



SPARC

SOCIETY FOR PROMOTION OF AREA RESOURCE CENTRES

ANNUAL REPORT, 1985

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tion is initiated, sustained and strengthened. The "ARC", as we call it, is simply a place where people come for information about and analysis of the resources available in their environment; where discussion of individual and collective problems, new methods of problem-solving, and sharing of experiences takes place. The ARC provides an unpressured environment where this process can take place at a pace set by people, and around the issues identified by them. SPARC's workers play the role of resource people, co-ordinators, and, when necessary, of catalysts.

Women's Groups:

The second level of our approach is to facilitate the formation of women's groups throughout the community, so that women can emerge from their isolation in the family or other traditional social groups where the opportunities for new learning and change are more limited. In the women's groups, issues and problems affecting women's lives are raised and dealt with in a new perspective. We are convinced that women's growing empowerment is the inevitable outcome of this process.

In our experience, the new sets of alternatives and attitudes acquired thus by women transforms not only themselves but their families and community. We are aware, however, that such long-term, in-depth change is not necessarily immediate, visible, or easily defined and

measured. A significant part of our task, therefore, is to develop with women their own indicators of change and growth through collective reflection.

Locating an Area:

Selecting an area of operation was our next priority, for with thousands of pavement dwellers in Bombay city, we obviously could not be everywhere at once. But based on available information and our own earlier contacts with some pavement families, we knew that South Bombay had the highest concentration of pavement slums. Out of the several wards in the southern part of the city, we chose the E ward (roughly corresponding to the Byculla and Mazgaon areas) where some of us had earlier worked with a few pavement families.

PHASE I: JANUARY TO JUNE, 1985

SPARC had, in a sense, given itself a very much more complex and difficult task than if we had simply set out to identify the "needs" of a "target" group and proceeded to provide services to meet them. Yet, some concrete and specific activities had to be undertaken to give substance and structure to our work. Here is what we did in the first months of our work:

Mapping:

The first step in working with pavement

dwellers is to find out where they are. Thus, having defined E ward as our geographical area, we set out to systematically "map" every pavement slum within it. This may seem an obvious step but is often overlooked. Pavement slums occur in a fascinating pattern, and there is a danger of not seeing the woods for the trees. The large, highly visible slums on major roads can easily become the focus of activity, missing out the small, scattered groups in the narrower lanes and gullies.

We also decided to map the public/civic facilities and resources in the area - clinics, hospitals, schools, welfare centres, etc. This way, we ourselves would be equipped with relevant information of use to the people.

Armed with a comprehensive street map of E ward, we walked every street and lane in concentric circles, marking every group of pavement huts - which we called a "cluster" - on the map until we reach the centre-point. We also did a rough hut-count as we went along. We located 39 clusters ranging in size from 10 to 200 huts.

The "mapping" exercise was also very consciously used to familiarise people with our faces, and to strike up conversations with women. The most often-asked questions were: "Why are you doing this?" "What do you want?" "What are you going to do for us?" and "If you are social workers, why don't you give us something?" These questions were fielded carefully, explaining that we did not plan to "give" anything except information; we did not want to make people dependent;

but we would like to sit with them and talk about different things.

These conversations were by no means easy. We ourselves often felt frustrated and even foolish at the lack of some specific "purpose"; women would often look at us as if we were wasting time! But in retrospect, this intended vagueness intrigued women far more than if we had talked to them with a clear agenda, thus creating a need for further interaction.

Cluster Profiles:

Once mapping was completed, we began visiting each cluster regularly and trying to establish rapport with the women. During this time, we found that women knew very little about the cluster as a whole. We therefore devised a "cluster profile", a list of some 20 items of basic information about each group. The cluster profile served several purposes:

- 1) It provided a set of basic data about each pavement slum, including their states of origin, duration of residence in the city and on this pavement, water source, toilets, major occupations of men, women and children, health facilities used, whether they possess ration cards, whether they are registered on electoral rolls, etc.;
- 2) It enabled women to learn about their own communities while sharing information with us;

- 3) Since the cluster profile required women to consult each other before providing answers acceptable to all, it initiated the process of collective reflection and discussion and of looking at the environment more objectively;
- and 4) It provided a structured format for our interaction with women, throwing up the issues which concerned them most in a spontaneous manner and through discussion of these, we were able to establish our credentials and methods of work more clearly than a hundred explanations.

For example, women in one cluster wanted to get ration cards, and explained the failure of their past attempts to do so through the usual middle men. Would we get them ration cards? No, but we could all go to the ration office together and find out how to get cards. Thus a group of women and a couple of SPARC workers set off for the ration office, obtained application forms, got the procedures explained, understood what information had to be put on the form, etc. We played the role of scribes (since none of the women could write). In a short time, therefore, these women not only got ration cards but understood a lot about what to expect from SPARC.

Cluster profiles were the main focus of our work from April to May. Photography was also extensively used during this time - indeed photography is a keystone of our total strategy.

When women see their own and others' pictures, lively discussions are the inevitable result.

The search for an office:

Until April, our contacts with women were one-sided in that it was always we who went to them - we had no office or place where women could seek us out if they so wished. All meetings were held on the pavements, in a clear space or in someone's hut.

But during the mapping of civic facilities, we discovered an empty garage at a municipal dispensary right in the heart of E ward and surrounded by pavement slums. It was large enough to seat at least 30 on the floor, with a large open area just outside. We approached the BMC Health Department, under whose jurisdiction this clinic lay, to explore the possibility of renting the garage as an office.

After some discussions with them and with the Municipal Commissioner, it was agreed that SPARC could rent the garage for our work. We took possession of the place on the 24th April 1985, and immediately began extensive repairs since the place was in very bad repair. It was only in June that we were actually able to use the office as a base.

Funding:

It was also during this early period that we received our first grant. Although we had

applied to several governmental and non-governmental agencies for funding as far back as October, 1984, the Women's Cell of the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, was the first to sanction us a grant for working with poor migrant women in urban slums. This was a long-awaited event, since we could now pay for the core staff and activities of one to three area resource centres in three years.

The Monsoon:

End-June was a depressing period when the fury of the elements put paid to our field work for more than two weeks. The monsoon rains lashed the city with unusual fury, and our area, a low-lying one prone to flooding, became a disaster area in 24 hours. Hundreds of pavement families had to abandon their dwellings and take shelter in nearby buildings. Our newly-repaired office was four feet deep in water for nearly three days.

At this time, although unable to carry on field work and cluster meetings, we tried to understand how people coped with such calamities. We found that many families whose women worked as domestic servants in nearby buildings were given shelter by their employers during the worst of the floods. We also used this enforced lull to review the past months' work and plan activities for the coming months. Primarily, we decided to:

- 1) Provide feedback to all clusters about the information gathered from them and

collectively analyse it;

- 2) Focus on features common to several clusters and attempt to define common issues;

and 3) identify clusters which were most ready for formation of women's groups and begin working with them.

Unfortunately, circumstances overset this plan, as we shall see.

PHASE II : JULY TO SEPTEMBER, 1985

The Supreme Court Judgment on Pavement Dwellers:

Just as we began to implement the work plan described above, an event occurred which rendered it meaningless: on July 11, 1985, the Supreme Court delivered judgment on what is generally called "the Pavement Dweller Case", which had been sub judice for four years from 1981, when a stay order had first been obtained to stop mass demolitions in the city at that time.

While paying lip service to all the socio-economic factors leading to pavement dwelling, the judgment in essence gave the Bombay Municipal Corporation (hereafter, BMC) permission to evict all "unauthorised" dwellings and structures without

the provision of alternative shelter, as per the provisions of the BMC Act of 1888.

The judgment had a devastating impact on pavement and slum dwellers alike. Within a few days, many people, especially women, began coming to SPARC's office in search of advice, help, or reassurance. In the general state of panic which ensued, we found that many people had very distorted versions of the judgment, often thanks to rank misreporting, especially in the vernacular press. For instance, one paper carried the headline: "Footpairiwalon ke liye khush khabar" (Good news for pavement dwellers).

While we in SPARC had anticipated the possibility of having to deal with the eviction issue at some time, we were not ready to deal with it at that point. Many demands and expectations were perceptible from the people, and we had to be careful about how we responded to these.

After intensive discussions amongst ourselves, we came to the following conclusions: since the focus of our work was migrant women living on pavements, we had to deal with whatever issue affected their lives critically; their immediate crisis was the threat of eviction from their homes without any alternative; consequently, this would have to be the focus of our interaction with them. We then went on to define the role SPARC could play as follows:

- 1) As a resource centre, women and their families should be provided factual information about the judgment and its implications;

- 2) SPARC should meet all the concerned authorities who might be involved in or influence the implementation of the judgment in order to understand what they proposed to do and take this feedback to the people;
- 3) Represent to these authorities the people's concerns and their need for relevant information about the how, when, and where of any proposed demolitions so that they may evolve alternatives;
- and 4) Identify and undertake any necessary activities which would assist people in facing both the immediate crisis and also fulfil more long-term goals.

Dissemination of Information:

These defined roles then took shape in the form of action. First we visited every cluster in our ward and discussed the details of the judgment with people, especially the women. This process was often questioned by the menfolk, who felt we were wasting valuable information on women who were by nature incapable of understanding such complexities! But we overcame this hurdle by explaining that since demolitions generally take place during the day, when the men are away at work, it was vital for women to know what to expect and how to cope.

However, we held weekly meetings in the office to which all were invited for further discussions.

These meetings were so arranged that people from several different clusters would attend, thus promoting feelings of a common cause and unified planning and discussion.

The content and nature of these meetings deserves special mention: the initial reaction, especially among women, was that of fear. The most common questions that arose were: "What will become of us?" "Where can we go if we are thrown out?" But gradually, people began answering their own questions. The vast majority affirmed that they had no place to go; returning to their villages would provide only a temporary respite - they had neither work, shelter nor land there, and would not be tolerated for long by relatives, if indeed they had any. Moreover, the initial feelings of fear and despair soon turned into more positive attitudes: they soon began questioning the validity of the judgment, and recognised their right to alternatives as citizens of the country who had only migrated to Bombay for survival.

Interaction with Officials:

At another level, SPARC sought meetings with various officials of the BMC, including the Municipal Commissioner, Additional Municipal Commissioner (Encroachments), and others. We found them quite open - they made it clear that they had no intention of undertaking mass demolitions without any thought for the plight of the affected. They seemed genuinely concerned to find a humanitarian solution to the problem. They offered to give full consideration to any plan SPARC might care to work

out for the resettlement of pavement dwellers in E ward. They also informed us that the BMC intended to undertake demolitions in a 'phased' manner, starting only with those areas where pavement dwellings clogged traffic movement on key arterial roads and where important public works projects (such as laying water supply pipes or storm drainage) had been held up by the presence of the clusters. Our meetings with state government officials such as the Chief Secretary confirmed this.

Interaction with other Voluntary Action Groups:

Simultaneously, SPARC also participated in a number of meetings and joint action committees convened by other voluntary organisations, lawyers' groups, and concerned citizens in the city. These meetings brought to light certain commonalities: pavement dwellers were highly isolated, and had no well-defined local leadership or organisation to represent them to civic authorities and policy-makers - especially in comparison to slum dwellers. Only those pockets which had repeatedly faced demolitions had developed some degree of local organisation to meet this intermittent crisis, although here too the leadership was often tired, complained of lack of unity among the people, and occasionally corrupt. Finally, some pavement clusters which had enterprising leaders were busy trying to obtain reliefs or alternate sites for themselves, while others who lacked this benefit simply awaited their fate.

As of mid-August, no consensus had been

reached in any of these forums about a course of action, and heated debates took place about what pavement dwellers should and shouldn't do, without much reference to the people themselves. We at SPARC did not think people should be told what to do (since the consequences of any action would affect them, not the outsiders); people should determine the course of action which was most functional to them through collective discussions and decision-making. In order to do this more effectively, they needed as much information as possible, especially about what options were available and what the spin-offs of each would be.

Data Search on Pavement Dwellers:

At around this time, SPARC began to scan all available sources for literature on pavement dwellers and on public housing programmes. In all our meetings with both officials and action groups we were struck by the blatant lack of facts and figures. No one seemed to know exactly how many pavement dwellers lived in the city, and how many would be affected by the proposed demolitions. It therefore became clear that any kind of advocacy, whether for alternate accommodation or any other kind of assistance, was meaningless in the absence of this crucial data.

Meanwhile, government spokesmen kept repeating that only those covered in the Maharashtra Government's 1977 census of slums would be provided alternate sites. But even the Additional Collector of Slums and Encroachments admitted that pavement dwellers had not been included in this census.

On the other hand, a study of various public housing schemes and the city's development plans made it clear that these referred only to slum 'upgrading' and 'rehousing'. Rehousing of pavement dwellers seemed not to have featured at all in any public housing or urban development policy/planning exercises. Thus, while pavement dwellers were all around us, just as much as slums, they were virtually invisible as far as any planned enumeration, rehousing or development efforts were concerned.

The Census:

It was against this background that SPARC decided, in mid-August, to undertake a census of all pavement dwellers in E ward. We saw the census as fulfilling several meaningful purposes:

- 1) To create an information base specifically about pavement dwellers which would make them visible, and enable people to represent their situation in an informed manner;
- 2) To generate information about the causes of their migration and reasons for living on the pavement;
- 3) To determine the role played by them, particularly the women, in the city's economy;
- 4) To influence both short-term and long-term urban development/ planning;

- 5) To perform this census as a demonstration exercise proving the need for and feasibility of a similar exercise by the BMC and/or state government on a city-wide scale as a precondition to finding a humane solution to the problem;
- and 6) Most important, to elevate the debate on pavement dwelling from the level of opinion, myth and prejudice to that of fact and reality.

From mid- to end-August, cluster meetings were held in every area and in the office to discuss the census idea with the people. The concept of their statistical invisibility and the power of facts and figures found ready acceptance, but many were cynical about the outcome; they had participated in many smaller surveys before and had never received any feedback either about the results or their impact. However, our pledge to provide a copy of each cluster's data in the local language as well as the total census results to each area reassured them and the people supported the entire undertaking.

During the same period, a questionnaire was developed and pre-tested, and 15 investigators recruited from a market research agency. It was further decided that the census should cover not only E ward but also families living on the pavements of the major arterial roads of South Bombay, as the latter were to be the first targets in the proposed demolitions, according to newspaper reports.

While pre-testing the questionnaire, the value of each item of information was discussed, so that people understood why it was asked and what the answer would tell the world about their life and work. All these attempts at involving people fully in the census made it their own, and the speed, accuracy and efficiency with which it was completed is mainly a result of people's whole-hearted support.

Data collection began on the 30th August and was finished on 29th September, 1985. This haste was warranted by the fact that demolitions were scheduled to commence on November 1st - if the census was to have any impact at all, the report of the results had to be out by mid-October. Thus in the short space of one month, 6,054 households with 26,583 population had been canvassed by 15 investigators continuously supervised by 6 SPARC staff working almost round the clock. One in every 10 questionnaires was crosschecked by a SPARC worker. The presence of SPARC staff at every cluster where investigators were deployed was doubly reassuring to people, since they could approach us for any doubt or clarification on the spot.

Questionnaires were coded as they poured in by a team of first four and later eight coders, so that all questionnaires had been despatched for electronic data processing by October 2nd.

At the end of September, SPARC received a grant from Terre des Hommes (TDH) to start either another area resource centre or for additional staff inputs in the Byculla ARC. The TDH grant

was a godsend at this point since it helped us absorb some of the census expenses.

PHASE III : OCTOBER TO DECEMBER, 1985

The Census Report, "We, the Invisible":

Computer processing of the census data posed a number of problems. This was the only part of the exercise in which we were totally out of control and dependent on computer professionals. The size and complexity of the data was such that each run threw up a host of problems. While we had anticipated many crises, thanks to the mind-boggling ambitiousness of our undertaking, it was, ironically, only the high-technology end of it which proved problematic.

The computer-related delays were a real crisis because SPARC had called a press conference on October 14th to release the results of the census. This meant not only getting the final data but analysing it, writing, and printing the report by October 14th.

We received the final ("de-bugged") printouts only on the night of October 12th. Through a superhuman effort, the data was analysed, the report writing completed, and 100 copies of it obtained in time for the press conference thanks to a committed printer who worked through the night to deliver the goods.

The census report was titled "We, the Invisible"

to signify the invisibility of this population from the point of view of planning or an understanding of what leads to the phenomenon of pavement dwelling. The report was released to the press as scheduled and received wide coverage especially in the English papers. Despite some malicious misreporting and the absence of the vernacular press (who had been personally invited), the press coverage of the report made considerable impact. The effect was heightened by the fact that the results of an All-Bombay census of pavement dwellers undertaken by the College of Social Work (Nirmala Niketan), Bombay University, were released the next day (October 15th), and closely paralleled every one of our findings.

It is important to note that the Nirmala Niketan's census commenced several weeks after ours, in late September, and so there was no question of any duplication of other efforts. In fact, when SPARC first suggested the idea of a census, it was not considered feasible in the short time left before the demolitions were to begin - which is why we proceeded on our own.

On the day of the press conference, we also delivered copies of the census report to the Central and State Government Ministers, officials, and judges, BMC officials, and concerned individuals. Hindi and Marathi versions of the report were also brought out and distributed among pavement dwellers and also to groups working in the districts from which many pavement families have migrated, shortly after the press conference. Copies of the report have also been sent to leading state and national research, teaching, and planning institutions.

Feedback of Census Data to the People:

Apart from the distribution of the report, we kept our pledge of giving the census data back to people. Several sets of charts were prepared by our staff, each graphically depicting some aspect of the census results - the number of families and individuals (men, women and children) surveyed; the main occupational groups and income levels; the states and districts of origin; and the major causes of migration to the city. Even though people were not always able to relate to all the items of information, or to grasp the significance of the statistics, the feedback did generate a lot of discussion and awareness. The most important impact, perhaps, was the realisation that they were not just a scattered handful but thousands and thousands of people sharing the same plight. This gave them an unknown sense of strength and significance: "If there are so many of us, surely government must do something! We cannot be swept away like dust!" The realisation that hundreds of similar families had left their rural homes for the same reasons - unemployment, drought, poverty - was also empowering.

Rallies and Marches:

Around mid-October, several political parties organised marches and rallies on the eviction issue. Pavement dwellers were being called every other day to participate in one or the other. Many people approached SPARC for guidance. Our role here was to explain the purpose and value of this type of mobilisation, what

influence such mobilisation has on the outcome of any issue, and its role in the democratic process. We also emphasised the need to participate in such events in an informed manner - to know the precise purpose, the demands being presented, whether these demands reflect one's own, etc. We neither persuaded nor dissuaded, but encouraged people - especially women - to decide whether or not to participate and then to do so not as a herd but with a clear understanding.

The Passing of the Crisis:

By November 1st, 1985, it became apparent that mass evictions were being shelved for the time being. For various reasons (which will be analysed elsewhere in a separate publication), the moral and political imperative of providing people with alternative shelter was recognised on all hands. The BMC and state government seemed to have decided to seek a more just and long-term solution to the problem; and one less fraught with the potential for violence. This provided a much needed respite to the pavement dwellers and to groups like ours whose routine work had been completely overwhelmed by the demolition crisis.

Official Reaction to "We the Invisible":

Another significant aspect of SPARC's activities in November was our many meetings with state government and BMC officials to discuss our report. At the risk of being immodest, "We the Invisible"

had made a considerable impact on these officials. They have taken cognizance of its major findings, and have invited us for discussions to help identify concrete 'solutions'.

Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, there has also been a tendency to demand that since we have attempted to represent and elucidate the situation and problems of the pavement dwellers, we must also provide facile solutions to the problem, and that too 'practical' ones. This we have steadfastly refused to do on the grounds that not only is the problem and its solution highly complex, but the need to evolve alternatives with the people most affected viz., pavement dwellers, and not with outside groups who claim to represent them. We can only indicate the basic diagnosis and some lines of treatment, which lie in the overall development strategy as manifested by the industrial, rural development and urban land-use policies. There is an urgent need to study the complex dynamics which lead to pavement dwelling: for instance, the vast majority of pavement people are employed in the city's growing informal sector at well below minimum wages, with no hope of acquiring proper shelter in the astronomically expensive housing market of Bombay. A deeper understanding of these dynamics will eschew oversimplified answers which cannot be called 'solutions' since they are neither effective nor socially just.

Internal Evaluation of SPARC:

December heralded the completion of one full year - a most eventful one - for SPARC. We all

felt the need at this point to reflect on the events and activities of the past year and put them into some perspective. Therefore, in the month of December, we spent two days a week on an internal review, the other days being utilised for cluster meetings where we again set in motion the business of working with women and integrating the experiences of the preceding months with them. Several resource persons also participated in the evaluation exercise.

Looking Back:

In retrospect, SPARC moved at a very accelerated pace in 1985, and often in totally unanticipated directions. The year was as traumatic as it was eventful. The eviction crisis was like a burst of adrenalin which speeded up our work with pavement communities and enabled us to establish a close rapport with the people, particularly women, much faster than is normally possible. We were fortunate that the role we assigned ourselves was not only within our capacity, but totally accepted by the people.

We see the main challenge of 1986 as building on this foundation and nurturing the sense of unity and collective change which was born in 1985. The enormous quantity of data generated by the census has also created a strong base for further research and action programmes in the coming year.

The stress and pressure under which we worked has more than established our credibility in the eyes of the people. We ask for no more.

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