



— MEMOIRS OF AN —

INDIAN SHACK DWELLER

MEN BOUND IN
FELLOWSHIP
FIRST WEEP AND LAMENT
BUT AFTERWARD
THEY
LAUGH
AFTER GREAT STRUGGLES
THEY SUCCEED IN MEETING

I Ching (The Book Of Changes)



SPARC

यहाँ पर बैठना स

RSD
AFF TO:
N.S.D.F. / M.M. / SPARC

President: Mohan S. Deokule
Gen. Secretary: Shankar H. Parab
Asst. Secretary: R. M. Tatil
Work President: Vijay S. Chavhan
Teamer: Shankar Mangarke
Int. Auditor: D. G. Gaonkar
N. H. Wadkar
A. K. B. Shaikh
K. V. Patil

MEMBERS

Shri. M. P. Jadhav
K. D. Ghankar
L. R. Ghankar
Shri. B. Bhungar
P. S. Phasade
A. S. Phasade
A. S. Phasade

MAHILA MILAN
OFFICE



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
BY
SPARC
AND
RAJIV INDIRA SRA CO-OP
HSG. SOC. LTD.
UNDER
SLUM REHABILITATION AUTHORITY
INAUGURATION CEREMONY
ON
SUNDAY, 24-02-2002
IN PRESENCE OF
SHRI. V. RANGANATHAN I.A.S.
CHIEF SECRETARY, GOVT. OF MAHARASHTRA
AS CHIEF GUEST
AND
SHRI. A. JOCKIN
SMT. SHEELA
DIRECT
SHRI. P. S. SHANM
RAJIV IND

N.S.D.F.

GOLDEN
EGG BANK
PH: 24043902
932105442
9422062366
MH-13
R-8056

CHAPTER

01

I was born in Irudaya Puram in the Kolar Gold Field on September 15, 1946. I came from a large family. I was the second of eight children. I was a sickly boy and almost died of smallpox in early childhood. I was raised by my grandmother, who was the real authority in the household. My mother, P, was a simple woman who did the chores and kept in the background. Both she and her husband were devout Catholics who spent much time in church. I started my schooling at the Kolar Gold Field School, which was run by Indian Catholic priests and nuns who used English as their medium of instruction. My parents wanted me and my brothers to enter the seminary, but the priesthood held no attraction for me. Although my family had moved to the gold fields, they continued to own agricultural land in their old village, which they leased. My father's father used to be a village magistrate in Tamil Nadu. He was wealthy and owned a great deal of land.

But my family's fortune started to spiral downwards when the old man was killed after sending a notorious bandit to prison. My grandmother fled the village with her two young sons and ended up at the Kloor goldfields in Karnataka. Not having the benefit of education my father, C, had to content himself working as a carpenter, but he rose to become a foreman and when I was a young boy he was chief engineer at the goldfields. He was also a freedom fighter affiliated with the Indian Congress Party.

At Kolar we lived in a large terrace house with six or seven rooms and a tiled roof that set it apart from lesser homes in the area. Over the years, however, my father took to drinking and by the time I reached seventh grade my family had lost all its land. Food became scarce at home. The dwindling fortunes drove a wedge between husband and wife, a fact that was not lost on me at all. I lost all interest in school. I remember coming home one day wearing only one worn out shoe. I had thrown the other one away, as a gesture or protest, I guess, over my family's worsening poverty. It was the last time I wore shoes until my late fifties.

My once loving relationship with my father gradually deteriorated until, one day, I announced to him that I was leaving because I no longer wanted to be part of the family. I took ten rupees from a jar I found in the house, put them in my pocket, and left. That evening, I got on a train, without bothering to buy myself a ticket. I was barely sixteen. I got off at Bangalore and, having no place to stay, decided to sleep in front of a church. Gradually I took on odd jobs until I found an inexpensive school where I offered a course in carpentry. I had cousins on my mother's side who were living in Bangalore and doing well as carpenters. One of them offered to take me in as an apprentice. It was my first real job. But I did not stay long in the job because I discovered that I was being paid less than the other workers. Outraged, I left my cousin's house and went back to sleeping outside churches and other buildings. On Saturday nights I used to walk over to the public faucet to have a bath and to do my laundry.

STRAP
YOURSELF
TO THE TREE WITH
ROOTS
YOU AIN'T GOIN'
NOWHERE

Bob Dylan





It was the 1960s and, though I never planned it this way, I was one of millions of migrants moving from the rural areas and the villages to the cities. For me, like so many others, this was not simply a one-stop journey. After two years of struggling in Bangalore I decided to try my luck in Bombay, the huge, bustling commercial centre of India. A friendly relative found out about my plight and invited me to come and live with him and his family in the big city. I was 18 years old. When I arrived in Bombay I discovered that this “uncle” was not as prosperous as I had imagined or been led to believe. In fact he was a petty smuggler in a huge slum called Janata Colony, on the outskirts of the city. Within days of arriving, I decided to move out of my relative’s house. But I remained in the slum, living on the streets. I was a Tamil and in those days I could not speak Hindi or Maharathi, which are the main languages spoken in Bombay. The carpenter’s skills that I had acquired in Bangalore helped me get occasional work as a builder repairing huts.

Janata Colony, like all slums in Bombay, was a bustling neighbourhood. I lived with my fellow construction workers and carpenters in our own quarter in the slum. Very soon I became involved in the community as a whole. When I was jobless, or when I came back to the colony after building a hut, I would organize singing sessions for the children.

After a few months the informal choir became an informal school. Together with other adults from the neighbourhood, I was soon teaching a few hundred children every day. There was a huge pile of garbage, ignored by the authorities, right next to the place where we gave our classes. So I thought up a plan to needle the authorities into doing their job.

At six one Monday morning, several hundred schoolchildren gathered before the rubbish mound. Every child packed about a kilo of garbage into a newspaper. Then, singing and shouting, the children walked to the nearest municipal office - which hadn't yet opened - and dumped the stinking packets outside its doors.

The municipal officials were furious with us. But they agreed to send a truck to remove the garbage from the colony on a regular basis.

*

WE LIVE AMONGST
RIDDLES
MYSTERIES
THE MOST OBVIOUS THINGS,
WHICH COME IN OUR WAY,
HAVE
DARK
SIDES,
WHICH THE QUICKEST SIGHT
CANNOT PENETRATE INTO.

Laurence Sterne



CHAPTER

03



Early in my career as an organizer, I realized that politicians, officials and planners had no grasp of how the poor live and what they want. For that reason alone we could not depend on government to solve our problems. The incident with the school children and the garbage made me realize that change could be achieved if there was a critical mass that demanded change. Authorities, I learned, were not inclined to deal with individual communities or disempowered groups. I also learned that as a slum-dweller, as opposed to a professional I did not need money to be able to organize people. All I needed was people. I quickly became one of Janata Colony's key youth leaders, well known for activities ranging from community cleanups of municipal toilets to arranging illegal water connections.

Then in the late 1960s, the municipality ordered the colony's residents to leave their homes and move to a site a couple of kilometres away, saying that the land was needed by the Government's Atomic Energy Commission to build 700 flats for its employees. The residents protested, pointing out that, unlike most Mumbai slums, which were built on illegally occupied land, Janata Colony had been established by the municipality 20 years earlier.

But the authorities were adamant. A prolonged struggle ensued, with me in the thick of it. I organized road barricades, public meetings and demonstrations. I lobbied top political leaders, and filed court cases against the government.

I was arrested dozens of times - though I also occasionally managed to evade capture by concealing myself in the midst of large groups of slum women. The situation turned serious when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took a personal interest in the Janata Colony case. I went to New Delhi and demanded an audience with her, but she made me and my followers wait for twenty-nine days. I refused to return to Mumbai unless the Prime Minister met with me. I was not successful.

When Mrs. Gandhi eventually gave the signal for the demolition, I circulated pamphlets and leaflets warning in bold red letters that we would bomb the houses of the scientists. The day before the demolition, I met with the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, arguing that me and my people were not contesting government's right to evict us but demanding that due process be observed. The chairman told me, "Even God will not be able to stop it tomorrow."

At 4:30am the next morning, while I was knocking at the chairman's door with a court order for a stay of eviction, about 13,000 policemen, six hundred trucks, and five thousand municipal workers arrived on the scene. Our actions attracted considerable international attention.

But it didn't matter. In May 1976, bulldozers flattened Janata Colony.

TRADITION,
TRADITION,
TRADITION...
YOU BAWL ON THE FLOOR
FOR THE TREE THAT
LOSES ITS LEAVES,
AS IF THE LEAF
WAS THE ROOT!
LEAVE TRADITION ALONE,
SON,
AND WATCH THE ROOT...

Patrick Chamoiseau



CHAPTER

04

During the 1960s with the support of various pro-poor Christian organizations, I travelled to different cities in India meeting slum leaders and housing activists, who were all struggling to check demolitions. We decided to band together and create a National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) with me as president. Today, NSDF has around two million members across 72 Indian cities.

Meanwhile my ideas were changing. I was coming to the conclusion that large-scale improvement in the lives of the urban poor was possible only if strong community organizations worked with the government. But that didn't mean the poor simply accepted whatever the authorities did. That was why so many development projects had failed. The poor had to have a major say in the design and running of such projects. Moreover, they had to prove to the authorities that they could acquire - despite their poverty and lack of formal education - the skills to oversee projects that affected them. This strategy was no magic bullet either. The journey would be long and arduous. Infinite patience would be required. But given the government's unmatched power and resources, there was no other option. In the beginning the Bombay Slum Dwellers Federation was an all-male organization. But pretty soon I discovered that women were the key to developing communities. To me women meant three things: communication, information, and money. These are the ingredients that make development possible. Women talk sense. In India they are like human money purses. They keep their change in their sleeves, in their saris.

Their whole body is their pocket.

You shake them, the money will fall down.

Money is very close to the hearts of women.

You put some money and ten women together.

They will take care of it.

Once you convince women to save money, they will not stop supporting one another. And money is the starting point for women's conversations with other women, as well as with men. Once they discuss money, they soon discuss all issues of importance.

*

MANY THOUSANDS GONE.

Folk song



CHAPTER

05

When Janata Colony was flattened I was arrested. There were rumors floating around that the Government was going to kill me. Somehow the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was alerted and announced to the world that the leader of Janata had been placed in police custody along with his followers and was about to be killed.

My life was spared but it was no longer safe for me to remain in India. I fled to the Philippines where I received training in organizing slum communities at the Tondo Foreshore Area in Manila and later with the Philippines Ecumenical Council for Community Organizations in Cebu City. After that I travelled to other parts of the world. I went to Senegal where I worked with ENDA Tiers Monde. I only returned to India in 1978.

The whole Janata Colony demolition taught me a lesson. I realized that violent resistance was not usually the most effective way of dealing with the Government. My approach changed slowly from agitation and confrontation to negotiation and eventually even collaboration. At the same time, I discovered that as a militant I could knock down opposition with information. When government authorities told me there was no land for resettlement, I was ready with a list of available lands.

My starting point was no longer to simply say “no” to demolition, I was far more effective to try to prevent an eviction by finding out and negotiating “why, what, how, who, where, and when”.

Other militants – especially NGOs criticized me for this change in approach and tactics, but I did not care. I was doing all agitation, breaking this and that, being completely militant, but the material benefit to the people was zero. I couldn’t even build one toilet. I had not even asked the government if it could build that toilet.

*

THE
BACKSLIDING
BEGINS
NOT ALL AT ONCE,
BUT GRADUALLY.

David Simon



CHAPTER

06

In the late 1970's and early 1980's the Bombay Slum Dwellers Federation grew and grew. It soon spread to other cities and we launched the National Slum Dwellers Federation. Then in July 1985 a big thing happened. The Supreme Court ruled that the Bombay Municipal Corporation had the right to start demolishing all the hutments in the city. There was a huge panic. Politicians and radicals talked of resistance, but the women pavement dwellers were not interested.

They knew that in any confrontation with the police their husbands were going to get their heads cracked, they were going to lose all their positions and the hutments would be demolished.

I was a bit of an activist celebrity by then and I used to give talks at the Tata Institute of Social Science. That is where I heard about an interesting organisation called SPARC, short for Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres. It was run by a group of professional women who claimed to be fed up with traditional social work. I met one of the directors. What I liked was that she believed that poor women had to organize themselves. SPARC worked in a suburb called Byculla where there were lots of pavement dwellers. Our Federation, NSDF, did not work with pavement dwellers at all. SPARC worked with the women pavement dwellers and were convinced that women had to be at the centre of community organization, just as they were at the centre of family life.

And then came the demolitions and at first the professional women in SPARC and the pavement dwellers they worked with felt completely powerless. What could be done? To focus public attention on the crisis, SPARC decided to carry out a detailed survey. This showed clearly that pavement dwellers were the poorest and most vulnerable of the city's residents. It also mobilized, united and organized the pavement dwellers and gave them rich information with which to fight the state's demolition agenda.

The survey was released in mid-October and received a lot of public attention. I have to admit that I was impressed, I met SPARC's director and we agreed to join forces. It was an unusual alliance between me - the dirty slum leader from the streets - and a clean-cut upper middle-class activist. Now don't forget that all my colleagues in NSDF were men. But I realized that it was from the women pavement dwellers that our power and future leaders would emerge.

*



MAHILA MILAN
OFFICE

CHAPTER

07

N SDF and Mahila Milan were born out of struggles against evictions. But they did not remain stuck. They still fight evictions every day of the year but they move beyond that. In the beginning they just reacted.

Before Mahila Milan was formed in the early 1980's the women pavement dwellers had no answer to demolitions. They were frightened of the demolition squads of the Bombay Municipal Corporation. They would beg and cry and plead individually and of course eventually their huts got torn down and their belongings carted away in the Municipal trucks.

Then about twenty of them got together as Mahila Milan and with the help of SPARC they began to develop a new collective strategy. The next time the demolition squads came some of the women surrounded them, buying time, while some of the children ran from street to street calling other women to the scene, which was Apna Street in Byculla, near the Katau textile mills. In a few minutes a large crowd had gathered around the demolition squad. This time they were the ones with fear in their eyes.

After a long discussion the women did an amazing thing. Knowing that demolition was inevitable they took a leaf out of Gandhi's book and offered to break down their own huts. They stored their building materials and saved their belongings from confiscation. Nobody got hurt and nobody got arrested, and in a few days the hutments came back and with them came a confidence and a taste of the victories that collective action can bring.

*

SENTIMENT
RULES THE WORLD.
CYNICS SWEAR OTHERWISE
UNTIL ONE DAY
IT FINALLY CATCHES THEM.
WE ARE ALL
IN SEARCH OF THAT 'GRAIN OF SAND'
THAT WILL
RECONCILE
US WITH OURSELVES.
EVEN THOSE WHO ARE JADED
END UP DRAGGING
THEIR BOREDOM
ALL OVER THE WORLD
IN THE SAME
HOPE.

Marie Vieux-Chauvet

WOMEN'S MILAN & HOUSING SAVING CHART							
MM		SPARC		N.S.D.F.			
MONTH	MM SAVING	WITHDRAW	LOAN GIVE	LOAN PAID	S/C	HOUSING SAVING	HOUSING WITHDRAW
OLD BAL.							
APR.	33448	42900	20,000	17095	1791	500	-
MAY	22347	55899		32290	4897	50	-
JUN	33950	18590	25,000	9100	2606	700	-
JUL	40783	41468	-	23600	2716	-	-
AUG	31701	28950	50000	5950	2761	-	390
SEP	31338	19200	10,000	7300	-	-	-
OCT							
NOV							
DEC							
JAN							
FEB							
MAR							



There were no demolitions of hutments in the year after we produced that community-based census of pavement dwellers. The women of the Byculla pavements set up their own organization, which they called Mahila Milan (Women Together). This organization was to help poor, illiterate women in these hutments understand why they could not get land in the city for a house and how to develop a strategy to challenge this.

The city officials told the women that there was no land in Mumbai. It was too congested. So they decided to go on “land searches.” Every weekend, pavement dwelling families set out across the city, travelling ticketless by train, getting off whenever they saw vacant land. They would hold a picnic on the land until they were forced to move on, but gradually they found out who owned many of these vacant plots and how they could try to negotiate to get them. Then they were told that the houses themselves would be too expensive to build. So they started to design their future homes themselves. They got professionals to figure out how they could reduce costs through construction and self-management. That was when the finance people came along and told them they would never be able to afford these houses because they would never be able to get the loans they would need for such a big investment. So they started saving, and then pooling these savings before going back to the banks to challenge them to give out loans to the “risky” pavement dwellers.

The NGOs challenged them and told them it was better to live in a hut on the pavement than move to a more distant space, even if they were able to get a house. So they began to examine the impact of possible relocation on their lives and how they would deal with such difficulties if they ever came to pass. And then they realized it was no good just talking about these things among themselves. They designed a strategy to talk about these issues with Municipal Corporation officials. First of all, these discussions would be held in order to stop the evictions. But in the long run, they would force the Municipal Corporation to accept the logic of the pavement dwellers' proposed solutions.

This was the work of the women. We men in the Federation started to hear about this. Fascinated by these strategies, we began to visit the women on the pavements. Soon slum dwellers from all over Mumbai, and eventually from other cities began to visit other settlements and even other cities to assist and support other communities.

*

IDENTITIES,
LIKE THE SUCCESSIVE
SKINS OF ONIONS,
ARE SHED,
EACH AS SOON AS IT IS COMPLICATED;
CAUGHT IN THE ACT
OF PRETENDING TO BE
CONSCIOUS,
THEY ARE SEEN,
THE CONFIDENCE MEN.

Alexander Trocchi



For about 20 years I was only doing “toy-toy”. Police would arrest me almost every month. But eventually I became so strong that they arrested me only on paper. They would sign my arrest warrant in front of the crowd but would never actually arrest me, because I was always with a crowd of women, always around 5 to 10 thousand women. Police would come to arrest me and the women would open their blouses. Police would be too embarrassed and would go away and I was safe. That is how we used the women and I mean really how we “used” them. Even though they were the ones who took the most risks, we the men were always the ones who made the decisions. Even then I was really arrested more than thirty times, being in and out of jail. And in all those 20 years of fighting, fighting, fighting, I did not even build one toilet, not even one house, but I became a very big leader. Yes I became a very, very big leader but people got nothing. There were headings in the newspaper, television, radio. Everything was “the leader, the leader, the leader.” It did not matter that I, the leader, spoke about people’s power all the time. The people still got nothing.

After 20 years I changed myself. I aligned my organization to the women pavement dwellers of Byculla, Mumbai and their professional support organization. Out of this partnership came a new way of action and a new formula for dealing with slums. It is simple and it is powerful. The state must provide free land, or land at subsidized cost.

The Municipal corporations must provide basic services, like they are meant to do for all their citizens, while communities must get organized to design and manage their settlements - spearheaded by the women. This all comes from dialogue and from engaging the Government, not as victims or lackeys. We take the struggle to the negotiation table.

Since that change 20 years ago I have enabled my movement to build over 70,000 houses plus millions of dollars worth of communal toilets. Today I can go to any city in India and in many other countries and the movements there are building hundreds of thousands of toilets and houses.

When I was fighting I was on the street begging, literally begging. Today my movement is producing development in the millions of dollars, and I still live in a slum. But I am a far better leader because my movement produces real results that people can see and touch and feel. But that does not mean we are always happy with our government. Just now very recently in a very big settlement in Mumbai called Dharavi, the government tried to impose their plans on the people. So we decided to show them our power. We organized 50,000 people to demonstrate and shut down the whole city of Mumbai for a day. But we did not do it just to demand a solution from outside. If we have the solution, government has no choice but to work with us.

Governments will come and go. We are not going anywhere.

*

THE TEARS OF THE
POOR
STIR THE POETS.
THEY DON'T MOVE THE
POETS OF THE LIVING ROOM,
BUT THEY DO MOVE
THE POET OF THE
GARBAGE
DUMP.

Carolina Maria de Jesus



CHAPTER

10

When you live in a slum the threat of eviction is always around you. Most of the time it is like a shadow in the night. You sense its presence but you convince yourself that everything will be OK. But at other times it is a real danger. And when the eviction happens it is an explosion of fear and anger, sorrow and disbelief.

Imagine what it is like to watch your children witness your total powerlessness as police tear down their home, trash their belongings, beat them with batons and hound them with teargas.

These are not criminals we are talking about. This is not an invading army that our forces are repelling across our borders. These are citizens, and as far as the overwhelming majority is concerned, their only crime is that they do not live in a formal neighbourhood and in a formal home.

No wonder evictions make fires of hatred burn in poor people's bellies. But when the bulldozers arrive it is almost always too late. And while it is heroic to fight evictions there is not much sense in fighting battles you are likely to lose if you can prevent them.

And preventing evictions does not mean running away or accepting solutions that are imposed upon you. It means being smart and strategic. Like we were in Mumbai in 2000 when the Railway Authorities came to evict 15,000 slumdweller families who were living along the railway tracks.

When the eviction came we had done our homework. We were ready to use our capacities and our resources to demonstrate an alternative that the State institutions eventually accepted. Believe me this was no easy task. Our preparations for making alternatives work did not only start the day or the week before the demolitions began.

*

VISIONS
OF THE FUTURE
BRING THEM FACE TO FACE
WITH THEIR MOST AGONISING
FEARS,
BUT THEY REJECT THEM.
HOW LONG WILL THEY
ALLOW THEMSELVES
TO BE DAZZLED
BY ONLY THAT
WHICH IS AGREEABLE
TO THEM?
IT IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT,
AND THEY THEMSELVES
DO NOT KNOW.

Rakesh Khairalia





SHACK / SLUM DWELLERS INTERNATIONAL
[SDI]

www.sdinet.org