

Moving Mountains: a community's journey from a slum to a housing society

In May, 1996, during the first rains of the monsoon, the houses of Rajendranagar slum were demolished by the city authorities. In September 1998, just over two years later, fifty families moved into their brand new, community-constructed houses.



An extraordinary process of mobilisation, negotiation and resettlement happened between these two milestone events. The hard work and determination of this women's collective transformed a devastating situation into a historic precedent for Pune's poor women and men in their struggle for decent, secure housing. When their houses were destroyed, the community was in total despair. Kids were falling sick, people were sending their families back to their villages, men were leaving their jobs. But a group of women decided that enough was enough, and got together to work out a new strategy. 50 families came together, and formed a strong collective with the support of Shelter Associates.

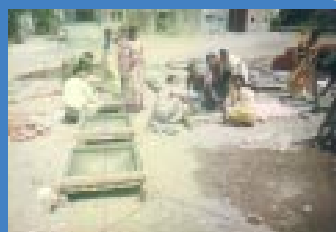


This time they were determined to have something more than insecure slum homes. They started making plans for a secure future, put up temporary shelters, accelerated their savings and had several rounds of discussions. The demolition was a crisis, but these women turned it into an opportunity to start negotiating for land, tenure, housing loans and infrastructure. By January 1997, a piece of land had been secured from the PMC at Dattawadi, just 10 minutes walk from the slum.

The first step was the construction of the site office, a temporary brick structure which served as a space for meetings, storage, chatting, baby-sitting, and entertaining visitors, over the year that followed.

The first phase saw the construction of all the prefabricated components. The women led the way, and constructed all the laadis (funicular shells), the beams, and thanks to the loan of a block making-machine, all the blocks for the building too. By May most of the prefabricated components had been made, and the actual construction began.

laadi making



curing the laadis



block making



beam making



BELOW: working together on site; putting up the beams; tamping; training other communities
RIGHT: laying the laadis on the beams; view across the courtyard of the completed building



To keep costs to a minimum, the community decided to contribute all the unskilled labour themselves. This was a huge commitment, as each family usually contributed one labourer per day, which meant a loss of income to the family of the usual earnings of that member. But the collective knew that using their own labour would really keep costs down: in the end they saved at least Rs. 5000 per house just on labour costs. It has also meant that the community gained real control over the project, and made the building really theirs.



On the basis that ‘poor people teach poor people the best’, women and men from other slum collectives came to the site to help out and learn from all the stages. That way, they participate in the process, and are in a stronger position to negotiate for and work on similar projects for their own communities in future.



It was the women who really kept the project up and running, right from the beginning. The women did most of the management work, and unlike on

conventional building sites, they worked side by side with the men on the construction work. The community decided to register each house in the woman’s name, because they recognised that it’s the women who run their households, but who are usually also more vulnerable. Through this project, the women gained many new skills, and their self-respect increased enormously.



A process of empowerment began at the family level, with the women taking a big step on behalf of the household. They came together as a collective, they managed the savings, and decided what sort of houses they wanted for the community. They had to persuade their families, and then support them through the whole process, right from the demolition. On site, these women managed a double commitment, putting in long days of work, around which they looked after the everyday needs of their households. The Dattawadi children are growing up knowing that it was the initiative and hard work of their mothers and aunts that gave them their homes and status.

It required patience, grit, tenacity for the community to work together on such a massive project. There were fights, aching bodies, jealous neighbors, shirkers, long hours of hard work, and tough decisions to make. But, simultaneously, there was the sheer pleasure and satisfaction of seeing their building grow. That pulled the community through the entire construction process.

The houses are 14’ high units stacked one above the other to form a structure about 30’ high. A height of 14’ gives space for the construction of a loft (mezzanine floor), which provides valuable extra, private, space for sleeping. The total floor space of each unit is 250sq.ft. Each unit has its own water supply, there is one toilet per 4 families, and a central courtyard for community meetings and events.

