the beat officer, not only to do the routine work like fixing dates and time for the meetings but also to do the follow-up action on issues raised at the meetings. There would be no office bearer and ordinarily meetings would be held twice a month or so.

### Working

The mohalla committees aim, on one hand at changing the ghetto-like mindset which had developed especially after the 1992-93 riots and on the other hand, taking up activities to improve the day-to-day life of the people. Such a broad sweep includes activities at different levels like celebrating the festivals like Id and Diwali, organising inter-religious/faith prayers, communicating ideas of peace and harmony at different meetings, building bridges among various groups of all communities, strengthening women's efforts, arranging cricket for peace and other sports for members of all communities and running classes for school dropouts. It is to the credit of the mohalla committees that they have diffused tense situations after the Bamiyan Buddha incident, the arrest of the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray, the banning of SIMI, terrorist attacks in New York and New Delhi, the attack on Afghanistan and run-up to Ayodhya.

The core activities of the mohalla committees focus on the issues related to (a) complaints related to the work of the police of the area; (b) civic issues like health, availability of water, environment, and garbage disposal; (c) facilities for education for the children and youth in the area; (d) activities promoting communal harmony like celebrating festivals of different communities.

The mohalla committees do not follow a uniform pattern in their day-to-day functioning, as each of them is moved by different persons and has different problems. The area of Mahim was chosen as the starting point of the work of the mohalla committees, as it has been a place for long-standing tension and suspicion between the Hindus and the Muslims on one hand and between the Muslims and the police on the other. Discussions among the members of both the communities resulted in the formation of the mohalla committee with the principal of a local school as the facilitator. When the concern expressed at the early meetings was the impact of the riots on the children of the area, the committee organised a drawing competition on the theme of communal harmony, where all the schools of Mahim participated. The area of DN Nagar is a mixture of the affluent living in the high-rise buildings and the poor living in the slums. The mohalla committees here decided to organise health camps for the police station staff and the slum dwellers. This strategy won them their confidence.

The idea of the cricket match as a means to diffuse tension has proved to be successful. It is by such games that people and especially the youth learn to take victory and defeat sportingly (In 1993, after the municipality demolished encroachments, including several temples in Dharavi, a meeting was held by the local mohalla committee to find a way out to lessen the anger of the people and to establish amicable relations between the people and the police. A youngster had suggested that residents play a cricket match with the police. The idea resulted in a great success. As pointed out by Sushobha Barve, "If youngsters from

both communities play together, cricket can be a uniting factor in stead of a source of conflict between the two communities". (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, May 31, 1996). Sports have been used by the mohalla committees of Dongri, Nagpada, JJ Marg, Malwani, Wadala and Antop Hill as an effective method to bring the communities together and to canalise the energy of the youth in a positive way. The Cricket for Peace Tournament organised by the mohalla committees with the police in 1996 demonstrated its success. The idea generated after a match between India and Pakistan gave rise to some tension. Thirty-two teams from the police stations took part. The tournament has become an annual event with the police commissioner's rotating trophy. Another successful strategy has been setting up of study rooms in slums.

It does not always require a religious meeting/procession or an ideological debate to ignite communal tension. In the metropolitan city of Mumbai where people stay in congested pigeon-holes and dilapidated buildings, a little incident may imbalance the life of their residents. Imamwada in the central Mumbai was brought to the brink of the riot, when an old man in a balcony carelessly blew his nose at some youngsters standing below. In another case, the communal divide in Madanpura's Afzal chawl came to the fore when water dripped onto some persons from linen left to dry on a second-floor clothesline (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, March 10, 2002). The living conditions of the people in this context becomes very important. Sincere activists realise that it is meaningless to preach communal harmony to the residents of a slum which does not have the facilities of toilets or drainage. Steps like trips to the municipal office or a ration office with women from different communities or organising classes for the children from different communities go a long way in forging good relation among communities. As a worker says, "Even the act of travelling together helps".

It is becoming increasingly obvious that lecturing the communities about communal harmony cannot establish communal harmony; the task requires solid and result-oriented work. Keeping this in mind, the Versova mohalla committee started sewing classes where women from all communities could acquire the skill to augment the income of the family. The committee also started 'Agaz', a street theatre group, to perform street plays on the theme of communal harmony. Mohalla committee at Imamwada and Wadala have started study rooms, libraries and other sport facilities for the local youth, while the Dharavi mohalla committee set up a family counselling centre to deal with non-cognisable offences like small fights (*The Times of India*, September 30, 1999).

The Imamwada BIT chawls present another scenario. These one-room tenements, constructed a century ago, are divided along communal lines. Over years interaction between the communities disappeared and the tension mounted. Even the children do not meet, as the Muslim children go to the Urdu school and the Hindu children go to a Marathi school. The 1992-93 riots widened the gulf between the communities. The mohalla committees here are busy with confidence building exercises from their inception including meetings and open discussions. It was revealed that causes for agitation were lack of facilities for study and recreation for the youth and the increasing number of the school dropouts with no job or occupation. Facilities for games like table tennis and volleyball courts were arranged with the help of the then police commissioner. The problem of the shortage of space for a community centre was solved when the municipal corporation allowed the mohalla committee to use three vacant classrooms in a municipal school. Within a year, 150 young people were

able to use such facilities. The mohalla committee also arranged for some of them to get admissions into two vocational training institutes. After they complete their course, they are given a tool kit so that they can begin to work as electricians, plumbers, or carpenters.

Dharavi in Mumbai, known as the largest slum of Asia, remained tense during and after the riots of 1992-93. The mohalla committee here, formed in September 1993, proved effective in diffusing tension in explosive situations and maintaining a channel of communication with the police. A seemingly inconspicuous incident like the passing by the main mosque of the procession of the idol of Ganesh taken by the Hindu devotees during the time of the Ganesh festival can be a cause for major disturbance. The mohalla committee has to be extra careful at such time. Interaction between the persons from both the communities is encouraged especially during various festivals of both the communities. It also attends to important civic issues like garbage disposal, water shortage, pollution and illegal construction. Women of the area have demanded the closure of the licensed liquor shops and have displayed their intense dislike for distillation and sale of illegal liquor by smashing some of the dens.

The area of Nirmal Nagar, which includes the slums of Beherampada, had experienced tense moments during the riots of 1992-93. Tension and clashes surfaced not only during the Hindus and the Muslims but also between the Muslims and the police. The genesis for the mohalla committee here lay in the period soon after the riots. The local people had a peaceful flag hosting ceremony on January 26, 1993. They also ensured that 1,500 students who could not attend schools because of the riots rejoined the schools. Special attention was given to the urgent need of giving training and employment to the youth from both the communities. The idea of the mitra mandal was floated to provide development of skills to its members. The first such group was started in 1995, in the AK Marg police chowky for the Beherampada area. Another group 'Saheli' also came into existence, as an offshoot of the mohalla committee, to generate awareness among women.

The mohalla committee in the area of MIDC, a badly hit area during the riots, was set up in 1995. An early programme for the mohalla committee members in the three police beats was a workshop on 'know your rights'. Successful attempts were made to organise sport events and medical camps for the residents, as well as to bring together the children from the dalit and non-dalit sections. The theme of communal harmony is always in the focus. The mohalla committee had organised a cycle rally with 150 young members spreading the message of 'pyar banate chalo' (keep establishing the bond of love) on the day of Gandhi Jayanti 1996.

The Bandra west mohalla committee, set up after the riots has taken up the issue of communal harmony as well as civic issues. It has organised the Clean Bandra Campaign (1995), awareness programmes for the students and zero garbage zones action plan.

The presence of individuals with a perspective of the larger interests of the community certainly makes a difference in the working of the mohalla committees. A communal flare up over the death of a Muslim youth in the police lock-up at the D N Nagar police station in September 1999 was diffused largely by the quick response of Ajay Kaul, a member of the committee of D N Nagar in interacting with the mohalla committee members, the local community leaders, political leaders and the police by him. Similarly, in June 1999 Yasmin Shaikh, who works with

the Nagpada mohalla committee, helped the police in maintaining peace by talking to the Muslim women and a mob of angry people over the trouble over the selection of a new Imam for Madanpura's Jamil Masjid (*The Times of India*, September 30, 1999). Such persons command respect in their areas because of the efforts put in by them for the betterment of the communities. Ajay Kaul at Yari Road, Andheri (W), is the principal of a local school and a junior college started by him. Yasmin Shaikh runs a free legal aid cell for women at Madanpura.

The mohalla committees are aware that their work demands constant vigilance and involvement with community members. Peace in the area may prove to be very fragile, as any tension between the communities may ignite disturbance at the slightest provocation. Timely action by the mohalla committee members can avert such mishaps. To take some recent examples, as events in Ayodhya reached a flashpoint, on March 12, 2002 Nergis and Khatoon Shaikh of Beherampada had gone on road of the communally sensitive slum in Bandra with a songbook and a megaphone. Nergis remembers, "When we began at 11 am, there were just two of us, but when we wound up at 3 pm, there were almost 80 women in the peace rally" (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, March 31, 2002). Vishwas Sonavane and his band of 100 volunteers had toured the Muslim localities on the day of the bandh called by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in protest against the Godhra killings on March 15 (Anil Singh, *ibid*). The Wadala mohalla committee held a medical camp on March 17, which benefited hundreds of people (Anil Singh, *ibid*). Simple initiatives such as holding a joint meeting of the JJ Marg and Dongri mohalla committees reduces the scope of misunderstanding as the former is Muslim-dominated area and the latter is Hindu-dominated. Youngsters from both the communities played a cricket-match as a confidence-building measure, where the zonal deputy police commissioner too joined in. A simple but not so easy step like persuading the VHP activists to restrict their 'Ghantnaad' programme at Gol Deol, a temple in the middle of the street, could be an effective strategy in controlling the eruption of disturbance (Anil Singh, *ibid*).

The mohalla committees have played an important role in maintaining peace in difficult situations. Some examples are relevant in this context. Tension had started mounting in the Muslim community over the release of Mani Ratnam's film 'Bombay', scheduled for release on April 1995. (The film was based on the theme of marriage between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl and their life during the riots of December 1992 in Bombay.) The Muslim community had some objections against some parts of the film. Release of the film in Hyderabad and other places had already caused trouble, and it was feared that its release in Mumbai would also may ignite disturbance. The release of the film, therefore, was postponed by a week. The mohalla committees throughout the city were activated during this period of one week. The film was shown to the members of both the communities and their assistance was sought in diffusing tension. The response of the members was positive, they spoke to many people after seeing the film. The interaction between the members of the mohalla committee members could diffuse the tension, and there was no disturbance when the film was finally released though some sections of the Muslim community maintained their objections to the film. As Sushobha Barve remembers, "The role that the mohalla committee played during that period revealed to one and all that when well meaning people of the community make a rational appeal to the general

public, it has a definite and positive impact and it helps in diffusing a tense situation".

Barve remembers another sensitive situation which had developed during the Ganapati festival in 1995 in the jurisdiction of Dharavi police station. On August 27, 1995, i.e., two days prior to the installation of the Ganesh idol, a rumour started that the Ganesh Mandal, an organisation located about 100 metres away from an important mosque in the area, has erected a pucca platform with the intention of constructing a Ganesh temple at that spot. The rumour spread in the whole area with an addition that the local Shiv Sena MLA was personally supervising the work of constructing the temple. The police and the members of the mohalla committee realised the gravity of the situation, and took measures to quash the rumour. They talked to various sections of the people, and explained that they had verified that nothing unusual was happening at the site. The misunderstanding was cleared up. Later as a follow-up action the police and the mohalla committees ensured that the platform made for the Ganesh festival was demolished on the Anant Chaturdashi day, which reconfirmed their credibility.

The working of the mohalla committees clearly show that vigilant participation of the citizens and sincere commitment of the police personnel play a vital role in betterment of the communities and maintenance of peace in the area.

## Evaluation

The experience of the mohalla committees reveals some important insights about our life as members of a democratic state and a plural society, both of them at present under the stress of increasing tension between the communities and fear of eruption of violence at the slightest provocation.

Sushobha Barve draws our attention to an important fact that in an exercise of conflict resolution, it is important to have a listening exercise. In this city no one has time to listen to others, and that is at the heart of all the problems and frictions. For some problems, there are no answers, and what happened cannot be undone. The fact that people in high positions, including police commissioners, were willing to give time to listen without arguing, brought psychological relief (Rupa Chinai, *The Times of India*, October 15, 1995). In her opinion, the mohalla committee experience tells us that during a crisis any neutral individual, who is trusted, can help open communication channel between parties. As long as people are talking, they will not go out on the streets to resort to violence. And these communication channels could then turn into creative connections in addressing other problems (Barve). A beginning for the dialogue has to be made, and this can be on an issue acceptable to all. Remembering a successful attempt of the committee at DN Nagar, Ribeiro remembers, "We requested leaders of various religious communities to read their texts on a particular topic like love or revenge. And the gathering realised that all the texts said the same thing" (*The Times of India*, January 8, 1998). Sahney remembers an important meeting of those tumultuous days. At a meeting held at the official residence of then chief minister, Sharad Pawar, a member of the minority community made some provocative remarks about the approach of the government to the communal issues. However, when the chief minister did not retaliate and promised to look into the matter, tension was diffused and discussions were held with openness.

The path for the mohalla committees however is not easy. There are some obstacles of the system and some pertaining to the

mindset of the people. Most of them surface only when the work starts.

The partnership with the police is a basic principle for the mohalla committees, the ground reality however points out that, the relationship between the mohalla committees and the police has been at times uneasy. The police find it difficult to accept the citizens as equal partners. Although several senior officers are sympathetic to the mohalla committees, the officers at the lower level tend to back such committees for their selfish interests (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, May 6, 1998). In fact, policemen at the lower level tend to reduce the mohalla committees to a network of informants alerting them about communal trouble. In absence of an effective local leader, as in Beherampada, Bandra (E), the mohalla committees have been subverted by the police (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, March 10, 2002). Even after 10 years, the police resent being questioned by the mohalla committees members about the cases of high-handedness. For instance, in 1997, the police refused to let the mohalla committee intervene in Golibar, Santa Cruz (E), even when a police atrocity led to a minor riot in the slum (Anil Singh, *ibid*).

It has to be noted that at times the political influence tries to dilute the spirit of the mohalla committees. A commissioner like R D Tyagi took the initiative from the hands of the people and gave it to the police. He sent orders specifying the members from each community to be incorporated in the committees (*The Times of India*, January 8, 1998). The elected members of the area demanded their place and the apolitical character of the mohalla committees acquired political dimensions. Some anti-social elements could enter such committees. The state-sponsored peace committees have created problems. "We find it difficult to get ten committed workers in a locality but police stations were instructed to recruit 50 peace committee members per beat, almost overnight," says Yasmin Shaikh, who heads the Nagpada mohalla committee, explaining how people with dubious records get into these state-sponsored committees. Since 1992-93 to 1998 the mohalla committees have been formed in only 34 police stations and they have just 70 key functionaries. However, each of the 73 police stations has a peace committee of 200 members (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, May 6, 1998). Such committees, however, could not go beyond token functions.

Initially people show enthusiasm for the work of the mohalla committee, but with the passage of time find it difficult to sustain it. The involvement of the members from the middle class has not come up to the expected level. Very often people join these committees, because of their desire to increase their sphere of influence and power or to complete some personal agenda.

Though the mohalla committees have to work primarily with the police, their involvement with the civic issues naturally bring them close with the civic authorities and this interaction has its own problems. Field officers are often not able to have successful tie up with the mohalla committees to solve problems related to issues like water and garbage, which often lead to fights in slums (Anil Singh, *The Times of India*, March 10, 2002). In addition, political interference is a formidable obstacle, which has to be faced by the mohalla committees. Leena Joshi, director of Apanalaya, an NGO in Shivaji Nagar, complains that most meetings are dominated by corporators who have their own axe to grind. Sushobha Barve acknowledging the interference of the corporators as an obstacle, points out that several concerned individuals and organisations, though well-intentioned, have no idea of the ground realities (Shameem Akhtar, *The Times of India*, June 5,

1994). A responsible citizen involved with the working of the mohalla committees from their inception points out that the facilitators would invite the police members as well as the ward officers to the meetings of the mohalla committees. The response from the police would be positive, but not from the ward officers, the latter would not come. Moreover, the communal networks at local level are very strong, and the residents cannot be free from such prejudices. Some keen observers have noted that the number of the members from the Hindu community has dwindled.

It is to the credit of the dedicated citizens and retired police officers and bureaucrats who are active as the members of such committees, that the mohalla committees have been able to do impressive work in the last decade. They have challenged on one hand the authority of the local lords having muscle and money power, and on the other hand power of selfish politicians and officers. They have made a difference in the way people think about communal disturbance at local level and the strategies that can be devised to lessen it. As K M Arif, trustee of the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust says the mindset of the Mumbai police has changed appreciably since the riots of 1992-93 (*The Times of India*, March 18, 2002).

Reflecting on the work of the mohalla committees, Ribeiro says, local leadership has blossomed. Young people visit the chawls of the other community, which they never did earlier. They play games and participate in each other's festival celebrations and cultural programmes (Julio Rebeiro, *The Times of India*, January 18, 1996). Bringing out an important point, Sushobha Barve says, the experience of the mohalla committees tells us that crisis situations can be turned into great opportunities as in a crisis people are desperate and often are more open to finding and accepting solutions. Suggestions for solutions can come from unexpected people and sources. Local initiative leads to more lasting impact than an imposed solution arrived from an overview from the top, though it is a slower process (Barve).

Varshney draws our attention to the fact that the Bhiwandi experiment questions the conventional wisdom that there is an adversarial relationship between the state and civil society. Civil society is a non-state, not an anti-state, space of our life whose vigour can be, though is not necessarily, promoted by the state. The insight gained from the Bhiwandi experiment is further strengthened by the experiences of the mohalla committees of Mumbai. Here civic linkages are formed by the initiatives of the police, an organ of the state, and the concerned citizens of the society. The participants in the process have proved to be not adversaries in the opposite camps, but partners having symbiotic relation in the project of maintenance of peace and harmony in the area. The simple fact of crucial importance in social and political spheres once again surfaces that existence of differences is normal, but when such differences give rise to violence, the situation is alarming and demands attention. Life in the metropolitan city of Mumbai can be ruthless turning individuals into fragmented atoms, and yet it is the urban life, which throws the people together in their day-to-day life. The mohalla committees have to cope with this reality of the urban life.

The experience of the mohalla committees has shown that after the outbursts of violence, it is important to ask not only 'why this happened' and 'what is destroyed', but also 'what can be saved, 'how can it be saved' and 'what can be done to avoid such catastrophe in future'. It teaches us that fight against societal violence has to be initiated at the level of the day-to-day life. It has to be dealt with not by slogans or emotional outbursts,

but by learning to transcend narrow differences, to establish linkages with persons of all communities in the area, to remain connected and to work collectively for the common good. Sahney makes important observations in this context. He emphatically points out that there has to be respect for the principle of rule of law. The egalitarian principles of the Indian Constitution have to be respected and implemented. Respect to religions does not permit public display of religious symbols and rituals like 'arati' and namaz. In addition, it should be always remembered that public servants are accountable to the people, the citizens of the state. They cannot get away with their whims or rash acts. When a well-meaning public servant takes an initiative, he mobilises the entire machinery of the state and the obstacles are removed.

The experience of the mohalla committees in Mumbai draw our attention to the basic and vital fact that common problems call for common action, and the ability of local life to cope with critical situations has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered. It has to be remembered, however, that this concept of working within the set borders has its own weaknesses with its strengths. Small steps taken collectively can go a long way, and yet their effectiveness is limited. The redeeming feature is that this weakness can be overcome to a great extent by multiplication of the experiment. Citizens have to understand and implement the concept of interdependence. To quote Gandhi, "Let us not also forget that it is man's social nature which distinguishes him from the brute creation. If it is his privilege to be independent, it is equally his duty to be interdependent. Only an arrogant man will claim to be independent of everybody else and be

self-contained" (Gandhi in *Young India*, April 25, 1929). Gandhi's words like his deeds can be energising in the turbulent contemporary times. Pious words, if devoid of committed action, can be blown like torn pages from an old book; but the constructive work taken up for the common good, based on compassion and not on passion, can be the cornerstone of a healthy relationship between the civil society and the state. ■■■

*Address for correspondence:*  
ushathakkar@yahoo.com

## Notes

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- 1 For details are Srikrishna Commission Report. Srikrishna Commission was appointed for inquiry into the riots at Mumbai during December 1992-January 1993 and the March 12, 1993 bomb blasts in Mumbai.
- 2 See also Mohalla Ekta Committees: A Documentation Report by Kalpana Sharma, Mohalla Committee Movement Trust, Mumbai.

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