

## WHAT IS A MOHALLA COMMITTEE?

We all agree that now more than ever we need to re-ignite the concept of community policing that encourages, a trust-based relationship between the police and public. To quell rumour mongering, counter hate-driven propaganda and prevent violence, Mohalla Committees are the way to go. But how do we go about this?

Mohalla Committees are mixed-community groups that include members of a neighbourhood, especially women, and other civil society members from across vocations and locations in the police station area. These members remain in touch with the police and administration on a daily basis to prevent clashes. Whenever rumour-mongering starts and whenever conflict builds up, committee members come together and put 'moral pressure' on police and administration to act in time.

**These groups have been active in some areas for decades. It all began in Bhiwandi, 1984, when then Deputy Police Commissioner of Bhiwandi Suresh Khopade started this active interface between citizens of different social backgrounds and the police. The idea was to address the bitter communal violence in the powerloom town. 75 local committees, each comprising of 50 members of all communities slowly began functioning and developed the concept of collective policing. Such was the impact of these Committees that they even dulled the impact of 1992-93 Mumbai violence in the area.**

In Mumbai too, the concept of the mohalla committees enabled interaction and sharing thoughts. People experienced the importance of their initiative and police officers, including the sub-inspectors and inspectors, realised that their work would be very difficult without public support.

24 active mohalla committees in the communally sensitive areas of Mumbai opened a new chapter in the history of the city. Former Commissioner of Police, Julio Rebeiro, then CP, Satish Sahney and senior social activists like Sushobha Barve worked to set this off. This time the emphasis was on initiatives taken by the citizens themselves, free from the influence of politicians and anti-social elements. 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 was strongly felt. Such steps had also been recommended by the National Police Commission years ago, but no step was taken to implement the recommendation.

**It is to the credit of the mohalla committees that these local initiatives successfully diffused tense situations after the Bamiyan Buddha incident (2001), the arrest of political leaders, the banning of SIMI, the terror attacks in New York and New Delhi, the attack on Afghanistan among others.**

We welcome the experiences from these committees kept alive by the Bombay Mohalla Committee Trust and shall be interacting with them closely over the next few weeks, even as our initiative grows. Today the active and independent committees are run by the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust (MCMT) where the Executive Chairperson is former senior policeman, KL Prasad (Julio Ribeiro, former CP and DGP Punjab is Chairperson and there are active members). The official mohalla committee is distinct from this effort where citizens play a major role.

### So how does this work?

Mohalla Committees work by regular activities at the police station level. The committee actively meets twice a month to improve the day-to-day life of people. This includes setting up libraries and film shows, community food stalls, observing national and international days of social justice import and, of course, celebrating Eid and Diwali festivals. They also arranged for 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 as well as running classes for school dropouts.

Primarily, mohalla committees focus on issues related to (a) complaints regarding police work in the area; (b) civic issues like health, availability of water, environment, and garbage disposal; (c) educational facilities for children and youth; (d) activities promoting communal harmony like celebrating festivals. Still, there is no uniform pattern in the day-to-day functioning. Each of them is moved by different persons and has different problems.

## Some examples

- In Mahim, people were concerned about the impact of riots on children.
- At DN Naga, members arranged for activities like health camps for basti dwellers and police staff.
- Cricket matches between citizens and police diffused tension and proved widely successful. (32 Cricket for Peace Teams took part and then became an annual event.)
- Study rooms were set up in bastis.

In recent times, we can think of human libraries calling for personal interactions, group viewings of movies, cultural festivities, discussion groups, hold local level meetings to diffuse tensions. Rumours of idol desecration can be also addressed this way.

It is the working of the mohalla committees that is important. Vigilant citizen participation and sincere commitment of the police personnel plays a vital role in the betterment of communities and maintenance of peace.

## Need for vigil

We also need to remember that at a later date, the Mohalla Committees got affected by undue interference from the higher echelons of the police that brought in only political players. Keeping an ear to the ground, being among the people, and encouraging listening exercises between various groups is key to understanding some important insights about our life as members of a democratic state and a plural society.

A beginning for the dialogue has to be made, and this can be on an issue acceptable to all.

Today, in 2022, there is an urgent need for more Mohalla Committees. The challenge is to ensure diverse and plural participation, transparent functioning and prompt and effective co-ordination.

## Can we collectively make this happen today?

### Quotes/experiences of Mohalla Committee initiators

*“When Ram Lal and Abdullah [representative names] started sitting together in these meetings, the respective prejudices they had of the other’s community began to diminish. They started becoming friends over time. Ram Lal understood that Abdullah didn’t have five wives and eight children as communal propaganda would state, but was just like him with one wife and three children. Like Ram Lal, Abdullah thought about bettering his own home, mohalla or Bhiwandi and never thought about Pakistan. Similarly, Abdullah realised that Ram Lal doesn’t want to eradicate Islam from India and has the same day to day concerns like water supply, electricity and everyday bills... More importantly, the Head Constable had made hundreds of friends in the mohalla cutting across caste, occupation and religion. This strengthens the intelligence machinery in the local police. The committee members would regularly inform the police representative present at the Mohalla meetings about the local troublemakers and any trouble brewing in their locality.”*

*(Mohalla Committee Pioneer Suresh Khopade(former IPS), Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Bhiwandi in 1988 and thereafter also Additional Commissioner of Police (North in 2009)*

*“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.”*

*(Sushoba Barve, Bombay Mohalla Committee Trust, to Anil Singh, The Times of India, May 31, 1996)*

*“If youngsters from both communities play together, cricket can be a uniting factor instead of a source of conflict between the two communities.” (Sushoba Barve)*