

Culture Counts: Civic Activism in Mumbai

Historically Bombay - now Mumbai - has always been a cosmopolitan city with several diverse communities having their roots in it, giving it its vibrant and progressive ethos. This turned it into a magnet which attracted a cross section of people from across India.

Until the 1960s, Mumbai was a contained City with the population and infrastructure largely supporting each other. Ironically, most of this infrastructure was laid by the British, still serving the Island City well, compared to what has been undertaken subsequently post independence. There were no major problems. Citizens had good pavements to walk on, traffic was smooth and well-controlled, suburban trains had not reached the super crush stage, the Police force was respected and dependable. Water and electric supply was adequate. Citizens had no real need to interact with the Municipality at the Ward level for day to day problems. With the exponential growth of population and a break-down of services and infrastructure, the City's decline slowly began. With this reality a civic conscious citizenry began questioning the reason for the City's deterioration and demanding what they felt was their due. This was the beginning of Civic Activism undertaken by enthusiastic volunteers.

The topography of this narrow Peninsular City brought forth huge problems mainly because of the shortage of land. The City grew northward in a basically unplanned manner. No social housing of any consequence was constructed since the 1960s; hence all those who came looking for jobs could not rent a place resulting in slums

mushrooming on open land. This was illegal but happened with impunity as the authorities either turned a blind eye or encouraged them. Politicians saw this as a way to grab land by promoting schemes in the name of the poor but in reality it is only a money-making opportunity. The unscrupulous builder-mafia nexus joined the fray and Mumbai's scarce land became free-for-all. This was vote bank politics at its worst.

The result of this downward spiral was that the once renowned Bombay Municipality, now the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) began to fail and was unable to tackle efficiently the new demands. Corruption became a way of life where land, which should have been held in trust for the citizens of Mumbai by its guardians, was being bartered and sold by them. They did not care that once 'sold' it could never be recovered and that their future generations would be deprived of their legitimate inheritance. They did not want to accept that a well-planned humane public space is no luxury, but a necessity for the physical, mental and social health of people. Without it, cities become a collection of crowded, unhealthy neighbourhoods, depriving especially its children and senior citizens, of outdoor recreation. It also makes a city of poor quality - for living, business or investment. The National Building Code laid down an ideal ratio of 4 acres per 1000 persons of open land; Mumbai has a dismal ratio of 0.03 acres and shrinking. Alas, it is the short-sightedness of immediate gain driving this!

Regarding Mumbai's civic services and governance, the less said the

better. Garbage (Solid Waste) was being badly managed, making the city stink and look grungy. The shortage of housing led to land prices soaring. There was a political and builder onslaught on the rich built heritage and Reserved Public Open Spaces. Politics began turning competitive at community and religious festivals creating its own frenzied and noisy reality without caring for those who suffered the consequences. Traffic control deteriorated as did all police services dealing with Law & Order. Sadly nothing except the spirit of Mumbai's citizens was left to commend the city once called "URBS PRIMA IN INDIS" (First City of India).

Concerned citizens began forming themselves into groups, to tackle the problems they saw before them. Two of the first such groups were - Save Bombay Committee (1970-71) and Bombay Bachao Committee (1977) which subsequently became the well-known Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG 1979). These citizens were obviously alarmed with what was happening to their City and wanted to 'SAVE' it. These groups were followed by the rise of Resident Associations which were local in nature and concerned about their immediate neighbourhood. More organisations were formed - each one to engage in civic issues. Besides the practical problems of their areas that they wanted to solve, these organisations realised that looking into poor Governance and Policy issues was also vital for long term solutions. One could see that even without the 74th Amendment of the Constitution of India devolving power to the citizens having been put into effect, citizens had become pro-active and began pushing the Government

and the Municipality to hear them and deliver unto them their rights. They were no longer willing to accept the adage that Government was the Mai-Baap doing its best for the citizenry.

Campaigns and Projects

There are far too many instances, campaigns and projects. Some would well illustrate how activists worked together, as well as opposed and litigated against the authorities. What became apparent was that, as corruption and greed increased, activists were as determined to oppose it. Their motivation was to protect their neighbourhoods and thereby Mumbai from bad, rapacious and anti-citizen policies and to make Mumbai a livable city. The Right to Information tool has been very useful in this battle and Mumbaikars have used it to great advantage.

Heritage

One of the first sustained campaigns in Mumbai to preserve a heritage building was the one undertaken by BEAG for the Old Yacht Club. This building was saved after a long and hard struggle with the highest in the land, including the Prime Minister Shri Morarji Desai, Dr. Raja Ramanna and several politicians and senior bureaucrats. It was saved and is being restored by a conservation architect engaged by the Department of Atomic Energy which was once keen to demolish it. This successful campaign gave an impetus to both BEAG and others to take up many more Heritage issues. Shyam Chainani, one of the founders of BEAG says in his book 'Heritage & Environment - An Indian Diary' that "the real significance of the Old Yacht Club story lies in what it triggered off".

The story of the Listing of Mumbai's built heritage is a long and successful one. Once the Heritage List was in place it was an uphill task getting all of it to be accepted and notified. Facing many ups & downs, working with as well as opposing the senior bureaucracy, enlisting sympathetic politicians and bureaucrats is what was done by members of BEAG and others. They realised that to get the State Government to finalise the Heritage List, go through the procedures to have it notified, to include it in the Development Control Regulations and get the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee formed was going to be an arduous task. If they did not pursue this with the single-mindedness of a terrier, known to set his teeth into what he wants, it would never get done – and this is exactly what they did. The Government often does appreciate such commitment and Mumbai got its "Heritage Regulations for Greater Bombay, 1995" — the first in India. It includes the Heritage List and Precincts. Fifteen years on, a revised and expanded Heritage List has been prepared and is with the MCGM awaiting notification. In the mean time many other laws have been promulgated which will dilute some Heritage norms and need to be battled.

Public Open Spaces

The Oval Cooperage Residents' Association (OCRA) established in 1978 was one of the earliest Resident Associations to be formed in terms of localised issues. Their buildings overlooked the deteriorating 22 acre Grade Oval Maidan. This vast open space attracted several construction proposals by the State Government which includes club houses, gymkhanas, shopping

centres, stadia, a two-tiered underground parking lot and much more. That these proposals did not take shape and the Oval remained an open Green was the result of the strong protests and objections raised by OCRA supported by members of the public. Simultaneously OCRA had proposed to the State Government that either the Government restore the ground or allow OCRA to do so at its own expense. This struggle continued for 15 years. Finally in 1997 the Government gave permission to the O.V.A.L. Trust (set up in 1994 for this purpose) to restore the Oval Maidan. It was restored in 1999 and continues to be maintained by the Trust. The Trust has recently restored the adjacent Cross Maidan Garden. Later on several other similar stand-alone projects followed all over Mumbai.

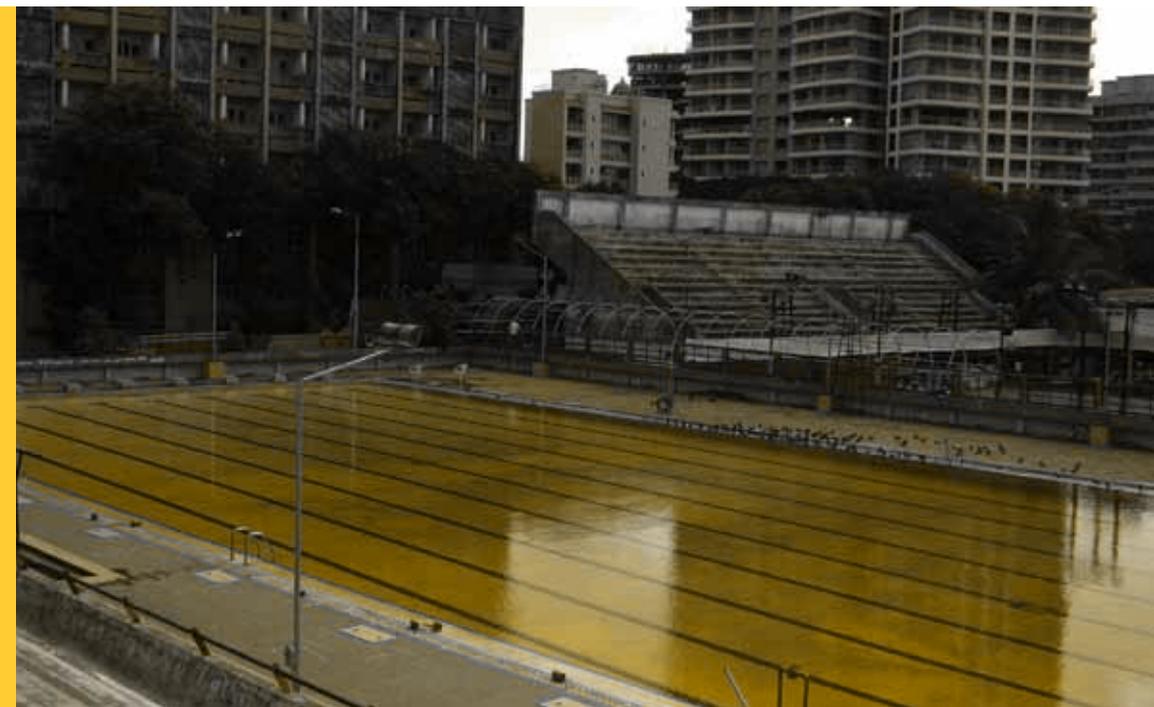
In 1998 an NGO named CitiSpace was formed which began looking into the open space issues in all of Greater Mumbai. It discovered many problems related to specific plots. More importantly at the Policy level things were looking really bad. Between the State and the MCGM there seemed to be a determination to gobble up all open spaces for construction purposes. Reserved Public Open grounds were being given over for construction of private clubs under the dubious 'Caretaker Policy'. CitiSpace has been extremely active in spreading awareness amongst the citizens of Greater Mumbai on how to protect their open spaces and battle such policies that impinged on designated Reserved Public Open Spaces such as Parks, Gardens, Recreation Grounds, Playgrounds and No Development Zones. CitiSpace's success has been in the awareness created and is able to have

certain policies stayed by Government itself and by the Courts. Recently CitiSpace released a book "Breathing Space, A Fact-File of 600 Reserved Open Spaces in Greater Mumbai".

The Nariman Point Churchgate Citizens' Association (NPCCA) formed in 1981 had to tackle a problem on a different kind of open space – of roads and pavements in their locality which used to be taken over by strikes and morchas. Hundreds of people would come and squat on the pavements and roads for days, making it impossible for any movement on them, besides messing up the area as there were no toilet or water facilities available. Pedestrian and vehicular traffic had to be diverted causing immense hardship to the office-goers and the residents of the area. It was NPCCA that had to move the Bombay High Court to get an Order in 1996 that directed the State Government to find an alternate place for strikes and morchas and prohibiting any morcha to take over any other road in Mumbai. Surely this could have been solved instantly by an executive decision of the Government?

Solid Waste Management

Solid Waste Management (SWM), or Garbage, was an issue easy enough to have been tackled by the MCGM. But this did not happen despite being taken up enthusiastically all over the city by Resident Associations in the belief that they would partner MCGM and that there would be no confrontation with the authorities. In hot and humid Mumbai the stink of putrefying garbage on streets and buildings was something citizens could not bear. They realised that the MCGM's systems had broken down.



In the beginning the MCGM encouraged a partnership with NGOs, then they backed off, then they came in with

Bye-Laws and invited suggestions/objections from citizens, then they backed off again. This blow hot blow cold relationship with NGOs continued. Many Resident Associations valiantly carried on following the mantra of Reduce, Reuse & Recycle. Their aim was to create zero garbage areas and reduction of the approximately 6000 tonnes of garbage and 2000 tonnes of debris going daily to the already overfilled dumping grounds. The citizens' enthusiasm was based on the National Urban Waste Management Policy of 2000 and a Supreme Court Order regarding it. But the State of Maharashtra, and Mumbai in particular, was unable, or unwilling, to tackle this problem. The cartel in Mumbai that controls SWM and its disposal has the MCGM in its grip and an NGO has taken the MCGM to court on aspects of this issue. With all that citizens have tried to do individually and collectively, this is an area where success has not been easy and the movement seems to have almost died.

The story of Electronic Waste (E-Waste) seems to be going the same way. This comes under the Central & State Government's Ministries of Environment and Pollution Control Boards. It is believed that the rules for E-Waste disposal have still not been formulated.

CLEAN-Sweep Forum, an NGO which has taken up this issue is struggling to be heard so that Mumbai's enormous E-waste is collected and disposed off scientifically and professionally and not go the way of solid waste.

Conclusion

What has been written about is only a very small fraction of the city's problems and the role of activist NGOs. I have chosen to write about some early campaigns illustrating the early beginnings of activism in Mumbai. It has continued and grown exponentially all over Greater Mumbai and is very exciting and heartening to see. The Activists are having to deal with a multitude of issues, namely, poor Governance, Mangroves, MCGM's plan to convert the Botanical Garden (Rani Baug), turning 150 years in 2011, into a fancy over built Zoo, Heritage, Noise, Air and Water Pollution, Skywalks, the Monorail, the Metro, and much more. With 16 Authorities in charge of the Administration and Planning of Greater Mumbai, a holistic and co-ordinated approach with a proper time-schedule is a pipe dream and has been given a go-bye. In addition, political chauvinism is driving decisions which a cosmopolitan band of citizens have to combat. NGOs of the entire City have had to become the proverbial David to battle the mighty Goliath – the State! Their intervention as activists has 'SAVED' Mumbai from even a bigger disaster!