



Community police stations in Mumbai's slums

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SUMMARY: This paper describes how an alliance between slum dwellers' federations and the police has set up community police stations in the slums of Mumbai and Pune, and explains how these operate.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE POLICE IN Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in India have started a partnership with community organizations to provide police services in the "slums". Although slums are home to more than half of Mumbai's 15 million inhabitants, they are generally considered to be places that should not receive public services. But the police recognize that their inhabitants have the right to police services, and that they live in conditions where police services are much needed.

II. WHAT HAS BEEN DONE

BY SEPTEMBER 2004, 65 slums in Mumbai had "slum police *panchayats*", each made up of ten representatives from the slum (seven women, three men) and a local police officer. Each community representative is a police *sayayak* (helper), and wears a photo-badge authorized by Mumbai's Police Commissioner, A N Roy. But they are appointed by residents' organizations, not by the police. The community also makes available a room in each slum, where the police are based and which also serves as an office for the police *panchayat* (Photo 1).



Photo 1: Community police station in Mankhurd
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Photo 2: Community police volunteers in Mankhurd
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These *panchayats* are responsible for policing in their area. They establish a permanent partnership between the police and slum residents. Residents get to know their local police constables, and this also ensures more police accountability to the local population. In turn, the police know they have partners working with them within each slum. The decision to have a majority of women on each police *panchayat* is in recognition of the fact that women are disproportionately the victims of crime, and often face problems of domestic violence (Photo 2). In addition, in Mumbai, there are strong savings and credit groups formed by women slum and pavement dwellers (*Mahila Milan*) and these support the police *panchayats*. Each police *panchayat* is opened with a public celebration, where community representatives tie flower bracelets on the wrists of each police officer, and receive their official card/badge.

The community volunteers help patrol the settlement to maintain law and order. They also seek to resolve disputes before they escalate into violence or other crimes. Slum inhabitants can bring disputes to this police *panchayat*, which meets every day, and under the auspices of the local police many complaints and conflicts are resolved. The police *panchayats* have proved able to resolve many issues such as domestic quarrels and disputes between neighbours over plot or house boundaries. Thus, they resolve small disputes that are known locally as *murgi ke uppar jhagde* – “fighting over chickens”. They also help to prevent disputes from escalating into violence or problems of public order. For the slum inhabitants, these police *panchayats* are much quicker and easier to use than going to the police to lodge a formal complaint. They also feel more confident about making complaints, as they know some of the community volunteers and the police. This also frees up police time to allow them to concentrate on crimes, as a

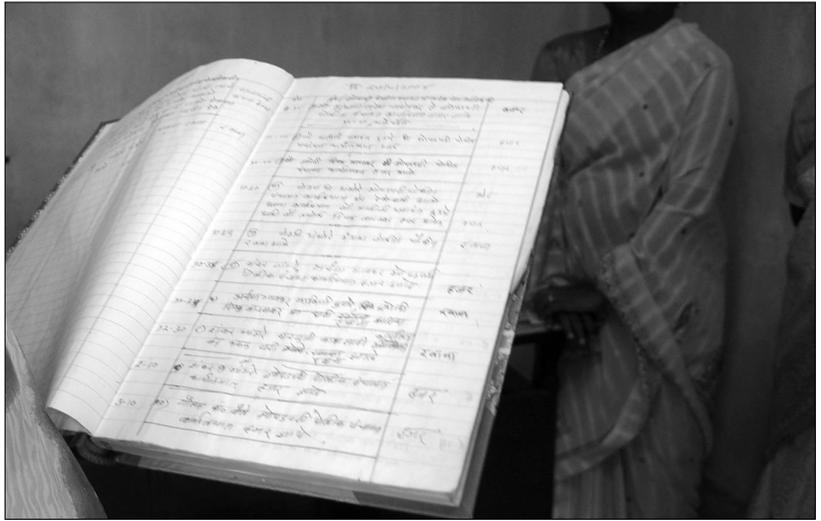


Photo 3: Each police *panchayat* has a book that records who was on duty and what issues were dealt with

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large proportion of police time is taken up responding to minor disputes and quarrels, and preparing official documents about these.

One example of a dispute that was resolved concerned a woman who worked as a domestic servant. She came to the police committee after her employer, who had not paid her for six months, refused to pay. When she complained to her employer, her employer called the police and lodged a complaint against her for unruly behaviour. After a local police committee discussed this with the servant, they concluded that she was innocent and that the employer should pay her what she was owed. The police made sure that she received her back pay; without the support of the committee she would never have succeeded.

The volunteers are clear that they do not have police powers and that dispute resolutions are undertaken by the group as a committee, with details of all the cases discussed being carefully recorded (Photo 3). In some slums, the police volunteers have also brought pressure on local people who are illegally brewing and selling alcohol to close down, as a way of reducing drunkenness and the violence to which it often contributes. The local *Mahila Milan* have also supported the people who previously made illegal alcohol to develop new livelihoods or have rewarded them with new houses. Without the community volunteers, the police would find it almost impossible to control this.

One of the key characteristics of these police *panchayats* is that they can be implemented on a very large scale without additional resources from the government (which are difficult to negotiate and, even if successful, take a long time to come). They first started because the Police Commissioner promoted the idea, but they are sustained in each locality because they meet the needs of the police: they get free helpers, a safe location within each slum from which to work, and a system that resolves many small disputes without their involvement. They are also rooted in local representative organizations in slums where the stressors that can contribute to violence and crime are obvious – the overcrowded, poor-quality homes and the lack of infrastructure (for instance, for water and sanitation) and civic amenities (schools, open space).

III. THE ORIGINS OF THE SLUM POLICE PANCHAYATS

BEFORE BECOMING MUMBAI'S Police Commissioner, A N Roy had been Police Commissioner in Pune, a city with over 2 million inhabitants, 40 per cent of whom live in slums. He was considering how to extend police services to the slums and was considering partnerships with local NGOs. But in discussions with A Jockin, president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation, the idea of community police stations and *panchayat* committees developed. Most slums in Pune (and Mumbai) have strong community organizations that are members of the National Slum Dwellers Federation or *Mahila Milan* ("women together"), groups who work in alliance with the slum dwellers federations. *Mahila Milan* groups had been very active in Pune, setting up and managing community-designed toilet blocks in the slums, and supporting communities threatened with eviction to negotiate solutions that were acceptable to them.⁽¹⁾ With such strong, representative community organizations already present in most slums, the structure was in place to support the community police committees. The police *panchayat* scheme was launched in July 2003 in five slums in Pune, and is now present in more than two hundred.

When Police Commissioner A N Roy moved from Pune to Mumbai, it became possible for a similar scheme to take root and expand rapidly in Mumbai, because of the support provided by the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan*. Also, in Mumbai, these locally rooted organizations were already engaged in many other initiatives, including designing and managing many slum rehabilitation schemes and new housing developments for slum and pavement dwellers, community-managed resettlement and hundreds of community toilets. The police *panchayat* scheme was launched in Mumbai in June 2004.

IV. THE FUTURE OF SLUM POLICE PANCHAYATS

AT THE CORE of this innovation is the recognition of the need to change the relationship between slum dwellers and the police. These slum police *panchayats* are helping to reduce the prejudiced responses that slum dwellers so often face when they go to police stations – either to make a complaint or as victims of crime. As the police get to know the inhabitants of the slum where they are based, especially the community volunteers with whom they work, they find that most are law-abiding and helpful. Meanwhile, slum residents will feel more confident about using police services, when needed.

Both the police and the slum dwellers' organizations that are creating and managing these slum police *panchayats* recognize the need for comparable changes in relationships between slum dwellers and other government agencies – for instance, agencies responsible for providing water, sanitation and health care. Work is underway to see how the police rooms within each slum might also provide a location for doctors' consultations and for more constructive relationships with local utilities. The coverage of the slum police *panchayats* is also expanding rapidly in Mumbai, with training sessions for both police and community volunteers, and reviews of the experience to date, to see what improvements can be made.

1. For more details of the community toilets scheme, see Burra, Sundar, Sheela Patel and Tom Kerr (2003), "Community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in Indian cities", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 15, No 2, pages 11–32. For more details of the work of the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan*, and of the Indian NGO, SPARC, that works with them, see *Citywatch India*, which is available from SPARC, PO Box 9389, Mumbai 400 026, India; e-mail: sparc@vsnl.in; also see www.sparcindia.org/