

# After the Violence: How the Mumbai Riots Changed Life for Muslim's in Chawls

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It was in First Nagpada (E Ward/23) that the Bombay Improvement Trust, more commonly identified as BIT, initiated its ambitious operations in 1898 with a scheme to completely clear and reconstruct the whole quarter, erecting 'model chawls for the industrial classes' [The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island, Vol. III, 1909]. First Nagpada, at that time had 'the unenviable notoriety of being the unhealthiest area in Bombay'<sup>1</sup> as it had suffered severely from the bubonic plague epidemic that broke out in the city in the late 1890s.<sup>2</sup> The colonial administration attributed the plague outbreak to locality-specific conditions of overcrowding, filth and squalor prevalent in Mumbai's inner-city neighbourhoods which housed much of the city's working classes. Their solution was to set up the Trust to specifically mitigate the abysmal living conditions of the urban poor and restore health of the city.<sup>3</sup> This involvement by the state in the "sphere of urban development, through the creation of a special agency devoted solely to the purpose of civic restructuring, was the first attempt of its kind in colonial India" [Kidambi 2007].

The BIT set about knocking down dilapidated neighbourhoods and buildings, opening up overcrowded areas and constructing what it termed as 'sanitary dwellings' for the city's poor and laboring classes. Besides First Nagpada, tenement blocks or chawls were also constructed in Second Nagpada, Mandvi, Imamwada, Agripada and others. Even these 'model' and 'sanitary' housing blocks were quite often divided by caste, class and religion.

Almost 110 years after the first BIT chawls were built in Mumbai's inner-

city mohallas, the process of demolishing and rebuilding has begun again at some of them. Like the Imamwada BIT chawls in Dongri. And significantly the process of redevelopment is bringing together communities that once faced each other on either side of a curfew line.

A set of seven decrepit chawls tucked off the busy Ibrahim Rehmatullah road, the Imamwada BIT chawls have traditionally housed workers of the municipality, port, and police. Some residents now also have small businesses or work as service professionals. While four chawls (Nos. 1,5,6,7) are exclusively Muslim, three chawls (Nos. 2,3,4) are predominantly Hindu. During the 1992-93 communal riots the area remained tense and violence-prone for days – the Laxmi Narayan temple in the vicinity was burnt, mobs on the loose attacked buildings, shoot-at-sight orders were in place, endless curfew caused shortages of milk and bread, the police and SRP jawans brutally forced their way into the Muslim-dominated chawls dragging men away for questioning and harassing women and children with communal taunts and jibes. Though Dongri is known to be a communally-sensitive area, the two communities had lived side-by-side with little conflict on a daily basis. But the exchanges between them had been limited. Some of their children played with each other in the spaces between the buildings; some of the people interacted at festivals.

"We were so scared and anxious during the riots, some days it was even tough to make it to the community toilets as we feared being shot dead," recalls 65-year-old retired municipal school

teacher Mohammad Farooque Sarang, resident of a 135 sq.foot room in BIT Chawl No. 5. "When the curfew finally lifted, many of us wept with relief." Sarang admits that "stones were thrown from both (Hindu and Muslim) sides" during the riots but he insists that it was "outside miscreants" and the police who created most of the trouble in 1992-93. After the riots, relations between the communities soured – "dudh aur shakkar alag ho gaye the (the milk and sugar had separated)", he says almost poetically.

But through perseverance and communication the Hindus and Muslims of Imamwada chawls have attempted to sweeten the milk again. Today they are a commendable example of how community links can be restored even after vicious fighting and painful losses. Much credit for this goes to the Imamwada chawl mohalla committee which was set up in the aftermath of the violence of the early 1990's. Through the mohalla committee – and its supportive friends, namely peace activist Sushobha Barve, retired cop Julio Ribeiro and then Police Commissioner Satish Sahney – local Muslims, Hindus and the police came together to keep the peace and dialogue going [Sharma 2002].

After several meetings with the young people and women of both communities in Imamwada revealed that there was no space to meet the needs of young people to interact, play, study and read, the mohalla committee took over three classrooms in a disused municipal school in the neighbourhood and turned them into a community centre, with a study room, a table tennis room and a newspaper reading room. Later, computer classes also began at the centre. At the

<sup>1</sup> Annual Administration Report of the Bombay Improvement Trust (AARBIT), 1902, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1896 and 1914, the bubonic plague epidemic claimed an estimated 183,984 victims in Bombay city. See Kidambi (2007).

<sup>3</sup> According to J.P. Orr, one of the Trust's early chairmen, "... the Improvement Trust may be expected to clear large areas of insanitary buildings... which should be replaced by buildings conforming to a much stricter standard of sanitation." ["How to Check the Growth of Insanitary Conditions In Bombay City", The Proceedings of the Third all India Sanitary Conference Held at Lucknow, January 19th to 27th 1914 (4 vols, Calcutta, 1914) , iv, p. 106]

same time, the JJ Marg Police station was encouraged to give a few volleyballs and nets to the young boys, who created courts in the space between the buildings. At first, the young men played only with those of their community, till some local police officers decided to encourage them to play volleyball with each other by initiating a match between the Hindu and Muslim boys of Imamwada and the police. A modicum of communal harmony was achieved by “bringing the Hindu and Muslim boys together on a volleyball court” [Barve 2003].

If the mohalla committee helped initiate the peace, then the ‘Hafeez Contractor’-inspired towers that are now being planned as part of the Imamwada BIT redevelopment plan may well cement the peace deal. “We’ve all found a common platform here. We want to save our homes,” says Sarang. “We all live as tenants in ageing buildings that can fall down any day, we all desire to have our own place, so we are now all going in for redevelopment. The chawls will be replaced by modern towers.”

The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, who is the landlord of these chawls, has given its no-objection to redevelopment of the chawls as independent flats. The whole exercise involves a local builder, more than 700 tenants, and all seven Imamwada BIT chawls who have come together as four cooperative housing societies. In return for about a lakh square feet of built-up saleable area, the builder has offered them seven 23-storey buildings with each tenant receiving a fully-owned flat measuring more than 300 sq.ft. Deals are in the final stage of being

inked with transit accommodation and rental money being finalised.

According to Sarang, coordinator of the Baitul Aman Cooperative Housing Society which represents Chawl Nos. 5 and 7, initially just the ‘Muslim’ chawls participated in the redevelopment plan but then their ‘Hindu’ chawl neighbours joined in as well. “United together we stand to gain a better deal from the builder,” says Sarang, who has spent his entire life at the Imamwada chawls. His father came from Jaunpur in 1930 to work at Mazagaon docks and rented a room at the BIT chawls then for “just 50 annas a month”.

Today his son, a Unani medicine doctor, his grandson and brother all live in rooms down the corridor. “I like the community life in the chawl, we look out for each other. I hope that doesn’t change when we move to flats in another two-three years,” says Sarang, who has always wished to experience life in a flat. “My eldest brother warns me that apartment life changes people’s lives, children forget their values, people get distanced from their religious tenets and get more materialistic.” But Sarang is realistic enough to note that he sees the not-so-good changes in chawl life too – people not valuing community feelings, youngsters going wayward, the rifts growing between various Muslim groups in the chawl such as the Shias and Sunnis as well as the Deobandis and Barelvis. At times, the school teacher, who received the Mayor’s award for the best teacher in the year 2000, also worries that a flat may give no security at a time of a riot. But then at one time neither did a room in a chawl.

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