PENGUIN BOOKS
HEALING STREAMS

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Healing Streams

Bringing Back Hope in the Aftermath of Violence

SUSHOBHA BARVE

PENGUIN BOOKS

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To the victims and survivors of violence in South Asia

Contents

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Preface

On 31 October 1984, my colleague Sarla Kapadia and I travelled from Mumbai to Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh for a conference. Little did we realize what a dangerous journey we were embarking on when we got on the train at Mumbai's VT Station.

A few hours after we set out, we heard that Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. We continued our journey without pondering over the consequences of this incident.

About twenty-four hours later, we were caught in the bloodiest riots independent India had seen since Partition. The experience was to deeply affect me and change the course of my life. During the first few months, while I struggled to make some sense out of what we had witnessed during that train journey, I got many insights about myself and about India's unhealed history. I began to believe that I had been allowed to witness evil but had been protected from it by some higher power for a purpose. I have tried to search for what that purpose might be. Over a period it became clear to me that my task was to bridge the gulf between communities and help heal and reconcile different communities at odds with each other, mainly in India but also in South Asia as a whole. As members of the majority community, the onus was on Hindus.

During the past eighteen years I have been led to people and situations in far-flung corners of India—Delhi, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Bhagalpur, Jamshedpur, Allahabad, Mumbai—which have seen terrible violence at different times. I have tried to reach out to the victims of

violence in these areas and have been involved in efforts to bring the divided communities closer and help them reconcile, to give solace to them by listening or sharing my own experience or helping with their rehabilitation in some way. As a result, amazing human bonds have been built.

This work became my mission in life. The more exposed I was to the different facets of conflicts and violence in different parts of India, the more convinced I became of the urgent need for the general public to shake out of its apathy to the dangers of communal intolerance and reach out to its victims. It was, I felt, a poison that would spread and spare no one.

When the Mumbai riots of 1992–93 occurred, I felt my experience had given me adequate preparation to be able to do something constructive. All through that nightmarish period, I was on the streets of Mumbai, trying to help control the conflagration. Over the next eight years I was able to work in a sustained manner and had an opportunity to help in the recovery of the city. I began, too, to help build a preventive mechanism against such an episode in the future.

But this work in Mumbai was not easy. People were often puzzled that someone like me would want to do this work on a full-time basis, without any self-interest or salary. The task was often made difficult as we worked closely with the police and had to guard against being co-opted by them. We also had to reckon with a variety of vested interests who did not like alert and conscientious citizens strengthening local networks against troublemakers, be they in the slums of Dharavi, Bhendi Bazar or middle-class localities of Mahim and Worli. Often I had to act and speak like a strong-headed and stubborn person, even while feeling fear and tension inside.

There were times when I was nervous about the outcome of a confrontation. I took many risks and most times was

protected and led forward. But there were times when initiatives went horribly wrong and we were not able to recover lost ground. Sometimes I was dubbed anti-police by the Mumbai police and pro-police by the activist colleagues. I made mistakes in judging some of those I chose to work with, who turned out to be untrustworthy. It made me very angry at times and often I was tempted to give up. Trying to meet the expectations of others given my limitations began to be more and more difficult. Regardless of how I felt or my own uncertainties, however, I never turned down a telephone call or an appeal for help from any corner of Mumbai. Often these came in the middle of the night.

So absorbed was I in my efforts that I lost contact not only with those close to me but also myself, failing to realize how the continuous exposure to violence was affecting me as a person.

I began to first notice the signs of burnout when others started complaining about my short temper and impatience. I laboured under the feeling of 'no one understands me'. Then wondering what really was the matter with me. I seemed to be drained of energy, inspiration and creativity. I began to feel deeply dissatisfied at the lack of progress in the work I was doing, particularly in that we had failed to bring about a policy change in the police and the state administration vis-à-vis mohalla committees in the state to develop them according to the present needs of the state in general and Mumbai in particular. But above all, living and coping with contradictions while working with the mohalla committees in Mumbai was becoming difficult. As a woman who had slowly evolved from being timid, it was not easy to work with strong men who had held high positions and to hold my ground and my convictions before them. If women are assertive they are dubbed 'aggressive'. I got that label at times.

It was around this time that a friend and colleague—Rajmohan Gandhi—suggested that I take a break and perhaps write about my experiences. Another friend bluntly told me, 'What makes you think that you can go on doing the work that you are doing without taking a break?' It made me thoughtful. I needed to rejuvenate myself for the sake of my work. Finally I decided to take heed of what my friends had suggested and accepted a long-standing invitation to work with one of the initiatives of the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) in the United States called 'Hope in the Cities'.

I had worked with MRA, now called Initiatives of Change, for thirty years. It is a worldwide movement and its role in the post-Second-World-War reconciliation between France and Germany is well documented. MRA believes that the process of change starts with individuals. If you want to see change in a situation, the best place to start is with yourself. Reflection on one's shortcomings as well as an honest acknowledgement of one's mistakes and wrongs can begin the process of reconciliation between individuals. The transformation in the self can then become the catalyst for wider change.

I hoped that my stay in the United States would be a time of reflection, stocktaking and writing. In Canada's Rocky Mountains, I was enraptured by the clear blue sky, bright sunshine, snow-covered mountain peaks and crystal clear blue water of the lakes and rivers. The streams were so clear and pure that their water seemed to have healing powers. A month later, while driving through the Blue Ridge Mountains, I was absorbing a completely different scenery. The mountainside was ablaze with the autumn colours of orange, rust and yellow. My thoughts drifted home, to India, and the poison that massacres and riots had left as a legacy. The new generation, at least, needed to be protected from that legacy. I thought how beautiful it

would be if such healing streams could wash away all the hate and revenge so that we could make a fresh start in the new millennium.

As I admired that awesome sunset in the Blue Ridge Mountains, I realized suddenly that thousands of miles away in India it was almost daybreak. It was 31 October—the anniversary of that fateful train journey from Mumbai to Barabanki. All the memories of that incident came flooding back to my mind, including many small details I had completely forgotten during the intervening years. I found myself thinking and praying for every individual who had come into my life or I had touched in some way since then. I felt an easing of the numbness that had gripped my heart. As these feelings and emotions passed, I was left with the determination to write a book and put down my experiences.

I felt nervous about it, as I am not a natural writer. But the thought persisted. I decided to take the plunge and informed some friends about this. Without exception they were very encouraging. For me this book is neither about writing history nor about narrating a story of bravery. Mine is the story of an ordinary person who, when thrown in extraordinary situations, acted according to the prompting of her heart. The writing also became a pilgrimage to revisit the people and places that changed the course of my life and gave a new meaning to it during the past eighteen years. I hope this pilgrimage, above all, will help to release the blocked healing streams in me as well as help release those healing streams in others that too may be waiting to be freed.

The events I have described in this book are long past but important nevertheless in these troubled times. I have written about them because I feel that the narratives in this book especially those relating to the Mumbai riots offer a perspective

that is often missing in the accounts we read of such incidents. It was these first-hand experiences and the lessons I learnt in the 1992–93 riots that have led me to take on the work of peacemaking and later to help in the formation of the Mumbai mohalla peace committees. But for these encounters with violence I may never have got involved in the work of communal harmony and reconciliation. My account of the Mumbai riots is restricted to just a few areas of the city where I worked during the period. A fuller picture is, of course, avaiable in the Justice Srikrishna Report and other documents. They go to show that we cannot afford the luxury of complacency. Violence whenever it occurs is mostly instigated. The instigators are rarely hurt or punished, but society has to pay a heavy price for their actions. We have our viewpoint and our disputes. But we can ill afford to allow them to cripple our society or tear apart the fabric of our national life. The saner elements of our society must, therefore, do all they can to prevent violence at all costs.

These days there is a lot of discussion about conflict resolution and women in conflict. I deal with these issues in the book, providing evidence of it and throwing light on the processes involved.

In America two young men, Debu Gandhi and David Ruffin, told me they did not want to know theory. 'We would like to read your story—about how you did it.' As they promised to read my story, I thought it would be worth recording my experiences for the sake of these and many other young people, so that they will see how heavy the cost of violence and retribution is and see the importance of healing and reconciliation. If they are convinced of this and can make a difference to this new century, all the turmoil, pain and violence we have gone through in the last century will finally be laid to rest.

Prologue

On 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her bodyguards. Unaware of this tragedy that took place in Delhi, Sarla Kapadia, my colleague at the Moral Re-Armament (MRA), and I boarded a train in Mumbai that morning for Barabanki, near Lucknow. We were invited to participate in a conference by General A.N. Kaul (retd), then the general manager of Somaiya Chemicals factory in Barabanki. Although I had visited Uttar Pradesh several times, this was Sarla's first visit. We were travelling in a crowded second-class compartment. It was the holiday season and many families were going home on vacation. In our section of the compartment there was a Muslim couple, two Sikhs, an army doctor, Sarla and myself. It was the kind of group one will find frequently on a train.

The train left VT station on time. Soon we had settled and conversations began among the passengers. Most of them were going either to Kanpur or to Lucknow. Our destination was only marginally further. Although it was after the monsoons, the weather was hot and there was a certain restlessness. After five hours the train made its first halt at Nashik station. Unknown to us, the public loudspeakers were announcing my name, requesting me to contact the stationmaster. My youngest brother, Winayak, had put me on the train in Mumbai that morning. On his way out of the railway station he picked up a special supplement that gave the news of Mrs Gandhi's assassination. The assassins were identified as Sikhs. As he read the news, his mind was racing to see how to get me and Sarla off that train. But the train had already left Mumbai and the next stop was

Nashik. My family contacted some relatives in Nashik and requested them to go to the railway station to get us to discontinue our journey. At Nashik my relatives went up and down the platform but did not spot us. My family in Mumbai could do nothing after that to help us and decided to pray for us. My father told the family, 'Shobha will be all right and will be taken care of.'

Once the train left Nashik station, the passengers returned to the compartment. Some male passengers had bought the special edition of newspapers and they began reading aloud the banner headline of the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi. The early news was sketchy. As the newspaper was passed around the compartment, there was discussion about the ugly turn the events in Punjab had taken. We wondered about the consequences of this murder for India and who might be the next prime minister. But after a while a silence descended on the compartment as we mulled over the tragedy. Outside, the countryside looked peaceful. There was no sign of the violence to come.

As the night descended, I noticed the worried faces of the Sikh passengers. The morning after, we were passing through Madhya Pradesh, and the train kept stopping at unscheduled stations. At one of these, some young students got into the train. Seeing the Sikh passengers in the train, they started using abusive language. I told the army doctor how apprehensive I felt by the presence of the students in the compartment. He took them aside and talked to them for some time. They came back to our side and said they would not harm the Sikhs, but by now the Sikhs had become nervous. Both of them were travelling with a lot of goods they had purchased in Mumbai for their shops.

At one of the unscheduled stops, we were told that a mob had stopped the train and was dragging out Sikh passengers. The two Sikhs in our compartment climbed on to the top berth. One of them threw down wads of money which landed in Sarla's lap. The other one too threw his gold chain and wristwatch down for safe keeping with a passenger. One of them, Bhupender Singh, threw a piece of newspaper at me. On it was scribbled his name and address. He belonged to Kanpur. He told me to inform his family in case anything happened to them. I promised to do so as I clutched the piece of paper.

Sarla was sitting by the window away from the aisle. The train stopped again. A mob outside was shouting '*Indira Gandhi zindabad*,' '*Jab tak Hindustan rahega Indira tera naam rahega*' and '*Khalistan murdabad*.' We shut the doors and windows of the compartment. We came to know later that a samosa vendor had told the mob about the two Sikhs. The mob threatened to burn our compartment if the doors were not opened. So someone opened the door and a group of villagers with bamboo sticks got in and went up and down, searching for Sikhs. Glancing up at the top berth, I saw the two Sikhs had pulled a blanket over themselves. I started praying that they would not be found out.

The villagers went through our compartment twice. On their third round, one of them asked who was on the top berth. None of us answered. A couple of villagers yanked the blanket, exposing the Sikhs. Before we knew what was happening, there was running and shouting in the compartment. The mob dragged the two Sikhs out of the coach. I stood up and spread my arms to stop the mob from attacking them. 'They are innocent,' I tried to convey, but I was forcibly pushed out of the way. Everything was happening too quickly.

Within minutes the Sikhs were out of our sight. We could only hear the wild shouts of the mob and the noise of the lathis as they hit the Sikhs. While some of those in the mob were involved in violence, another group seemed only interested in looting. They were walking off with bags and boxes. As one of them picked up my suitcase and a roll of 16-mm film, I shouted at him and tugged at the suitcase. With one free hand, the villager grabbed my neck. 'How dare you raise your hand at a woman from Maharashtra?' I managed to blurt out. The man seemed just a little puzzled and let go of me. I could hear Sarla's voice through the din of other noises in the background pleading, 'Never mind. Let him take your bag.' But I had succeeded in recovering my suitcase. Unfortunately Sarla lost everything except for the clothes she was wearing. All the goods belonging to the Sikh passengers too were gone. I later came to know that the Provincial Armed Constabulary had been on the platform. But instead of quelling the mob, some of them had openly encouraged them.

Finally the train moved. Our compartment was spattered with blood. The turbans of the Sikhs were lying crumpled on the floor. Sarla's small cushion, which she had specially carried for the train journey, also had blood on it. We took off the cushion cover and threw it out of the window. During the scuffle that ensued when Sarla tried to get out of the way of the mob, she had lost her thick gold bangle. Luckily she found it under a seat after some hours. We lost track of the time in our dazed state.

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity in the compartment. We were approaching Kanpur station. Most of the passengers seemed to be getting off there. Some suggested that we too should get off with them. One family particularly seemed concerned about us. From the window we could see clouds of

smoke over Kanpur. I told this family that we did not know anyone in Kanpur whereas someone would be waiting for us in Barabanki. One woman told us, 'You have worn the wrong dress for this journey.' Both Sarla and I were in salwar-kameez. No doubt the woman had made her statement out of genuine concern for us, but instead of consoling me it made me very angry. In that crisis the dress had taken a communal identity. How strange it seemed!

I had been aware for some time that the mob had kept the injured Sikh passengers on the other side of our compartment. I told some of those getting off at Kanpur to inform the railway authorities about the injured men and to take them to a hospital. I walked along the aisle once to have a look at them. They were unrecognizable, and I could not make out whether they were dead or alive. Some policemen did come to our compartment, but they just looked at us and did not ask us anything. Sarla began to get upset by the way these men stared at us. She was trying hard to control herself. We were told later that word had gone down the train that we were the 'jananis' of the two Sikhs.

Finally the train moved out of the station. The injured men were still on the train. The policemen seemed to be guarding them. As we crossed a railway bridge, the train stopped once again. Amid a lot of shouting, the two passengers were thrown out of the compartment.

The mob started stoning them and beating them all over again. We could only hear the thuds as the lathis hit the bodies. When they missed them there would be a crack as the lathis hit the metal of the railway tracks. At one point I heard shouts of 'Let's burn them.' We saw the attackers bring dry grass and cover them with it before setting it on fire. I closed my eyes to shut out the scene, but I could hear the crackle of the flames. The Muslim woman sitting opposite us closed her eyes and

started to pray silently. How I wished to know what was going through her mind! But she did not say a word.

Not even in my wildest dreams had I thought I would witness such a display of cruelty. I had read about the riots during Partition but had not witnessed any violence even on a small scale before. What a sheltered life I had had in Mumbai! Someone shouted, *'Fauj aa rahi hai'* and several people got into the train. As the train began to move again, I felt numbed. We had been powerless to protect the innocent Sikhs. We were convinced that they would not survive. There were too many conflicting emotions going through my heart—fear, anger, shame and guilt were all part of it as the train moved slowly towards Barabanki. Were we cowards?

The army doctor was getting off at Lucknow and suggested that we get off with him. He offered to help us. Again, we were in two minds. We knew that General Kaul would be waiting for us at Barabanki. If we were not on that train, he would worry about us. So we decided to carry on. The doctor suggested that we at least change our seats and helped us to move to another part of the compartment. He got us some tea and snacks at the Lucknow station. We were now on our own.

The train was running several hours late and it was night when we arrived in Barabanki. General Kaul was at the station and was relieved to see us. He said, 'There has been a lot of trouble and violence everywhere. I hope you did not encounter it.'

I told him of the harrowing experience we had gone through. Sarla was quiet. We were in a terrible shape. The general quickly took us to his home and entrusted us to the care of his wife, Leela, or Leelaji as everyone usually called her. A warm-hearted person, Leelaji took us to a bedroom and made us feel at home. For the first time Sarla seemed to be at ease and wanted us to pray and thank God for protecting us through the ordeal. Leelaji

and I gave clothes to Sarla. Neither Sarla nor I felt hungry, but our hosts insisted we eat some food. Sarla had sprained her wrist and she was taken to a doctor. Fortunately there was no fracture or injury. She was given a tranquillizer to sleep.

I narrated our experience to the Kaul household. When I ended, General Kaul said, 'You have been very brave and done all you could. I have seen many riots and I know that at such times individuals cannot do very much to save lives in front of the frenzied fury of the mobs. We must be grateful that you are both unharmed.' I gave the paper with Bhupender Singh's address on it to the general, requesting him to inform the victim's family. He promised to do the needful. In the 1970s, when he was posted as General Officer Commanding in Mumbai, General Kaul had been called upon to quell riots in Ahmedabad. He had witnessed the carnage at close quarters.

Thinking that our safe arrival called for thanksgiving, Leelaji invited people from the neighbourhood the next morning for a prayer meeting. Those who came for the prayer meeting were concerned about the situation in the country following the prime minister's assassination. The riots that ensued had claimed hundreds of Sikh lives. That morning we prayed for the fury of violence to stop and for peace to be restored in the country.

General Kaul gave shelter to a few Sikhs in the company guest house. Sikhs make up about 10 per cent of Barabanki's population, which was about 30,000. Most of them had come there after Partition.

In view of the national mourning, the conference was deferred. However, General Kaul felt it would be better if the workers in his factory attended sessions on national integration in the tension-filled atmosphere prevalent in Barabanki. He and some of his staff went around the town reassuring the Sikhs. The factory security officer was a retired Sikh army officer. He

too had to take shelter inside the factory. I met the officer and expressed regret for the attacks on innocent victims. Although I was putting up a brave front, I was still shaken inside.

The telephone lines had not been working, and it was only on our second night in Barabanki that I got through to my family. Winayak answered the telephone. When I told him we were safe in Barabanki, he sounded both happy and relieved and said, 'Thank God, you are safe in Baramati.' I had to repeat I was in Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh, not Baramati in Maharashtra. Winayak was very surprised that we had managed to reach our destination. Only on my return to Mumbai did my family inform me of their efforts to contact us.

Sarla and I were deeply touched by the care we received at the Kaul household. One evening we were taken to the tomb of Sufi saint Haji Waris Ali Shah. Urs and Meal Katik at his shrine are attended by all communities every October. His simple message—'*Mohabbat karo*' (give love)—seemed particularly appropriate at that time.

Later, I asked General Kaul if he had had any luck contacting Bhupender Singh's family. For the first time he explained his dilemma. 'What will we tell the family?' I replied, 'We must tell them what happened to the two men. We had promised Bhupender Singh that we would inform his family.' The general asked, 'How can you be sure they are dead? You do not know what happened after the train left the scene. You do not know the name of the village where the incident took place and where they were set on fire.' Somehow he felt the family would not believe our story. Besides, his main concern at the time was our safety, as well as that of others whom he had sheltered as the riots were still continuing. He wanted me to trust him and assured me he would trace the families at the right time through

his contacts. I felt uneasy about this, but General Kaul kept the scrap of paper.

While I managed to recover somewhat from the trauma of the train journey, Sarla was far from her usual self. She was reluctant to make the train journey back by the same route. So we travelled up to Delhi by train and then flew to Mumbai. Sarla and I were happy to be once again with our families and in the safe environs of Mumbai.

Part I

The Beginning

Chapter One

The First Steps

I was haunted by the memories of the cruelty I had seen, the hatred and the glee I had seen in the eyes of the mobs. It was difficult for me to reconcile their barbarism with the deeply ingrained image of Hindus as peace loving and non-violent. That neither Sarla nor I had thought of the danger we ourselves might encounter continues to baffle me. Would it have prepared us better or would it have frightened us? We were guided by our hearts in the train. It was not a thought-out response.

I could not stop myself from telling everyone I met about our traumatic train journey. While some thought ours was a heroic experience, a few felt it was very foolish and irresponsible on my part to have tried to protect the Sikhs. How could I have ignored the responsibility I had towards our own safety, one person asked. This deeply hurt me. How could they not understand that if I had not done what little I did, I could not have lived with my conscience for the rest of my life? My parents were supportive and a few friends patiently listened to me whenever I approached them, understanding my need to unburden my thoughts and inner confusion.

After spending a few days with my family, I was back at the MRA conference centre in Panchgani, where I was working at the time. When my colleagues heard of our harrowing experience, they were stunned. A Naga colleague, Niketu Iralu, told me, 'Keep your heart open and do not shut it to those events.' Niketu had seen and lived through many killings in his

home state of Nagaland. Many members of his own family and his close friends had died in these clashes. He could understand the emotional conflict that the anti-Sikh riots had set off in me. Far from trying to protect me, he sensitively and gently helped me to face the conflict in my heart. I am grateful for the lead Niketu gave me in those early days to begin my search for where we as a people and a nation had gone wrong.

But several of my other colleagues avoided talking to me. Some thought I was too intense and they were afraid of it. Others believed that the best way to help me to get over the traumatic experience was to help me forget. Thinking that frequent discussion would keep the memories alive, they did what they thought was best for me—avoided talking about the journey and the riots we had encountered. But expressing what I was going through and being able to channel the emotions I felt into some constructive action was what I needed most. The inner struggle was both exhausting and bewildering. At times I felt the nightmare would never end.

It was in Calcutta (now Kolkata) three weeks later that my future course of action began to get directed. There I met Gaur Kishore Ghosh, a noted journalist, novelist and writer who is now no more. I told him of my experience and my fear that India was going to disintegrate.

Pointing out that large parts of India had remained peaceful and were not tainted by the anti-Sikh riots, he said, 'Fortunately for us, India is a vast and diverse country. All parts of India and all Indians do not react uniformly and with the same intensity to issues and incidents. Therefore all parts of the country never explode into violence simultaneously. If this were to happen, it would truly be difficult to cope. Luckily, its diversity helps India to absorb shocks.'

Gaurda, as I called him respectfully, firmly believed that the best bridges of understanding and trust could be built through personal encounters between individuals and communities. Talking with Gaurda was therapeutic. He helped me to have a better perspective of India and the events following Mrs Gandhi's assassination. But I had a long journey ahead before the turmoil in my heart finally stopped and peace returned.

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From Calcutta I returned to the MRA centre and tried to get on with life. During the day I kept myself occupied, but at night images of the attack returned and with them the guilt at not being able to protect innocent lives, anger towards the Hindu mobs for what they had done and for besmirching India, and a deep hurt and shame which I could not resolve. As a Hindu I wanted to distance myself from those I had seen with blood on their hands. I was different from them. But could I really detach myself in this manner? Did it amount to self-denial? Should there be a collective guilt? Would I have felt the same emotions if I had not witnessed violence and brutality on that train? Thoughts like these kept me awake. One night towards the end of December I prayed to God to release me from this nightmare.

As if in response, many thoughts came flooding through my mind. I got up and started scribbling them down. 'When there are upheavals in any society no one individual or factor is responsible for them. We are all responsible for whatever has happened. All members of the society have contributed in varying degrees to it. The crisis is built up through the civil society's attitudes—of taking sides, prejudices, self-promotion, political ambition or simply indifference—that make its members blind to the wider interest of society in general and

to what is happening around them in particular. History too plays an important part in forming attitudes. Are people aware of their blind spots? If each individual is responsible for what goes wrong around him/her then surely as individuals one could also take responsibility to rebuild what has broken down. I will not be able to help either the victim or the oppressor if I continue to nurse anger, blame or guilt in my own heart. Many Indians say what happened was wrong but often there are attempts to justify the mass fury against the Sikhs. Can such acts of cruelty and violence against innocents be justified? Wrong had to be accepted and acknowledged as wrong and without excuses. The murder of the defenceless woman prime minister was wrong and cowardly, but killing thousands of innocent Sikhs in retaliation was even worse.'

For the first time in almost two months, I began to see the path I must take. It would be a path of healing and reconciliation between people and communities. I too was a victim of violence, but it was up to me to break the shackles and free myself. I had survived and I had to continue not as a victim but as a victor. I saw clearly how violence could not be supported, no matter how horrific the grievances. Henceforth I would always condemn violence no matter who committed it. For the first time since that fateful train journey in October, I had a peaceful sleep.

The morning after, I woke up with new energy and ideas about what could be done at an individual level to bridge the gulf between Hindus and Sikhs and to mend the fabric of our society. The pall of gloom and depression that had gripped me for a couple of months seemed to lift. I decided to convey my feelings in a letter to my Sikh friends and to others whom I did not know.

I wrote how we had tried to protect the Sikh passengers on the train to Barabanki and how sorry I was as an Indian and as

a Hindu for the deep wounds and humiliations we had inflicted on the Sikh community. I asked for their forgiveness. Everyone who received my letter responded to it, which encouraged me.

A few weeks later I was at the MRA house in Delhi. Those of us staying in the house at that time decided to visit the Sikhs we knew. Among the people we met were Usha and B.P. Singh, who had a farm just outside Delhi. Sitting in their garden, they told us about the ordeal they had gone through when their farmhouse was attacked during the 1984 riots. Suddenly I found myself telling them about my experience of the riots and saying, 'I am deeply sorry for the hurt and humiliation we have inflicted on your community. Please forgive us.' Both our hosts were deeply touched. Usha Singh took my hand in hers and said, 'To hear you say these words makes me feel that all we went through was worth it.' They talked about where they felt the Sikhs had also gone wrong and contributed towards the building up of a crisis which had resulted in a terrible tragedy. I realized how my acceptance of the wrongs committed by my community had led them to the path of self-reflection.

The second visit I remember was to the home of General Harbax Singh and his wife. He too told us how the mobs had come to attack their home. He had got his wife to bring all the firearms they had in the house. As he was almost blind, he had difficulty in loading the gun, which he fortunately did not need to use. The general, who was a hero of the 1965 war, was deeply hurt that even he was not spared.

During visit after visit we listened to people's pain and hurt. Most often the conversation would lead to the riots during Partition. People would talk about how their families had suffered and were uprooted from their ancestral lands and homes. Were they going to be uprooted again, they would ask. We did manage to bring in our conversation the need for introspection.

Through these individual meetings, we were able to heal the hurts and assuage the anger in some ways.

While I was still in Delhi, Sarla called me from Mumbai. She was very scared as someone had called her, asking her about the money and the goods the Sikh men on the train had given for safe keeping. Instinctively I felt that at least one of the two men we thought were dead was alive. Who else would know our names and addresses? During the early part of the journey, we had talked to our fellow passengers. If one of them were alive, he would remember it. But some of my friends were not so convinced about it.

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Soon afterwards I returned to Mumbai. I knew I had to discover the truth about the injured men. I decided to visit Kanpur and asked Sarla if she would like to accompany me. But Sarla declined as she was still in a state of shock. She was having recurrent nightmares and was constantly frightened that a mob would attack her. This was a woman who had single-handedly brought up her three sons after she became a widow at a young age. For nearly a month after the incident one or the other of her sons was with her all the time as the doctor had advised she should not be left alone. After that, she was persuaded to spend a week with her friends, who helped her overcome her fear through prayer and reinstated her faith in God. Still, she said, 'I do not think I will be able to make a train journey on the same route again.' So I invited a friend in Delhi—Mrs Prabha Mathur, another colleague in MRA—to accompany me. She understood how important this was for me and accepted my invitation straight away. She and her family had tried to save people in their neighbourhood during the 1984 riots.

Once we agreed on making the journey, several friends offered to help. General Kaul sent back the piece of paper that Bhupender Singh had given me. Another friend, V.C. Viswanathan, who was then a vice-president of JK Industries, offered to locate the address through his contacts in Kanpur. Prabha Mathur's sister and brother-in-law, who lived in Kanpur, offered to accompany us on our visit to Bhupender Singh's home in Kanpur.

Several people joined in tracing the train victims. I was deeply touched and encouraged by their wholehearted support. But I was apprehensive about making that journey and facing the families of the two men. My mind was filled with harrowing questions. Would the two men have survived? Would they welcome us? Would they blame us for not returning their belongings? Would they be angry? Would they be bitter? Would they be aggressive? Not having met victims of violence before, I was not sure what reaction to expect. In the end, I went to see them with an open mind, ready to face whatever awaited us.

On 31 January, Prabha and I set off for Kanpur from Delhi by train. In the late afternoon, we went to visit Bhupender Singh and family, whom I had contacted earlier. Blackened walls and missing windows and doors in the house showed it had been targeted during the riots. The house looked very bare. Bhupender Singh's wife welcomed us and took us to a room where Bhupender Singh was reclining on his bed. Even after seeing him I could not believe that he was actually alive. I was surprised to see that he had no burn marks on his face. He seemed to have shrunken, but as he could not get up from his bed, I could not see how badly the rest of his body was affected.

As we sat down I told him how sorry and ashamed I was for not being able to protect him and his friend from harm. To that he said, 'In fact, I am sorry that you were put to a lot of trouble

and danger because of us. God has given us the gift of new life and we must use it to bridge the gulf that has come between our communities.' Both of us were eager to know what had happened. Bhupender Singh told us that his friend Davendra Singh too had survived but was in a very bad shape. I described our feeble efforts to protect them from the mob and what we had witnessed.

Bhupender Singh and, later, Davendra Singh told us the following story.

By the time the train crossed into Madhya Pradesh, they knew they were in trouble. At Babina station, Bhupender was wondering if they should get off the train and go to the army camp, as he worked with the defence department. But while they were still debating what to do, the train started moving.

At Bhimsen station, 30 to 40 kilometres from Kanpur, one of the men in the compartment offered to protect the two Sikhs, but wanted something in return. Without any hesitation, Davendra took off his ring, chain and watch and gave it to the man, along with some cash. After some time the man closed the doors and windows of the compartment. 'Perhaps this was a signal to those outside, indicating the compartment where we were hiding,' said Davendra.

They decided to hide on the upper berths and recited prayers from the Granth Sahib until they were found out and dragged down by the mob. While they were been beaten with lathis and iron rods, they tried to feebly say '*Indira Gandhi zindabad. Indira Gandhi amar rahe.*' But to no avail.

They heard the mob discussing the advisability of throwing them in the Ganga and clung tightly to the ticket collector's seat when they passed over the bridge. Though the crowd pushed them, the two men clung on.

At the Gangaghat station, the mob threw them on to railway tracks. Their clothes were ripped off, their pockets searched and again they were stoned and beaten with shoes. Their clothes were piled on their bodies along with dry grass. Bhupender remembered an uncle telling him years ago that burn injuries received on the front side of the body could be fatal. So he turned on his stomach before he was set on fire.

When the train resumed its onward journey, a police inspector arrived on the scene with a few constables from Shuklaganj Police Station. They gave the Sikhs water to drink, which somewhat revived them. A few villagers were still present on the spot. The inspector was very angry with the villagers and threatened them with dire consequences. He asked the victims their names and addresses. When he heard that Bhupender worked with the defence department, he asked if he preferred to go to the military hospital or to the government hospital. Bhupender asked him to take them to Ursula Hospital in Kanpur, where he knew one Dr Bahadur.

The villagers brought two charpais and shifted the two men on to them. They stopped a truck passing by on the main road and placed them in it. Expecting the worst, the inspector took dying statements from them. He then asked them to sign, but they could not write. Bhupender's thumb was hanging loose. So the inspector took his bloody thumb mark on the document. The officers noted in the station diary that two Sikhs had been sent to Ursula Hospital, but the diary has mysteriously disappeared.

The two were unconscious when they reached the hospital. Bhupender's skull was fractured and he had broken his nose and ribs. One ear and a thumb were torn. He had also received 80 per cent burns and could not sleep on his back. Dr Bahadur had very little hope of his survival. Even in the hospital, their suffering continued. In his semi-conscious state, Bhupender

heard a man shouting, 'How many Sikhs do you have here? Shoot them.' But there were others who helped. On the first day Bhupender felt like having a hot cup of tea. But he had no money. Swallowing his pride, he asked a poor Muslim who was attending on a relative if he would lend him a rupee for a cup of tea. The man happily obliged and continued giving him tea until he left the hospital. Bhupender gave him Rs 50 when he left the hospital but wished he had more to show how grateful was he. During the first week, a doctor, Major M.A. Khan, supplied all the costly medicines that they needed and refused to take any money from them. He also gave Bhupender some money, saying, 'Keep it. You need it at the moment.' When he hesitated, the doctor said, 'You can return it later.' But he never took back the money. As Bhupender Singh was a member of the defence department's health scheme run by the Central government, a lady doctor attached to the scheme ensured that all his medicines and other needs in the hospital were provided free of cost to him. She also made sure he got special attention from the doctors and the nurses. She helped him get a private room.

In the general ward, Bhupender Singh saw other fellow Sikhs who had been targeted during the riots. He recalls two daughters-in-law of a college principal in Kanpur. When the riots broke out the principal had called the local police station seeking help. The police advised them to go to the police station, as it would be safer. But once they got there, a police officer misbehaved with the women. To escape from him, they jumped from the roof and were badly injured. One of them died later in the hospital and the other fractured her spinal cord. Later her brother came from Punjab and took her back with him, swearing to seek revenge against the perpetrators.

Meanwhile, rioting mobs had gone berserk in Kanpur too. Sudarshan, Bhupender Singh's wife, recalls those fateful days. When Bhupender did not turn up on the expected date, his family hoped he had alighted from the train and escaped to a safe place. Their neighbour Sharma invited the entire family to move into his house for safety. As it was dangerous to leave from the front door, Sudarshan and her sons, Jaspal and Paramjeet, climbed over the terrace wall on to the terrace of the Sharma house and from there into one of the rooms. The Sharmas locked the room from outside and went down and stood outside their gate. A mob had gathered and wanted to know where the Sikh family was. The Sharma family said they had left the house the previous night and they did not know their whereabouts.

The mob mostly comprised people from the slum behind Bhupender's house, some of whom knew the family. Safe in the knowledge that the house was empty, they broke into it and systematically looted it. They took away all the food grain, along with the containers. Then they made a pile of school books, clothes, utensils, stools, chairs and even the refrigerator and the scooter. Someone also brought the gas cylinder from inside the house and wanted to put it in the pile being prepared for a bonfire.

The Sharmas intervened and cautioned against putting the gas cylinder on the pile as it could blow up the neighborhood as well. Sudarshan watched all this from a window in Sharma's house with a burning heart. Within a short time everything went up in flames.

By evening curfew was imposed. Army trucks came out on the streets and transported Sikh families, including Bhupender's, to a camp. People brought them clothes, and well-to-do families had to be grateful for hand-me-downs. The rice in the camp was full of stones, but the Sikhs soon learnt to be appreciative

of whatever they received without complaining. Bhupender's family's sense of helplessness, anger, pain and uncertainty was made all the worse by the fact that they had not heard from him. They hoped he was alive, but they began preparing for a life without him. They were lucky as Bhupender's boss chanced upon them in the camp and took special interest in them.

After eight days they heard from Bhupender.

In the meantime, the army had started taking action against the rioters. Fearing that the army would discover stolen goods in their homes, people dumped them in the nearby pond. The army retrieved them from the pond and told people in the neighbourhood to claim their belongings. However, since most of the victims were in the camp, they were unaware of this.

At Davendra Singh's house, we met him, his wife and his father. I almost did not recognize Davendra Singh, who had just returned after a long stay at a hospital in Delhi. I told his wife, 'I am sorry we were not able to protect your husband nor protect the goods he had given for safe keeping.' She replied, 'That you and my husband are alive is in itself a big thing. Don't ever let this thought cross your mind again.' I was greatly relieved to hear this as I had been worried that they may not believe that the mob had looted everything.

Davendra's family had given a police officer whom they knew in Kanpur the details of the train, seat and compartment he was travelling in. The officer went to the compartment and saw the battered bodies of the two Sikhs and thought they were dead. Davendra's face was pulped beyond recognition. The officer ordered his juniors to remove the men from the compartment. But they had not obeyed him.

At the hospital, Davendra gained consciousness briefly when his face was being cleaned. He recognized the doctor who was attending on him as Dr Saha to whom he had taken his children

for treatment. Seeing a known face, Davendra said, 'Doctor, I am Kake.' Dr Saha informed his family.

Bhupender and Davendra were under the special care of Dr Kashyap, the superintendent of the hospital. Davendra was in a critical condition, with serious burn injuries on the left side of his body. His kidneys were damaged. The blood urea was dangerously high and he needed to go on dialysis. Since hospitals in Kanpur had no provision for it, Dr Kashyap suggested that he be shifted either to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi or to Vellore. Davendra's family contacted friends in Delhi and he was shifted there. The doctors there felt he might need a kidney transplant. His wife and a friend were ready to donate their kidney. He was admitted to Tirath Ram Shah Hospital in Delhi where Dr B.D. Gulati treated his kidney ailment and Dr Jawaharlal Gupta his skin. After a complete blood transfusion and eight or nine dialyses, the doctors decided that he did not need a kidney transplant. His wife, Gurvender, said, 'My heart is filled with gratitude for the care I personally received from the doctors. They consoled me and encouraged me not to give up hope and efforts for my husband. They made a special concession for me that enabled me to be with my husband when he had to undergo dialysis. In the end, efforts of the doctors, faith and prayers of the family gave my husband a new lease of life.'

It took Davendra Singh several months to recover and get back to normal routine. It took three years for him to begin to have a sense of peace. Apart from some kidney discomfort, he has kept good health in the following years.

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In a way, the Kanpur trip helped me complete the inner journey. I could now move on. Looking back, it was the most difficult

encounter in my life till then. I do not know how I found the courage for it.

As we left Kanpur that night I said to myself, 'I owe it to these two men and many others like them to commit my life to the work of healing and reconciliation.' The burden of guilt I had carried all this time was gone. Yes, we had not been able to protect them from injury but they had been protected. Had we not gone to Kanpur I would never have known that the two men had survived the ordeal. The journey helped me discover a new meaning and calling for my life. I saw the capacity in the victims to be generous and accept their survival as a gift of new life for a higher purpose. A challenge not just for the perpetrators of violence but also for the silent majority who allow such upheavals to take place. The visit convinced me that breached relations between communities could be restored. It was an enormous task, but I knew in my heart that I had to do it.

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In the weeks and months following the Kanpur visit, my thinking and my future course of work began to be crystallized. I would work towards building bridges between communities, reaching out to those who felt aggrieved and acknowledging our failure as a majority community. But I still did not know how to go about doing this. At the time the situation in Punjab was serious, straining Hindu–Sikh relations not just there but elsewhere in north India. It seemed right that my work be concentrated there.

I wondered if I was being presumptuous in carving out such a role for myself. Was I equipped for this task? I could certainly do this at an individual level, I realized. As also that to

be timid of doing the extraordinary is to deny the abilities God has gifted you with.

I come from a middle-class Brahmin family. My family could be described as liberal in their attitude on questions of caste, attitude to women, etc. But they were conservative about interacting with Muslims. The only Muslim ever to visit our home while I was growing up was a friend of my uncle. Although he was welcomed into our home, my grandmother had reservations about any of her family visiting his home.

We lived in a Hindu locality. The only non-Hindu student in my school was a Jewish girl in my class. As a result, while growing up, I had few social encounters with members of other communities. This may seem strange in a metropolitan city like Mumbai with a sizeable number of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other communities living in it. But I perhaps represent millions of middle-class Hindus in urban areas. Our knowledge of the 'other' was restricted to textbooks or what we were told by the elders.

I developed my first meaningful contact with a Muslim in college when I had to share a table with Abida during practicals in the laboratory. Abida and I became good friends. One day she told me about her relatives who had come from Pakistan. There was nothing wrong in what she told me, but suspicion about Pakistan and Muslims was so ingrained in me that I kept telling myself, 'I cannot trust her. She has relatives in Pakistan—India's enemy.' No doubt the memory of the recent Indo-Pak war had influenced the reaction. I found an invisible wall grow up in my heart although Abida and I continued to interact daily. It was some weeks before I realized that I had no right to distrust someone like Abida who had done no wrong or harm to me. One day when she came home with other friends, I told

her how I had unjustly harboured suspicion in my heart towards her. She was in tears and said she had sensed something but had not known what it was. Later she was to tell me about her family and how some members remained in Karachi and others in Mumbai. I had been ignorant of such divided families and the pain of their separation. This experience opened a small window of my heart.

But almost eighteen years later the new experiences I had gone through still made me feel inadequate. I realized how little I knew of the history and the events of past sixty or seventy years on the subcontinent and how they had moulded the thinking and the very existence of countries in South Asia. I had to equip myself to fulfil my self-set task of bringing healing and understanding. As a first step I decided to read the history of that period. It was important to understand the history from the point of view of not just the Hindus but also the Muslims and the Sikhs. They looked at some of the major events of that period very differently from how the Hindus did. If I was going to be a bridge over which others could walk, it was essential that I be sensitive to all points of view.

In July 1985, I had an opportunity to spend some weeks in Oxford, which was to broaden my understanding of the India of the 1980s and the complexities of the many problems India faced. It was the first step towards equipping myself for the task of reconciliation. I stayed with two British women: Dr Kirstie Morrison, a former don at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, and Dr Charis Waddy, an Arabic scholar and the first woman to read Arabic at Oxford University in the 1920s. Both these women had done pioneering academic work in their respective fields and were in their eighties when I met them. They continued to be very active and their homes always had visitors from around the world. Kirstie arranged for me to have a library pass where I

was able to read books by Muslim authors on South Asia.

That short academic pursuit was in many ways a shattering one, as many beliefs and stereotypes I was brought up on and held dear began to crumble. I had been proud of my Hindu identity, but now I could look at certain aspects of my cultural roots with more objectivity. Some of my heroes, while heroic still, appeared in a more complex light, as people who could, when the occasion demanded, be calculating and shrewd as well. A 'villain' like Aurangzeb could also be looked upon as a pious, orthodox Muslim who had given land to build temples and was not just a fanatic Muslim as shown in the school textbooks we had read.

Every community has its heroes. My family in particular were admirers of Tilak and Gandhi, and their portraits hung on the wall in my grandfather's sitting room, in the house that I had grown up in as part of a joint family. I realized that every group, community and nation looks at history according to how it has affected them. That history as I knew it had another side to it moved me profoundly. The second reality that was brought home to me was how the very size of India produced a certain awe, resentment and fear among India's neighbours in South Asia. The third reality was that the size of the Hindu population made it a majority community. For the first time I began to think of the majority–minority issue and how this played a part in the insecurity of the minorities. I had been not just ignorant but also a little blind towards the weaknesses and shortcomings of my own community and its leaders. A deeper knowledge of history and how others perceived it made me better understand others' viewpoints. Although it was difficult, I tried to look at Hindus and India as others saw them.

Those days in Oxford were rich and useful. Each evening I had long discussions with Charis and Kirstie about what I had

read in the library. Charis was brought up in Jerusalem between the First and the Second World Wars. The history of that region had parallels with that of the Indian subcontinent. As there, partition and the legacy of distrust and conflict it left behind had embittered relations here. Charis had friends who belonged to the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths. She had seen how the partition of Palestine had left behind a trail of violence and distrust. She felt keenly the responsibility of Britain in this and wanted to do something. Few others had the kind of friendships she had with Palestinians of all backgrounds and the insights and understanding of the area she had gained as a result. Through her writings and her books she has tried to pass on that understanding to others, specially in the West, in the hope that stereotypes and prejudices would be removed.

Clearly I needed not just a knowledge of history but also to meet people for a better understanding of how they felt. During this period it began to dawn on me that if in a democracy minorities felt insecure and nursed a sense of grievance, the onus is on the majority to look at what in their attitudes had caused this. It was up to the members of the majority community to take initiative in correcting what went wrong or to remove insecurity in the minds of the minorities. At a personal level, as a Hindu and belonging to a majority community, there was no escape from the responsibility this posed. This and many other related convictions have grown and strengthened over a period and have continued to bring newer and deeper insights for me.

I do not know if this time of reading and reflection equipped me with the qualities needed to bring healing and reconciliation. But it certainly made me aware of what qualities are needed by those who want to involve themselves in this work and my own inadequacies in respect to it. I learnt to be patient with people, listen to them and not dismiss anyone as being difficult.

In the process of doing this, it was possible to heal the anger and hurt in the aggrieved persons. It certainly strengthened my inner convictions and resolve to take on the work of South Asian reconciliation as a life's calling. Thus began a new phase in my life.

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From Oxford I went to the United States, where I stayed from November 1985 to March 1986. There I had the opportunity to interact with some Sikh and South Asian students. In my meetings with them, I was acutely made aware for the first time of the dangers posed for India from the feeling of extreme alienation among the Sikhs, specially the young people.

While in the United States, I stayed with my friends Anne and Bryan Hamlin, at Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Hamlin home was close to Harvard Square. The Hamlins were one of the host families to the students of Harvard University and many students frequently visited their home. I met several students there, including a few Sikhs. The students had seen many killings and persecution of innocent Sikhs during the 1984 riots and the turmoil in Punjab before and after that. Some were deeply hurt, angry and bitter and felt alienated. They were struggling with feelings of revenge and rebellion.

The young Sikhs told me that after being humiliated during the Delhi riots, they had to prove to themselves that Sikhs were still a martial community, known for courage and valour and a never-say-die spirit. They thought these credentials could be re-established by committing outrageous acts of violence.

The Khalistanis sought out such disenchanted students and discussed with them plans for the formation of Khalistan as well as plans to assassinate political figures. During our meetings I would ask them if acts of revenge could actually help achieve

justice. At least one of them came to realize that the instinct for revenge could never satisfy.

Talking to these Sikhs I saw how counterproductive brute force the state used for suppressing separatist movements can be. In the end oppression, no matter by whom, can never suppress human spirit and aspirations. In fact very often oppression can make those oppressed become more resolute in their demands. One act of violence can breed a chain of counter-violent reactions, as we saw happen in the Punjab of pre- and post-1984 Delhi riots.

Conversations with the Sikh students made me realize that people fired with an idea cannot be crushed or suppressed. Brute force will not work—the resentment, alienation and anger may simply go deeper inside and fester on—witness Nagaland, or the long saga of violence in Kashmir. The state action may result in eliminating the symptom, as medicines for cold sometimes do, but it cannot cure the root cause of the problem—the causes that made people take up arms in the first place. In fact time and again we have seen that use of brute force sets off a new chain of grievances and further strengthens the resolve of alienated people against the perceived enemy—the state. Brute force may subjugate a people for a while but will never succeed in winning their hearts if their genuine grievances remain unaddressed. The root causes of violent social upheavals, uprisings and separatist movements can only be cured by patient, compassionate and honest dialogue between the parties involved, restoring the dignity and honour of those who feel alienated and acknowledging wrongs. The issue of justice cannot be de-linked from this. Any attempt to help repair human relations will go a long way in healing the human spirit. But who will give this slow but therapeutic treatment to those whose

disaffection has taken a violent turn in Kashmir, the North-East and elsewhere in the country?

Some of the Sikh students in the United States tried to get the Khalistanis to talk about a realistic plan of the Khalistan they dreamed of. What would be its federal structure, constitution and economic policies? When they found that the creation of a theocratic state was their only aim, they became disenchanted and distanced themselves from the Khalistanis. Several students realized that what they really wanted was a genuinely federal relationship to operate between the Centre and states in India.

Amit Singh Chadha was one of the young Sikhs I met at the time. He was at the Harvard Law School and was a very distinguished looking, articulate young man. He came from an illustrious family in Delhi. His maternal grandfather, Justice R.S. Narula, had been the Chief Justice of the Punjab-Haryana High Court and Amit's father was a justice of the Delhi High Court. I met Amit when he came to the Hamlin home for dinner with a friend. During dinner, I told them of my experience during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. I apologized to Amit for the humiliation and the pain that had been inflicted on his community. After some initial awkwardness, Amit spoke about what those riots had done to people like him.

Amit had graduated from Harvard Law School and was offered a job there. He also had an admission at The Hague Academy of International Law at the seat of the International Court. His family expected him to return to India, but he was keeping all options open. Then he decided to visit Europe to attend a conference at the MRA centre in Caux, Switzerland in July 1986.

Amit said, 'The 1984 riots had left a deep scar in my heart. The riots and humiliation we Sikhs were subjected to had

robbed us of our sense of pride in India. Atrocities on innocent Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere made us feel that our self-respect, honour and identity were taken away from us.' At the Hamlin home he met people who were willing to listen to his feelings, accept another point of view and acknowledge wrongs done to innocent human beings. This acted as a balm and gave much solace to his spirit. But it was in Caux that he finally put the anger and alienation behind him. He said, 'I remember walking in the woods one day. While pondering over many things, I fell asleep under a tree. When I woke up I was filled with strange sense of peace. I just knew my place was in India. I began to realize that India had given me much more than what I thought was taken away from me. I wanted to return and not just reconstruct my life but also contribute in whatever little way to change the system that had created a sense of grievance in people. My feelings for the country which had vanished in the face of the wrongs committed during the 1984 riots were revived.'

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When I returned to India in the summer of 1986, Punjab was still seething. There were several massacres of Hindus in Punjab. As a result Hindu–Sikh relations were strained in Punjab and the distrust had spread over to Delhi and elsewhere in north India. I shifted to Delhi and stayed with Prabha Mathur at the MRA centre on Panchkuian Road. The area where the house was situated was badly affected during the anti-Sikh riots. Furniture shops had been looted and set on fire during the riots. There was a labour colony just opposite the house. Many people from the colony frequently came to the house. On one occasion I talked to them about my train experience during the anti-Sikh riots and my conviction that we needed to work

towards bringing healing and trust between the Sikh and Hindu communities.

We talked about the Punjab problem, the 1984 riots and the widening emotional gulf between the two communities. Some of them told us how others from their colony had actively taken part in the riots. One rioter had stolen a lot of furniture from a shop, including a big wooden bed he had fancied for long. Since it was too big to fit into his very small house, the bed had lain outside for months. Some of the rioters from the colony who were involved in looting had become suddenly rich. Others in the colony disapproved of these actions and felt ashamed of all such acts that had brought a bad name to their colony.

Some of them had made heroic efforts to save lives of Sikhs during the riots. One of them, Babulal, taught in a municipal school in Delhi. He recounted how by 3 p.m. on 31 October 1984 everyone had heard about the prime minister's assassination and returned home early from work. A mob had attacked Hotel Ekant opposite the colony because the owner was a Sikh. Some tried to burn the hotel furniture, while others looted the hotel. By evening, rioters were coming to the colony to hide from the police. Some residents of the colony decided to stop them from entering as it could threaten their safety.

In the colony was a Sikh jawan, who worked with the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), and his family. The day after the riots started, Babulal and some others went to their house to tell them they would be safer in the CRPF camp. Initially the family was not willing to leave their home in the colony, afraid they would be attacked while trying to escape. But his neighbours assured him they would guard his room and belongings.

As the young Sikh family and those escorting them came out of the house, someone shouted, 'Catch them.' Shaken to

the core, Babulal shouted, 'This family has lived amid us and we have taken responsibility for their safety. We are taking them to the CRPF camp. If anyone attacks or harms them, it would bring dishonour to our colony.' This helped rein in the troublemakers and some even joined the group to the CRPF camp.

Babulal and others from the colony continued visiting the Mathur household and we spent long hours talking about the situation in Punjab, where both Hindus and Sikhs continued to suffer in the continuing violence. But it was only after a few weeks that we got down to discussing concrete steps they could take to right the wrong done to the Sikh families in the colony. One evening one of our friends said, 'We feel bad that men from our colony took part in rioting. We wish we could do something about it.'

'Would you be willing to meet some Sikhs and tell them how you feel?' I asked them. Except for one man, the others were uncertain. I told them about Justice Narula (Amit Chadha's grandfather). I had met him a few times since my arrival in Delhi. Would they like to meet him, I asked. After some hesitation a few of them agreed. I telephoned Justice Narula and fixed a time for a meeting between them.

I accompanied these friends to Justice Narula's house. Justice Narula warmly welcomed the men. He personally served them tea. My friends were both overwhelmed and uncomfortable by this reception. At one point one of the men started telling Justice Narula about the reason for their visit. He told the retired judge, 'We have come to say sorry for what happened during the 1984 riots. Those who have died cannot be brought back. But this has been on our conscience and we wanted to tell you about it.' Justice Narula accepted their apologies and said how mistakes had been made by both sides in Punjab. He talked at

length about the need to understand one another. Before leaving, these friends invited Justice Narula to visit their colony. He accepted their invitation.

On the day of the proposed visit, Justice Narula was ill and in a nursing home. So his grandson Amit, who had returned, represented his grandfather. Amit first came to the MRA home where the colony friends came to fetch him. As they crossed the road together, Amit told one of them how nervous he felt about this visit. They in turn told him about their nervousness when they had visited his grandfather. These confessions led to deeper discussion among them as they sat in the Valmiki Mandir, an appropriate site for such reconciliation, as Mahatma Gandhi used to hold his prayer meetings here during the pre-independence days. A small group of Hindus and Sikhs had taken a tentative step to remove psychological barriers.

At the MRA centre other meetings were arranged for the colony people to meet the Sikh residents on that road. These community dialogues on a small scale had a profound effect on the members of the Valmiki Samaj who took part in it. Some of them tried to reach out to other slum colonies of Delhi where terrible killings had taken place. They told their friends in those colonies of their efforts to make amends. But to my knowledge they were not able to initiate Hindu–Sikh community dialogue as had taken place between them and Justice Narula or with Sikhs of Panchkuian Road. That I did not support these efforts in a sustained manner is a matter of regret to me. But I had moved on to other things.

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These encounters with the Sikhs after the 1984 riots triggered a deeper thought process in me. The discussions had raised several issues, including the riots during Partition and forced migrations

at the time. Could it have been prevented, I wondered. The violence of Partition had left deep scars and it continued to affect intercommunity relations within India. Partition had caused internationalization of the Hindu–Muslim question rather than its resolution. Even the seeds of the Punjab problem could be traced to that period. Besides this there were the grievances that several other religious, linguistic and tribal minorities nursed. These issues had hardly affected me and I had not thought about them deeply. So I found I had nothing to contribute during such discussions and could only be a listener. But that too was useful. I began to see that reconciliation was not simple. Hardened attitudes shaped by experience and historical baggage could not be changed so easily.

I began to be aware that there were several festering wounds Mother India carried. These wounds had remained unattended for several decades and in some cases for centuries. These were now beginning to bleed. Some believe that these ugly and painful events of history should not be dug up and discussed as they can further incite emotions. But can ugly, painful events in an individual's life or that of a community or a nation be thus tucked away?

Memories good or bad will always stay with individuals or communities. If they are not healed, they have the power to turn victims into prisoners, sometimes becoming potential weapons to avenge the real or perceived wrongs done, humiliations heaped and suffering caused. Hence there are some who for political purposes make it their business to keep collective memories of a community and a nation alive. One cannot always turn one's back on such people, call them divisive elements and pretend they do not matter. The only way to defeat their designs is to actively work towards healing the hurt and building trust between people.

When the hurt heals, memories lose their sting and can no longer disturb minds. I had turned my own experience into a constructive tool to help others, in the process obtaining release from my nightmares as well. Could my experiences be replicated on a larger scale, such as that of an entire community? I thought it could. But in India and South Asia, attempts to heal the scars of history have been few and far between.

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Several years later I asked Amit Singh Chadha whether there was still alienation among Sikh youth. He said he would be less than truthful if he were to say the Sikhs had truly forgiven the perpetrators of the violence and humiliation heaped on them or that their hurt was healed. But such feelings had been put on the back burner, as people tried to keep pace with the changes that had taken place in the economic environment since the 1990s. With all the developments that had taken place, however, the task of rehabilitating the former militants had remained neglected. These young men are largely ignored both by the government and by the society. As a result they have no friends to help them start new lives. Not many in India today are aware of this.

Some Sikhs feel worried about the unresolved problems of the 1980s, but these sentiments are not given public expression. This includes the rehabilitation of former militants, widows and orphans of the militants and victims of violence in general. Although a lot has been done there are many who have been left out. The possibility of the anger and revenge breaking out into a raging fever is very real if systematic efforts are not made to engage those youth in Punjab who were involved in violence or have served long or short prison terms in meaningful

economic and social development.

I have heard such feelings time and again in situation after situation in different parts of India. Five decades after Independence we have not learnt how to make each member of the Indian family feel secure and free to develop and grow as a citizen of this country. We have looked for quick fixes that have not brought permanent solutions to internal conflicts. As a nation we have never taken the trouble to listen to people and their grievances. New Delhi is often perceived as being indifferent, distant and insensitive to people's aspirations in far-flung border areas of the country. Often the impression conveyed from Delhi is 'We know exactly what is best for you.' In the process, those who are not close to Delhi or not very articulate find their voices either muffled or suffocated.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increase in communal and caste violence and insurgency in India. The Indian state responded to these challenges exclusively by using the law-enforcing machinery and security forces to quell the violence. The underlying social and political reasons behind the eruption of violent upheavals and insurgent movements have never been addressed in independent India. Not many efforts have been made to address genuine grievances of the people and to heal and win the hearts and minds of the aggrieved.

What could be done for people living in the areas considered problematic? The solutions to problems have to evolve through active participation of people on the ground along with the government. We cannot thrust on people solutions that are evolved in remote government offices by people who are out of touch with ground realities. What we need in India is institutionalization of dialogue between people and between those who govern and the governed. We need to open up

communication channels at many different levels and hold community dialogues to understand and address the problems facing us.

The process of reconciliation needs to go hand in hand with the development process—it cannot be an isolated process. Why is it difficult for us in India to put our efforts into long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction of the areas affected by violence?

Chapter Two

Bhagalpur

In October 1989, I was in Madras (now Chennai) when news broke out that about 120 Muslims had been massacred in Logain village, near Bhagalpur, and dumped into a pond and a well nearby. However, the stench had been unbearable after a few days and the killers had fished the bodies out and buried them in a field. They had then planted cauliflower on top of the bodies. Thinking that I had enough experience after the 1984 riots to perhaps be able to help bring about a rapprochement between the two communities, I decided to go there. How presumptuous of me to have thought that way, I was soon to discover. I realized how difficult the process of reconciliation really is and the various qualities needed for it. In each such situation one has to relearn how to deal with trauma and ways of human relations.

The Muslims had been killed when riots broke out in the wake of the shilanyas yatras organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The shilanyas yatras were part of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, initiated in the mid-1980s with the VHP's claim that the 500-year-old Babri Masjid was built over the birth place of Lord Ram. The VHP wanted to raze the mosque and build a Ram temple there instead. Political leaders whipped up religious passions and tensions were high in the whole of north India. As part of the temple movement, bricks made from 'local earth' were collected from all over India and carried in processions,

or shilanyas yatras, to Ayodhya to lay the foundation of the Ram Janmasthan Mandir. These processions left a trail of violence in the areas through which they passed. In Bhagalpur, communal riots raged for over a month, claiming the lives of about 1890 people, most of them Muslim, in 226 villages. The riots started in October 1989 in Bhagalpur town and quickly spread to the villages in an 80-kilometre radius.

Bhagalpur, a small town of historical importance in Bihar, is situated on the southern bank of the Ganga. It is believed to be the kingdom of Anga, referred to in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Centuries back, when the Ganga was used as a waterway, Bhagalpur was an important trading town. Today it has a university and engineering, medical and homeopathy colleges. But the economy is still agriculture based and not too many employment opportunities exist for the youth who pass out of these institutions. Bhagalpur is also famous for its silk production and it has a silk institute and agricultural college. A sizeable section of the population is involved in weaving tussar silk, which is exported and fetches good profits. The cloth is mostly woven by the Muslims and the Hindus sell it. Thus both communities are dependent on each other economically.

Bhagalpur shot into prominence in the 1970s when a national newspaper reported that a large number of undertrials in Bhagalpur jail had been blinded by the local police force. It later reported that the people in Bhagalpur had taken out processions in support of the police, justifying the blinding of the undertrials on the ground that 'they are criminals'. A public interest litigation was filed in the Supreme Court and won in favour of the undertrials. But in the public perception, Bhagalpur had come to be known as a crime-infested area.

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In January 1990 I went to Bhagalpur for a two-day workshop at the invitation of Professor Ramji Singh, head of the Gandhian Studies Department at the Bhagalpur University. Volunteers of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others attended the workshop and discussed practical steps that could be taken in the post-riot scenario in their town.

On the second day, Kedar Chaurasia, head of the local unit of Gandhi Peace Foundation, took a few of us to several villages that were badly affected. I was shaken by the extent of destruction of the houses. The houses seemed abandoned and no one was to be seen. The owners had fled and not returned. Many of them were in the relief camps set up by the government and other organizations following the riots. Not many efforts were made to bring them back. We knew that if we wanted to reintegrate people it was important that we brought the riot victims back to their villages. This was not easy as terrible massacres had taken place in some of the villages and survivors would not be willing to return to the scene of those tragedies. Luckily this was not the case with all villages. In most cases there was large-scale destruction of houses but not too many killings.

At the workshop, most agreed that the priority was the reconstruction of houses. It was decided that the riot victims needed to be encouraged to build their mud houses in the villages and to provide them material to do so. But before that, conducive conditions had to be created in the riot-affected villages so that the victims felt safe to return there. The riot victims had lost everything. The devastation had left them with very little or no money to buy food grain or material for house construction.

The participants at the workshop decided to concentrate all efforts on confidence building for the return of the riot

victims. A large village called Bhatodia was identified to start work. About 300 Muslim families had fled from there. Kedar Chaurasia undertook to visit the riot victims to persuade them to return and he spoke with Hindus of Bhatodia to ensure that they did not resist the return of the victims amid them. Lutheran World Service of Calcutta had decided to combine their efforts with others working in Bhatodia. They had previous experience in building houses after natural calamities and working with victims of trauma.

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From Bhagalpur I went to Calcutta to enlist the help of Gaur Kishore Ghosh. Together we went to Shanti Niketan and Burdwan universities, spoke at a few gatherings and found volunteers to help in Bhagalpur. The first team of a dozen volunteers from West Bengal, Jamshedpur and Mumbai went to Bhagalpur in March 1990 for ten days. Gaur Kishore Ghosh came from Calcutta. The team from the Lutheran World Service had surveyed the village and identified 250 houses in need of reconstruction. The organization decided to fund this project and run it as food-for-work programme. The victims would build their own houses. At the end of each day's work, the families would be given food rations. There was much wisdom in this as the work programme was therapeutic for the riot victims.

Kedar Chaurasia and his team had done the spadework. They had already had several rounds of meetings with the village elders of Bhatodia as well as with those who had fled. Chaurasia and his team had convinced them of the need to have the riot victims reintegrated in the same villages. This was a significant victory as there were some organizations trying to get the

government to allot separate land to resettle the victims and establish new villages. People like me were absolutely against this plan as we felt this would create mini-Indias and mini-Pakistans all over the countryside.

In the course of our work, we visited some of the relief camps and spent hours talking to the victims. Some of the relief camps run by Jamaat-e-Islami were like villages that had sprouted overnight. Several victims in these relief camps told us that they were tired of sitting idle. They said it made them feel like beggars. Many of them were weavers. They wanted us to give them a loom so that they could start earning their livelihood. The relief camps had ignored economic or occupational rehabilitation.

Since the infrastructure in Bhatodia was skeletal, we decided that the women in the group would stay at the Gandhi Peace Foundation Centre in Bhagalpur town and the men would camp at Bhatodia. When I first visited Bhatodia in February 1990 it looked quite desolate, specially the Muslim quarters. By mid-March the riot victims had come back, along with the teams that had come from outside. As there was no shelter over their heads, the riot victims—women and children including—quickly started construction activity. Those who were too old to help simply sat watching. Little children freely ran around. Overall, the spirit of cooperation thrived, though there were occasional quarrels and raised voices. But the vision of normalcy was only superficial. Emotions like sorrow, numbness, incomprehension of why this had to happen to them, anger and distrust flickered on the faces. The younger volunteers helped with the construction work. In the evening they gathered children and youth from both communities and organized games. On the first evening all the adults gathered to watch their children play. There was much laughter and clapping of

hands. For months, these people had lived in crowded relief camps which provided them security in numbers but no clue about their future. This insecurity had led to despair, bitterness and anger. But now they were back in their village and could rebuild their homes with their own hands and their future with the help of others. For the first time in months they were beginning to relax and unwind. Perhaps curious about why outsiders would want to help their Muslim neighbours, Hindu youths followed our team into the Muslim locality after a few days. As the walls of houses were being raised, other walls were slowly crumbling. Distrust was being replaced by the desire to renew friendships again.

Those of us who could not help with the construction work spent our time each day walking around in both Hindu and Muslim localities. The people were curious about us, our work and our intentions. So they stopped us and talked to us and invited us to their homes. This gave us an opportunity to get to know them as well as to know what was going on in their locality. On our walks we met widows who had not begun construction of houses, as there were no menfolk to do the heavy work. The women were shattered by the murder of their husbands and seemed dazed. They could not think of what to do next or how to reorganize their lives. With the earning members gone, they would now have to work to make a living for themselves and their children. They needed practical help.

One of the widows we helped was Bibi Kobra. When we first met her she could hardly speak. Her husband Bakir and son Chedi were killed two months after the riots. One day it was rumoured that some Muslims had kidnapped two Hindu women. The women had left their homes in the morning and had not returned by the end of the day. Foul play was suspected and in the ensuing confusion four Muslims were slain. Soon

thereafter, the missing women appeared in the village. Unfortunately four innocent people had lost their lives. Bibi Kobra's husband and son were among the four. She had two more sons and a daughter. We visited her often and slowly helped her to think about what she could do to earn money. We also found help for the construction of her house. Within a week, work on her house had begun. Bibi Kobra began to open up and talk more freely. Shaking off her inertia, she busied herself in construction activity.

Towards the end of the week, Bibi Kobra stopped me and said, 'Construction of this house alone is not enough. You must find some work for me quickly.' I replied, 'Have patience. Let us do one thing at a time. Why not finish work on your house first?' She was not happy with this and pestered me to the point of making me angry. It was only later that I fully appreciated the new spirit in Bibi Kobra. That she wanted to stand on her feet as quickly as possible was a positive sign. She had succeeded in getting free of her victimhood.

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Although after every riot people say that outsiders had come and attacked their localities or looted them, there is no doubt that local elements are always involved and sometimes work with outside elements. We found out that people in Bhatodia were no different when a young man invited us to his home for tea.

A few minutes earlier he had told one member of our team that he was going to beat up his schoolteacher, as he wanted to teach the teacher a lesson. The young man had left school when he was in the fourth standard after getting a severe beating from the schoolteacher. Jyotibhai Desai, a Gandhian from Vedchi

in Gujarat; Bina, a volunteer of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA); and I went to his house. On reaching his house, we discovered that his father was one of the key persons of the Hindu locality. Soon we had a lively discussion. Suddenly Jyotibhai asked our host, 'Tell me, what happened to the crop that was standing in the fields belonging to the Muslims? Was the crop not ready for harvesting when they fled?' Our host replied, 'People came from outside and took it away.' Jyotibhai asked, 'Did you not resist them?' Our host said, 'How could we, as we were hiding inside our homes?' Jyotibhai was not satisfied with this answer. He told them how little the Muslims had to eat now, when just a few months earlier they had had standing crops in their fields. Under the circumstances, what was the duty of their Hindu neighbours, he asked. In exasperation our host blurted, 'When everyone in the village has done it, why am I alone being targeted?'

Before getting up to leave, Jyotibhai asked him to consider giving grain to the riot-affected families. Such an act of restitution would perhaps go a long way towards restoring trust and community spirit without which the bad blood created by riots would linger on, he said. Restoration of amity between the communities had to be established through practical gestures. Some Hindus did help in the rehabilitation process.

Another afternoon, while walking through the Hindu locality, we stopped to talk to a woman. She invited us into her home. Just as we were about to climb the steps of the house, her husband appeared in the doorway and suggested we sit outside. He brought a charpai from inside and before long seventy to eighty people had surrounded us. They bombarded us with questions. They were suspicious of us as 'outsiders'. They thought we were taking the side of the Muslims. They wanted to know what caste we belonged to. They were not

satisfied with our answer that we were Hindus who did not believe in caste system but were firm believers of humanism. 'Surely you belong to some political party?' they asked. They found it incredulous that we were apolitical people who had taken leave from our work and had come at our own expense to help riot victims.

Then we got talking on the genesis of the October riots in Bhagalpur, about who was responsible for them. Why were the Muslims against Hindus wanting to build a Ram mandir, they wanted to know. When we informed them that Muslims were not against the construction of a temple but only against it being built by demolishing the mosque, they were surprised and asked, '*Masjid hatane ki baat kaun kar raha hai?*' (Who is talking about bringing down the mosque?) We emphasized the need to stop blaming someone else for what had happened and to take responsibility for where each one may have been wrong. Now that the people had returned, it was necessary to shed distrust and prejudice from their hearts. We urged them to leave the past behind and join together to build a new future. It was a gruelling session during which we were not sure if we were succeeding in our efforts to rebuild broken bridges between the village communities. We were encouraged when we heard an educated man say, 'If we had had discussions like these before the riots they would never have happened.'

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Post-riot rumours continued to float for months far and wide in Bhagalpur district. Because of the fear and distrust of the past months, people believed every rumour. This also made them jumpy. When we were in Bhatodia, the rumour doing the rounds in the Hindu locality was that Muslims were making

bombs. The Hindus wanted us to stop the 'bomb factory'. That no one had seen the factory was of little concern to them. Since they were not willing to listen to reason, we told them we would unearth the bomb factory together. Some members of our team offered to conduct the search and found out that the strange noise they thought was from the bomb factory was in fact coming from a house in the Hindu locality, where a well was being dug. Thus, a rumour that had threatened the fragile social fabric, which was painstakingly being mended, was quelled.

We found ourselves having to settle all kinds of disputes between the villagers, brought about by pent-up tensions of many months. These cropped up by the minute and would quickly reach flashpoint. In retrospect, they look minor, but it helped that we, as impartial outsiders, were at hand to get them to talk things out and settle misunderstandings. One day a woman complained to us that people were taking mud from her field to build their houses. She did not mind them taking mud but was afraid they were digging so deep that it would cause water-logging. She created quite a commotion and all those concerned as well as most of our team got together to give her a hearing. All of us went out to inspect her field and found some basis for her complaint. An alternative site was identified and the dispute was worked out fairly quickly and amicably.

Another day we heard about a woman who was beaten unconscious by her husband. When we reached the spot, people were still trying to revive her. Several men who were watching from a distance urged us to do something about the husband. It was a curious story. When the family fled their home during the riots, they had hidden their jewellery. But they made the mistake of telling their relatives the hiding place. One of them

had stolen it and the poor woman was blamed for this. We warned the husband, who was notorious for his foul temper, that we would have him arrested if anything happened to his wife. We told him to feed his wife as she had gone without food for two days.

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If the Muslims were afraid of restarting their lives in the village after the trauma they had undergone, many Hindus were fearful of retribution. I often told them about Rano Shaiza of Nagaland, a former member of Parliament (MP). Her husband had been murdered that January while addressing an election meeting. At her husband's funeral, Rano announced that she and her family would not seek revenge for her husband's murder. Several young men of their clan expressed their displeasure, arguing that their tribal tradition allowed for revenge killings. Rano steadfastly countered them saying that although their tribal tradition had accepted revenge, their religion, Christianity, was against revenge and she would not permit anyone to be involved in revenge killings on her or her family's behalf. Rano's courage and clarity as a wife and mother was an inspiration to all women everywhere.

The women of Bhatodia listened to Rano's story with great interest. They told us how they too wanted a different kind of future for their children—a future that was free from violence, hate and destruction. Some of them told us with tear-filled eyes that Bhatodia was their home and India their country.

Each day we found our engagement with the lives of the villagers deepening. One evening an old man took me to his home. We sat on the floor, talking to the members of his family.

The construction work of their house had not started. I could not see any able-bodied men around. The women spoke of all the possessions they once had and were now lost. The old man told me, 'During Partition, we heard of the riots and killings that had taken place. But that was far away. They did not touch us. Why are we made to go through this in our country now?' His tone exhibited no bitterness, just incomprehension at the trauma they had gone through. As I sat listening to them, I looked around me at the burnt and broken walls of what was once their home.

What provokes men to inflict such destruction and cruelty on others, I wondered. The houses can be rebuilt. But can we restore the shattered lives and hearts? Could we restore their belief in basic goodness of human beings again? I told them, 'Those who inflict such blows and destruction have no religion. They are neither Hindus nor Muslims. They are shaitans. Those who are true believers of religion, no matter which, would never commit such crimes against other human beings.' The old man replied, 'What you say is correct. This is the work of a devil. *Hum apna imaan hi kho baithe.*'

I was deeply stirred by the words of the old man. How generous those who have suffered can be! It takes courage to refuse to allow personal suffering to create bitterness against an entire community or a group. It was people like this old man who prodded us to help in efforts to rebuild broken houses and lives on the debris and ashes of communal flames that raged in Bhagalpur in October 1989 and continue to rage in so many parts of the country.

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Several villages where tussar silk was woven were totally destroyed. Most of the weavers were in the relief camps. During the riots when the Muslim houses in the villages were burnt the looms were also destroyed. Hundreds of weavers were sitting idle.

Moved by their pleas for at least one loom, I gave a short report to Dr L.C. Jain, who was then a member of the Planning Commission, describing the condition of the weavers and the tussar industry. Following this, the commission sent a three-member committee to Bhagalpur. Dr Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA, was part of the team. The team drew up a plan to resurrect the tussar industry. The plan consisted of forming weavers' cooperatives through which local carpenters were given contracts to make handlooms to the specifications of the weavers. Weavers thus got their looms at nominal rates. The entire families of the weavers were engaged in this and within three to four months the scheme had begun to work and the weavers were gainfully employed.

The small part I was able to play in the resurrection of the tussar industry was deeply satisfying. I realized how interdependent Hindu–Muslim communities in rural India are through various cottage industries. That interdependence could also play an important role in the process of reconciliation. Bonds formed on the basis of economic necessity are enduring. People in rural areas may not be highly educated but they are often practical, wise and good at survival. They can judge what is better for them. Left to themselves, they would keep the politics of hatred far away.

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A year after we worked in Bhatodia, 140 families had returned and were fully settled. The village was almost unrecognizable. It looked peaceful and undisturbed, surrounded by lush green

paddy fields. Unfortunately, there were some revenge killings. This raised some tension in Bhatodia now and again, but the timely intervention of local volunteers helped to defuse the situation and prevented it from growing into a full-scale riot.

For two years, several of us from outside made trips to Bhagalpur. I went once every two months. Gaur Kishore Ghosh, who went as often as was possible, wrote several articles about our work in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. Among the team that Gaur Kishore Ghosh brought from Calcutta/Shanti Niketan was Suresh Khairnar. He first came in May 1990 and decided to work in the Sabhaur block, which was considered one of the toughest areas of Bhagalpur district. Suresh made frequent visits from Calcutta and won the trust of villagers from both communities in several villages.

Chanderi village was situated in Sabhaur block. It had seen a large massacre that claimed 105 lives from forty-five families. All of them were Muslims. Malka, a seventeen-year-old woman, was the sole witness to the Chanderi carnage. She survived the massacre but most members of her family were killed. According to her, when the trouble started in Chanderi and the attackers came, she rushed with her sisters to their neighbours. Instead of taking them in and giving shelter, they shut the doors on their faces and left them at the mercy of the attackers. Malka ran towards the pond and jumped in to escape her pursuers. As she leaped, one of the men attacked her, chopping off her foot.

She lay bleeding in the pond on top of other bodies for several hours. An officer from the Border Security Force (BSF) rescued her. This had become the lead story on BBC's coverage of the Bhagalpur riots. Malka had described her deep hurt when those she had grown up with and trusted had abandoned her in a crisis. On the strength of Malka's evidence, cases were registered against individuals from Chanderi.

Suresh organized a three-day camp in Sabhaur in October 1991 to coincide with the second anniversary of the Bhagalpur riots. The cases of those implicated in the Chanderi massacre were to begin the following week. Raab, the head of Bhagalpur telephones at the time, had risked his career and filed a case about the Chanderi massacre. A fortnight before the camp, the chief minister of Bihar came to Chanderi to inaugurate a cluster of pukka houses built by the Tata Relief Committee for the forty-five victim families. All these various factors taken together had stirred the emotions of Hindus in Chanderi.

On the first afternoon of the camp, Narendra, a nephew of the sarpanch, came with his friends to meet us. The young man spoke with much anger about the attitude of the Muslims. He told us how he had made attempts to talk to Muslims of his age and invited them to return to their homes. But they rebuffed his offer. 'What do they want us to do to convince them that they will be protected?' asked Narendra. We tried to help Narendra see that the Muslims felt betrayed. We asked the Muslims present at the meeting why they were reluctant to go back and they said it was fear that prevented them from returning to the village. But if the government provided Gurkhas from the BSF as security, they would consider returning. This led to an interesting discussion on how to deal with fear. We acknowledged that the fear the Muslims felt was natural after what they had gone through during the riots two years ago. But this fear would not disappear by the presence of the BSF.

We turned to an elderly man in the gathering from Babupur village. 'Is it true that the Hindus of your village looted the homes of the Muslims?'

'Yes,' replied the man.

'Those who looted the homes are no doubt guilty, but what about the rest? They knew that houses were being looted and

then set on fire. Yet they did nothing about it. Are they not equally guilty?' one of us asked.

The man said, 'I suppose so.' But not everyone in the room agreed with the old man.

'What can the Hindus do to restore their faith?' we persisted.

The old man replied, 'Well, they can go to our houses and take back whatever is theirs.'

But this had not been our point in raising the matter. We wanted the Hindus to ask themselves if they were truly repentant for what they did. If so, they had to think of practical steps to be taken. That afternoon, Muslims of Babupur approached the old man and expressed their desire to return. They were given personal guarantees by others from Babupur that they would be provided protection.

The next afternoon, to our surprise, a sizeable group from Chanderi turned up at the camp. This included the mukhia and sarpanch (who belonged to opposing political camps and were both implicated in the riot cases), two known criminals of the area and some Muslims, including three women who were widowed during the riots. There was quite a heated exchange between the mukhia and the Muslims as they went over the events preceding the massacre and the mukhia's role in it. The mukhia put up a spirited defence, which provoked the widows sitting in the room. They started nudging me and whispering in my ear about the mukhia. Finally I told the widows it was important that the others also heard what they had to say.

This brought silence into the room. After some initial hesitation, one of the widows, Ruksana Khatun, started speaking softly, and I repeated what she was saying to the rest. At one stage Ruksana turned to the mukhia and cried, 'Your bastiwalas killed my son and my husband. What did you do to stop them?

Now you fall at our feet, requesting us to return. What have we left there to return to? You killed my son.' Her outburst silenced the mukhia and the rest. The men were not able to look her straight in the eye.

The senior men in the team seized the moment and challenged the mukhia and the rest. They asked, 'Are you prepared to take these widows in your homes and give them protection and adopt them as your sisters?'

The discussion went on late into the evening. Later the mukhia told us, 'Ruksana Khatun's son was a bright young boy. He was the first man from our village to go to a college. We did not do right by killing him.'

The next morning, at Ruksana's invitation, a SEWA volunteer, Suresh and I went to Rajpur to meet Ruksana and another widow. The second woman had lost eleven members of her family in the Chanderi massacre. Rajpur had a sizeable Muslim population. Survivors of Chanderi had moved to Rajpur. From the money they received as compensation from the government, they bought land and built their houses there. They were not keen to go back to live in Chanderi, although the houses built by the Tata Relief were beautiful and the local government machinery was trying very hard to persuade them to return. Tormenting memories were associated with Chanderi. Once betrayed, how could they stay among the killers? In fact these newly constructed houses had become a source of resentment among the Hindus. These stood out among the rest of the mud houses in the village. Although there was nothing wrong in giving the best to the victims, there was certain lack of sensitivity in constructing the kind of houses that could become a source of heartburn.

Ruksana's husband had worked in the Sabhaur Agriculture College. The college had refused to pay her his dues because

she had failed to produce his death certificate. The state government had already given her relief of Rs 110,000 following her husband's death. But at the college, a junior official was demanding a bribe to process her case. The commissioner was requested to intervene.

We were glad to see Ruksana Khatun in her Rajpur home setting, where she seemed secure among her relatives. She gave us an account of an incident before the riots which had a direct bearing on the massacre in Chanderi. Apparently, three weeks before the riots, her husband and others had erected a tent on the village land. It was a Friday and they offered their namaz in the tent. They wanted to build a mosque on the spot. But the Hindus objected to this. The following Friday, the men offered their namaz at the same spot. Two days later, the Hindus confronted Khatun and an ugly quarrel ensued. Ruksana's husband refused to give up the idea of building the mosque. Her eldest son felt his father was precipitating matters. Three days later, sensing trouble, her son suggested that she leave with her younger son, Mohamad Rifaqat. Ruksana came away to Rajpur, thus escaping the carnage. Some hours earlier, her elder son who had gone to survey the scene had been the first to be killed in the village. The following day other Muslims were killed.

This dispute over the construction of the mosque had taken place around the time the shilanyas yatra was to pass through Bhagalpur. The three of us listening to Ruksana were deeply stirred by her account as also her objectivity.

I have often thought of Ruksana's account of the dispute that was brewing in Chanderi over the village land and the plans to build the mosque. Didn't the local police have any inkling of this dispute? Why had they not taken any steps to defuse the situation? Had they treated the matter as sensitive

and posted the necessary security there? How should such disputes at village level be handled? If the police are not able to make effective intervention, who else should make interventions for dispute solving?

❁

I worked among the riot victims in Bhagalpur for two years. It was different from my work after the 1984 riots. Then I was not involved as deeply in the lives of the riot victims, nor had I helped in the rehabilitation process. In Bhagalpur I learnt how people are ready to share their sorrows and how they put their lives back together with a little help from outside. Looking back, it is amazing that we had such discussions with Hindus and Muslims in their own villages.

The train journey from Mumbai to Bhagalpur is a long and tiring one as there are no fast express trains one can travel on. But the fatigue was more than compensated for by the rich experiences gained during each visit there. Bhagalpur taught me that local mechanisms had to be created to deal with social disputes that have potential to grow into violent conflict and disrupt peace between communities. A wave of violence would only spread in an area with a history of animosity and distrust among communities. This insight helped me to look for local reasons and causes for the outbreak of violence during the Mumbai riots.

After two years of work in Bhagalpur the following points were brought home to us.

- The Hindu–Muslim schism is deep and easily exploited by politicians for political purposes.
- Post-riot relief and rehabilitation need to be holistic. Mere relief and physical rehabilitation are not enough. These need

to go hand in hand with economic and emotional rehabilitation.

- In this process teamwork between NGOs, social activists and government departments can produce positive results.
- Trust building and reconciliation work needs to be undertaken before physical rehabilitation of victims to ensure their safety and well-being in their original habitation. This is the most difficult part and there are no ready-made techniques available but to do it and learn as one goes along.
- Very often local feuds between individuals or disputes between communities explode into violence under external provocation. It is important to understand the local causes and issues when reconciliation work is undertaken.
- In most parts of India, no administrative or social mechanisms are available to address or resolve local disputes and tensions before they reach flashpoint.

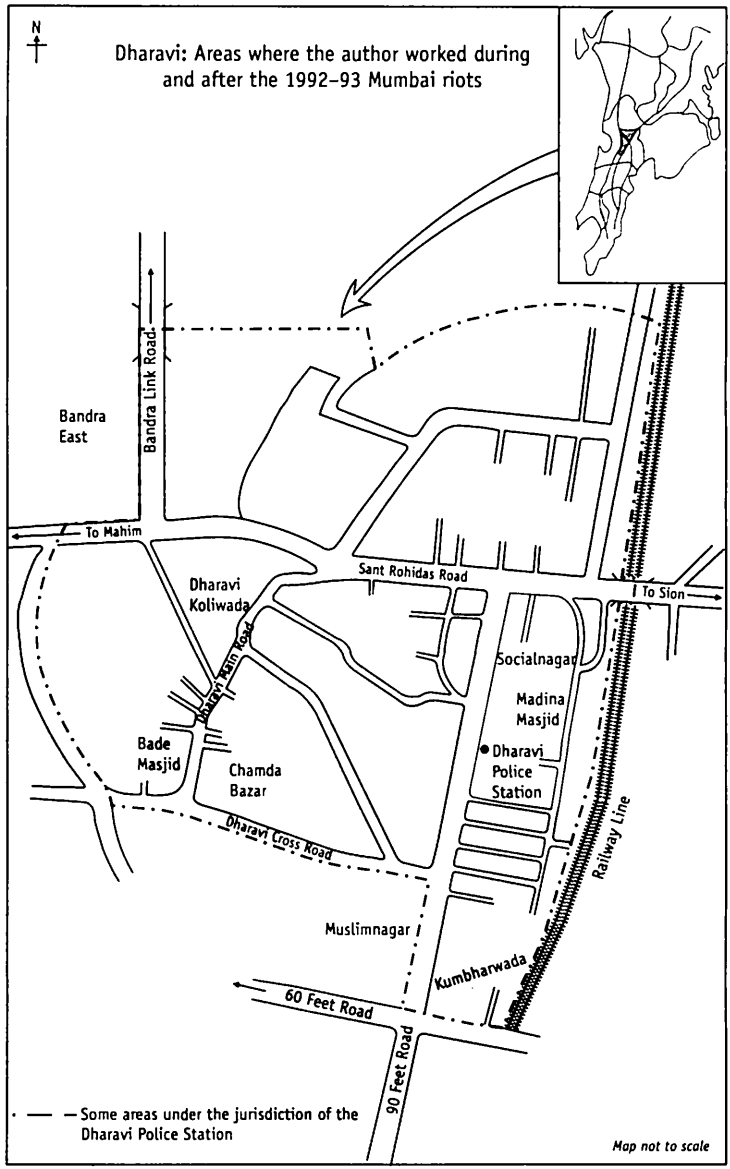
We felt we were at least beginning to address some real issues on which the future depended. We had opened up channels for future dialogue and for each side to explore where they may have gone wrong. Perhaps it started the deeper process of healing and reintegration.

Our approach in Bhagalpur and the close ties we were able to forge with different NGOs, local government and government institutions ensured at least a good number of riot victims were rehabilitated physically, economically and psychologically. But the work there could not be taken to its conclusion due to the untimely death of two of the main people working with the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Bhagalpur: Kedar Chaurasia and Jayaprakash. They were killed in a road accident. Both had amazing local contacts with all communities and extraordinary courage. Without a solid basis of local support, a

sustained effort could not be carried out. I often look back and wonder how far our efforts would have gone there if the two men had been alive.

Part II

Mumbai


N
Dharavi: Areas where the author worked during and after the 1992–93 Mumbai riots
Bandra East
Bandra Link Road
To Mahim
Dharavi Koliwada
Sant Rohidas Road
To Sion
Dharavi Main Road
Socialnagar
Madina Masjid
Bade Masjid
Chamda Bazar
Dharavi Police Station
Dharavi Cross Road
Railway Line
Muslimnagar
Kumbharwada
60 Feet Road
90 Feet Road
Some areas under the jurisdiction of the Dharavi Police Station
Map not to scale

Chapter Three

Riots and Their Immediate Aftermath

I

In 1990, I returned to Mumbai. I had been working outside the city for twenty years. During those intervening years, the city had changed drastically, making some parts almost unrecognizable. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the city slowly changed from an industrial centre to a commercial centre. With large industrial units either shifting out of the city or closing down (as in the case of several textile mills), a large workforce was rendered jobless. Thousands of textile workers and their families had gone through terrible hardship during the millworkers' strike of 1982, the longest in the world. It had made many thousands of workers destitute. Their children had joined the ranks of the unemployed youth in the working class areas of central Mumbai. No study has been made of how many such young, active unemployed youth exist in Mumbai. The once powerful trade union movement of the city was no more a dominant force. The areas where large mills once stood now lay vacant and were being developed for commercial use by the owners.

Since the early 1950s successive governments have been consistently subverting or ignoring the development plans for Mumbai. The city's uncontrolled growth has gone unchecked because of the collusion between politicians, civil administration, quasi-leaders and builders. On the floor of the state Assembly,

the government admitted that 48 per cent of Mumbai's thirteen million inhabitants live in slums. Through the 1980s and 1990s the slums proliferated, with a large number of migrants coming from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The new migrants had little contact with older communities and the links that existed among the diverse communities of the city were considerably weakened. While the new migrants worked hard to earn a living, they were not as committed to the city's life and its well-being as the older migrants were. Whether in the slums or middle-class housing colonies, the new migrants seemed unconnected with old Mumbai and its ethos and values. On the other hand, slumlords, who occupy land illegally, exploited the burgeoning population's need for housing. They were aided in this by the absence of a proper housing policy. Politicians colluded with the slumlords and allowed settlements to proliferate and later regularized them. On humanitarian grounds, civic amenities such as water and electricity were provided, though these were not adequate to meet the basic requirements of slum dwellers. Many slums grew as ghettos of a particular community or a caste, a fact most Mumbaiites were unaware of until the riots broke out and slums became the focus of media attention.

The city always had poorer areas but the squalour and the sprawling slums that have become the hallmark of the city's landscape are a recent development. The slum dwellers live in tiny one-room tenements without even the most nominal amenities. In a city where housing is scarce and prices of property exorbitantly high, the slum dweller has no option but to put up with a lot of hardship.

Slumlords and builders who built illegally did not pay taxes and accumulated black money. This steady volume of black money created a parallel economy and resulted in the growth of the underworld mafia, who took over or occupied prime

properties by evicting the owners or the tenants. Slowly the underworld progressed from smuggling gold or silver or drugs to entering and financing the construction business and the film or entertainment industry in Mumbai. All these trends have undermined the respectability of Mumbai.

Alongside the increase in the number of people living a hand-to-mouth existence, the number of middle-class families too grew. The interests of these two groups naturally clashed, due to what one group thought of as luxuries and the other as basic needs. Differences between these two groups were brought to the fore during the riots in areas such as Bandra East.

As I was born and brought up in this city, it has always been home for me. But when I returned to live there in 1990, it was clear that I would have to rediscover my own city. It had become more crowded, dirty, noisy and polluted than I had known it to be. The city's character seemed to have changed. There was so much aggression at the bus stops and in the local railway compartments. Loud and nasty quarrels were quick to erupt—whether in slums and chawls over a water tap or in the local train compartment or in buses over a seat. These outbursts were indications of the daily pressure the people were living under. Very few in Mumbai seemed to have time or space for others. There were several indications that a time bomb was slowly ticking away and would cause a major explosion of pent-up frustrations and anger. But not many mechanisms were developed to prevent or cope with such an outburst when it happened.

In 1988, south Mumbai's Muslim-majority area had seen a riot over Salman Rushdie's controversial book, *The Satanic Verses*. The Ayodhya temple movement was also drawing support from Mumbai as well as the rest of Maharashtra. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad held frequent meetings and went on a drive to

collect money for building the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The shilanyas yatras passed through Mumbai, but did not cause law and order problems in Maharashtra. But as in the rest of the country, the polarization between Hindus and Muslims was taking place very fast.

Towards the end of November and early December 1992, G.R. Khairnar, then deputy municipal commissioner of Mumbai, ordered a major demolition drive directed at the unauthorized properties of some criminal elements in the city.

Tension mounted in Bhendi Bazar, when Khairnar's squad demolished some roadside stalls that belonged mostly to Muslims. Tempers were running high. Following a citizens' initiative, Khairnar and the leaders of the hawkers' union met to discuss the issue.

All this was happening in Mumbai at the time when newspapers and TV screens were flashing the news of hundreds of people gathering in Ayodhya. A petition was moved in the Supreme Court against the Government of Uttar Pradesh to restrain the kar sevaks and guarantee the safety of the Babri Masjid. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh gave such a guarantee to the Supreme Court. In spite of these assurances, there was an atmosphere of uncertainty over developments in Ayodhya. For those of us watching the events from Mumbai, though Ayodhya was far away it was cause for concern. But we did not think that the developments there would have any serious fallout in our metropolitan city. How ignorant we were of the various forces at work in the city!

II

On the evening of 6 December 1992, Kekoo Gandhy, a businessman and senior citizen, informed me about the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The massive crowds that had gathered there had performed an act that was to have far-reaching consequences for India and the fabric of Indian society. It was morally, ethically and constitutionally incorrect and unacceptable. Although hard to believe, the news was not totally unexpected. Many of us felt numbed. We believed it was bound to cause riots across the country. Kekoo asked what we could do. After some discussion, we decided to telephone all our Muslim friends and tell them we shared their pain and anguish. We wanted to convey how deeply ashamed we were of the vandalism and the assault on the mosque. The right-wing groups had not just defiled the mosque in Ayodhya but had trampled upon the democratic Constitution of India and all Indian people. With one stroke, the Hindu fanatics had taken the country back by hundreds of years.

During the course of the evening, Kekoo and I spoke to many Muslims. We also decided to meet other prominent and responsible citizens and social activists in the city the next day. One of the Muslim friends we contacted was very bitter and reminded us how his apprehensions had not been taken seriously by a retired general of the Indian Army. He was referring to a meeting that had taken place at the MRA home in Mumbai three days back. The general, who had just returned from Faizabad, had informed the gathering that the government had made sufficient security arrangements. But the Muslims present had expressed their apprehension about the situation in Ayodhya.

At 7.30 a.m. the next day, Kekoo telephoned me. He said, 'The night seems to have passed peacefully. Thank God. Perhaps

we may ride over the storm.' I said, 'I don't think so and feel worried precisely because of that.' Unknown to us, there had been violence in Bhendi Bazar and elsewhere in the city. By mid-morning, riots broke out and one by one several areas were put under curfew.

Through the night of 6 December, there were incidents of arson and desecration of small temples in Bhendi Bazar. By the next morning frenzied mobs started attacking police chowkies and government properties, including buses and bus stops. When it seemed that the situation was beginning to get out of hand, police opened fire, killing or injuring a large number of people.

According to the Srikrishna Commission Report, that evening in Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum, leaders of the Shiv Sena, a right-wing Hindu political party, led a cycle rally following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The rally that started at 4 p.m. passed through the main roads and important localities of Dharavi. At one spot a meeting was held and several local leaders spoke, shouting slogans. Someone in the crowd threw a stone at a mosque. This hurt and angered the Muslims. On the following morning, a huge crowd, mostly Muslim, gathered at the junction of Kumbharwada and Bismillah Hotel on the 60 Feet Road, apparently to stage a peaceful protest. An inspector tried to pacify the crowd by explaining to them that there were prohibitory orders. A heated argument ensued between the police officers and the demonstrators. The police told the demonstrators that they would check with their superiors if permission could be granted to them. They asked people to give them half an hour to consult their superiors. Some people agreed to this, but others shouted that they would not. Then someone hurled a stone in the direction of the police officer. It was almost like a signal to the crowds that had gathered and soon the protest turned violent.

On inquiring about these incidents later, I found out that wherever demonstrations were staged by Muslims on 7 December, the crowds went berserk after a stone was thrown from among them in the direction of the police, prompting the police to open fire at the demonstrators. Apart from the minor details, the pattern was the same that morning in many places around the city.

In Dharavi, the demonstrators turned violent. They smashed all the earthen pots stacked up by the side of the road in Kumbharwada. At the Kumbharwada junction, a stone thrown at a police officer hit a woman instead at around 11 a.m.

About the same time, near the junction of Dharavi Hotel and the Cross Road, a motorcycle was burnt. After this incident, several prominent Muslims from around the Bade Masjid area came out to pacify the crowds that had gathered on the Dharavi Main Road. They took out a peace march from Bade Masjid to Mahim railway crossing. But, according to people present there, the police misunderstood their intention. One officer, it was said, raised his lathi at Dr Azar Qureshi, chairman of MESCO, who was much respected in the community for his integrity. Thereafter, stone-throwing began and the community effort was quickly abandoned. Finally a curfew was imposed by 5 p.m. on the evening of 7 December.

Crowds had also gathered at Naiknagar and overwhelmed a couple of constables who were on the scene. Some local people rescued them. In the Laxmibaug-Socialnagar area, too, large crowds of Muslims had gathered. They were shouting slogans. It is alleged that a municipal corporator, instead of pacifying the demonstrators, joined them in shouting slogans. In that area too, the handful of police had to withdraw from the scene when the crowds turned violent. Several policemen were injured on that first day of rioting in Dharavi as elsewhere. After this it was a free for all. Frenzied mobs looted and set fire to shops, houses,

taxis, hand carts, timber marts and factories. Large areas of Dharavi were engulfed in violence and the destruction was tremendous.

As in other parts of the city, in Mahim near Dharavi, a sensitive area for some years now, the news of the demolition of the Babri Masjid shocked and upset people. Some prominent Muslim citizens decided to attempt damage control, knowing people's sensitivity on religious issues. So, on the morning of 7 December, Amin Khandwani telephoned the assistant commissioner of police (ACP) for Mahim, Korde, suggesting that he join a meeting of responsible citizens that he proposed to call to discuss the situation arising from the demolition of Babri Masjid. That morning, a new senior inspector, S.V. Rane, had taken charge of the Mahim Police Station. Korde and Rane went to the Mahim Dargah at 10 a.m., where Khandwani and other prominent people such as Sajida Contractor, her brother Rashid, Rishad Bare, Nasir Fulwala, Burhan Parkar and Afzal Mithaiwala had assembled. In view of the tension, the group decided to remain in Mahim to see that nothing untoward happened. They assured the police that they would take responsibility for areas around Dargah, Welkarwadi, Shyamwadi and Winayakwadi, where several Hindus lived.

Around 10.30 a.m., a rumour spread that a BEST bus was set on fire outside St Michael's School. Most children had gone to school that morning and parents rushed to the school on hearing about the burning of the bus. As the crowd of the agitating parents was very large, Khandwani suggested that they use an ambulance to fetch the children from school. There was some distance between the parents and Khandwani, who was trying to persuade the police team led by Inspector Bhagavat to send a vehicle to bring the children out of the school.

Suddenly a stone was hurled in the direction of the police and the police opened fire. Khandwani tried to tell them to

hold fire. But an officer dragged him away to the Mahim Police Station and detained him for a long time. A young father who had come to get his child was killed in the police firing.

When Khandwani's brother Yaqoob, along with Yaqoob Kablee, Rashid Qureshi and Haroon Chunawala, went to the police station to inquire why Khandwani was detained, they were also arrested. According to Mrs Chunawala, when she went to the police station to tell the officers that her husband was an invalid and needed to be on oxygen, she was badly abused by an officer. These were to be costly arrests. Khandwani's arrest sent shock waves not just in Mahim but also in the rest of the city. The community felt strongly about the humiliation that was heaped on the respected members from among them. Some of them told us later that if police could do this to these men of influence, there was no hope for ordinary people. Fear of the police gripped the community.

That morning, a mob had beaten up a policeman passing through Mahim on his motorbike when he stopped at a traffic signal. The officer had received serious head injuries. Khandwani was charged with attempted murder for the attack on the policeman.

The police alleged that Khandwani's remark 'Let us be ready for anything' had instigated the attack on the policeman. Khandwani categorically denies the words attributed to him and says he was targeted for political reasons.

Meanwhile in Hari Jhandi, a slum located behind the Mahim bus depot on the main road, rioting mobs attacked and burnt houses for three days. The slum was saved from destruction by slum dwellers who worked non-stop to put out the fire. The attackers tried to stop the fire brigade from coming near the slum. Twenty-three houses were destroyed in the fire. In the following days, most slum dwellers moved to the Yatimkhana, a well-known orphanage.

Bandra East, where Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray resides, also saw its share of violence. Behrampada and Bharatnagar, two predominantly Muslim slums there, became the focus of conflict. On the night of 6 December, a Ganesh idol near the New MIG Colony and Behrampada was desecrated. Some residents of the New MIG Colony believe that Lord Ganesh, who is also called Vignaharta or remover of obstacles, took the brunt of the wrath of rioters upon himself, thereby protecting their colony and Hindu lives.

In Dharavi there is no account of how many rounds were fired by the police. Both Muslim and Hindu communities suffered terribly during the riots in December and later in January. According to the Srikrishna Commission Report, the casualty figures are as follows: death due to police firing, twenty-eight; death due to stabbing, twenty-eight; three by arson; and three by mob action. Among the dead forty-three were Muslims, seventeen Hindus, one other and one unknown person. In Socialnagar, while doing a door-to-door survey, I found thirty-seven young men who had received bullet or shrapnel injuries below the waist. None of them had gone to the hospital but were treated by a compounder in a doctor's clinic.

Although the severe police action around the city brought the riots to a halt quickly, the aftermath of this has been difficult to deal with as a large number were either killed or injured in the police firing during the December riots. The police were accused of using excessive force against the Muslim demonstrators in December and colluding with the Hindu rioters during the second round of riots in January. The charge against the police of a bias against the Muslim community has stuck.

❁

When Kekoo Gandhy called me on the morning of 7 December, we decided to mobilize friends and other responsible citizens and meet at the Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal later that afternoon. But at 4 p.m., only a dozen or so people could gather there, due to lack of transport. Each one present tried to give ideas about what could be done. Everyone wanted to do something, but could not decide whether to issue a statement to condemn the demolition of the Babri Masjid or to stage a protest demonstration.

I said that we could go to the riot-affected areas to be close to the members of the Muslim community and assuage their feelings of anger and hurt. Many thought it was a good idea and volunteered to do so. Some of those present volunteered to go to Tulsiwadi. As curfew passes were needed to go into riot-affected areas, Kekoo Gandhy took the responsibility of obtaining these from the police commissioner. By the next morning all means of transport in the city had come to a halt. Our efforts to get curfew passes had come to naught. That evening, I felt really angry that forty-eight hours had passed since the riots broke out in our city and we had been unable to help in any way. It was difficult for me to sit idle at home and helplessly watch the events unfold. In 1984, I had seen how spontaneous anger could be manipulated into mass hysteria. I kept thinking about what I could do to help and prayed to God to show me the way.

At night, I telephoned Ramakrishnan, the head of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Mumbai. He arranged a meeting between Dr Usha Mehta, a respected Gandhian who is now no more, Kekoo Gandhy and myself and C. Subramanian, Governor of Maharashtra, on the following day. When we met the Governor, we discussed the situation in the country following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the riots in Mumbai, the

role of citizens at this juncture and the setting up of a peace committee under the chairmanship of the Governor. He telephoned the chief minister, Sudhakarrao Naik, and informed him that some citizens had come to him with a proposal for a peace committee. The Governor said he would be happy to chair such a committee if the chief minister had no objection. The four of us met the chief minister later that day and in the evening the Government of Maharashtra announced the formation of a peace committee headed by the Governor. Usha Mehta, Kekoo and I were invited to be on the peace committee.

Our first action was to procure curfew passes and visit riot-affected areas and hospitals. We met the injured and talked to the doctors attending on them. Every evening a couple of us reported to the Governor about the day's visits and the conditions we had seen. The follow-up was kept up.

During the first two days we visited as many places as possible and tried to do whatever could be done. The wards at JJ Hospital were overflowing. The curfew that was imposed prevented many doctors and nurses from reporting to duty. Hence the doctors and nurses who were in the hospitals worked round the clock without relief for three or four days. Medical students were pressed into emergency services. They had run out of essentials such as bandages, cotton wool, surgery threads, food for the canteen, etc. When we reported this to the government, it provided them with essential supplies. The efforts of the doctors while coping with the emergency were indeed commendable. They acted as professionals and also showed enormous humanity to those who had suffered.

Most of those at the JJ Hospital wards who had received bullet injuries were young men. Some of them looked bewildered. Some had their family members attending on them. Each one we talked to said he was innocent. I was struck by the

uniformity of their answers. Where were the rioters? In a smaller ward we saw uniformed policemen standing guard near some beds. Apparently, the men had been caught indulging in criminal acts. When I asked one doctor how he felt attending on such men, he said, 'We are doctors. We are here to attend to the injured and the sick.'

In some wards the alleged rioters and the injured policemen were lying next to one another. What went through their minds, I wondered. But no one had time to address such issues. Each one in the hospital was coping with his/her designated task as best they could.

In one ward we met a policeman with a bullet injury. It was assumed that someone in the mob had fired it, though it was never confirmed. He was very traumatized. He had been at a chowki under Pydhonie Police Station when it was attacked by a mob. He kept lamenting how they had had nothing but wooden sticks to defend themselves. The bullet had lodged very close to his spinal cord. The doctors had decided the existence of the bullet could do him no harm and that surgery would be too risky. The policeman was not convinced and wanted us to inform the police commissioner of his case. I somehow never got around to telling the commissioner that one of his men needed help. I have often thought of that policeman and wondered what became of him.

In the mortuaries the procedure to claim bodies was time consuming, adding to the trauma of the relatives. Their stories were heart-rending and we felt helpless.

When we visited the slum colonies of Kurla, Bainganwadi and Govandi in the eastern suburbs and Behrampada and Dharavi in the western suburbs, I was appalled by the conditions in which the people lived.

At Bainganwadi, a Shiv Sena leader took us to his home

which was attacked during the riots and showed us the broken furniture and blood stains. His wife was injured in the attack. In the Muslim locality, emotions were running high as the police had raided a large number of homes and made mass arrests the previous night, following the discovery of mutilated bodies of policemen in the garbage dump. Y.C. Pawar, deputy commissioner of police (DCP), took charge of the eastern suburbs on the third day of riots. He told me the rank and file was enraged by the brutal way in which the policemen had been murdered. The Muslim women, in turn, complained to me about police brutality towards their men and how their homes had been ransacked.

The visits to slum colonies and other riot-affected areas were distressing. When we saw the extent of the destruction, we realized it would be more effective if each of us chose an area to concentrate our efforts in instead of visiting as many places as possible each day.

III

I decided to concentrate my efforts in Dharavi, where I had already done some work at the invitation of a doctor, Varsha Jethava. My involvement there continued through the December–January riots, giving me an opportunity to know Dharavi and its people intimately.

Varsha's grandfather was a master potter who had won awards. She was the first woman from their community to become a medical doctor. She taught in the Homeopathy College and ran a clinic in Dharavi. In the following weeks their home became my base and her entire family my allies in the conflict prevention and reconciliation efforts that I undertook. She lived

in Kumbharwada, situated at the junction of the 90 Feet Road and 60 Feet Road leading towards Sion Hospital. The Jethava home was at the corner of the junction where a riot broke out on 7 December. The earthenware manufactured by the Kumbhars that was stacked by the side of 90 Feet Road was the first target of mob attacks.

Varsha had been in constant touch with me on the telephone ever since riots broke out in Dharavi. When I went there, it was like a battleground. The roads all over the slum were strewn with bricks, stones, broken glass and debris from the torching of houses, shops and business premises. Some of the timber godowns smouldered for several days.

On 11 December, Varsha asked me to go to Dharavi as there had been some trouble that afternoon. Some boys of Muslimnagar were said to have beaten up boys of Kumbharwada. These localities are on either side of 90 Feet Road, which encroachments had made much narrower. The Kumbhar community had called a meeting to discuss the matter.

When I reached there, Varsha took me straight to where the meeting was in progress. Tempers were running high and the youth were very vocal. After a while, an elder in the community asked me if I had something to say. I began by saying that members of the Governor's peace committee were promoting peace and understanding in the city. It was important for everyone to understand that we could not go on fighting. We had already had several days of rioting and large-scale destruction. Given the situation, there were bound to be provocations, but were they going to retaliate at every provocation and avenge every act of violence, I asked. This would only make things worse. I asked if they could think of another way of handling the situation. Reconciliation, not revenge, was the only way to move forward.

A young man standing at the back retorted, 'Why don't you go and talk to them [the Muslims] on the other side? Tell those young men never to beat us again.' I said, 'Certainly, I would do so, except I don't know anyone on the other side.'

Januben, one of the women at the meeting, said she knew someone called Amina in Muslimnagar and offered to take me there. It was decided that Januben and I would go to meet Amina and come back to report to the others. As we crossed the road, we found Amina standing at the entrance of a narrow lane. After the introductions were made, the three of us sat down on the steps of a shop after clearing the stones and broken glass all around us.

I told Amina that the Kumbhar community was agitated over the alleged beating of their boys by the boys of Muslimnagar. Then I conveyed the message from the Kumbhars, asking the Muslims to restrain their boys. I asked Amina if she knew the troublemakers. Initially she dismissed the allegation as false. I said, 'It is not possible for me to judge as I was not present at the scene. But tempers are running high in Kumbharwada and some boys want to retaliate.' Amina wearily said it was difficult to control their young men. Then she suddenly got up, saying she wanted to go across to meet the Kumbhars. So here I was, an outsider, helping these women to go to one another, literally just walking across the road. I thought to myself, in this tense atmosphere if Januben was prepared to cross the road to meet Amina and now Amina wants to do the same, I must walk with them. Amina met the Kumbhar community elders. She asked them to excuse the Muslim boys just that one time. They accepted her word. No one wanted another round of riots to start.

I was very impressed by the courage of Amina and Januben. I had already seen how strong Varsha and her mother, Veenaben,

were. Veenaben invariably escorted me out of Dharavi to a point from where I could take a taxi home at night or early morning when the curfew was still on. That evening I began to have an inkling of the useful role these women could play if they were given some support and direction.

At my request, Amina took me all around Dharavi from the next day onwards. It was quite an education. The sprawling, congested slum spread over 3.5–4 square kilometres. It had a population of six to eight lakh people. Although I was born and brought up in Mumbai, the only time I had come close to this slum colony was when we had to drive past its boundary to go to the western side of the city. I remember the feeling of awe and fear we experienced whenever we passed Dharavi.

From Amina, I learnt the names of various Muslim pockets: Socialnagar, Muslimnagar, Naiknagar, Chamda Bazar, Indiranagar and Dabur Company. The predominantly Hindu areas are Laxmibaug, Kumbharwada, Koliwada, Mukundnagar, Bhagatsinghnagar, Shastrinagar, Dhorwada, Vijaynagar, Anandnagar, Kamrajnagar, Shahunagar and Dhobighat. There is a small presence of Muslims in the Hindu areas. Nav Baudhas reside in Valmikinagar, Sidharthanagar and Matunga Labour Camp. Names of some localities, like Koliwada and Kumbharwada, indicate that communities with a specific trade reside in them. Dharavi is also divided in some areas on the basis of language, religion or region. People from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bengal and Kerala live in separate pockets. People from different parts of Maharashtra too stay in Dharavi. Many of them are craftsmen, involved in leather work, garment embroidery, gold jewellery, pottery and so on.

I met some very courageous and fascinating women in different localities of Dharavi, like Amina, Khatija, Shahida,

Munni, Januben, Veenaben, Heera, Kamal, Varsha, Mariam, Prema and Rosamma. Apart from Varsha and Shahida, who were medical doctors, the others were not very educated. Yet they all had a good grasp of issues and were very practical. These women became my team. They informed me of every incident, small or big, that happened in their localities. The information was mostly accurate and often I heard of the incident before the police did. Without exception, these women accompanied me in their areas to help control the situation. Often I took things I heard and saw at face value, but these women helped me understand the nuances. They taught me about the power brokers in every lane, the petty criminals who exploited the local population, the history of the area and who was who and their political affiliations.

I encouraged the women to step out and do whatever was needed at the time, and the men in their families did not stand in their way. They went to the hospitals with the injured or brought the bodies back. They went to the police stations to plead for their menfolk who were detained or arrested by the police or seek permission to get food supplies from outside. These women did not hesitate to stand in front of the mobs and reason with them. They did their bit to maintain peace in their areas. Not one of these women was in burka.

One day Amina sent Heera and Kamal to Bandra to buy kafans, or shrouds, for two men who were killed in Muslimnagar. Not finding them in Mahim and Dharavi, they went to the Bandra mosque. The maulvi became suspicious when the two women asked for kafans. They were questioned about their intentions. The women said they were from Dharavi and their names were Rehana and Fatima. The maulvi called Amina to check if she had sent these women. For a brief moment Amina was puzzled when she heard the Muslim names and almost

denied knowing them. But she realized her friends would use Muslim names in case of trouble and without hesitation she reassured the maulvi that she had sent the two women for the kafans. The two Hindu women had risked their lives to help their Muslim friend in an emergency. They had walked all the distance from Dharavi to Mahim to Bandra and back to Dharavi, giving their Hindu names when they walked through Hindu areas and pretending to be Muslims when they passed through Muslim areas.

On another occasion Amina was in Sion Hospital to collect the bodies of three unknown people from Dharavi. She got hold of an ambulance and a hafiz to accompany the bodies from Sion Hospital to Narialwadi Kabarstan. In Parel, the ambulance was stopped and the driver was asked whose body was being taken. On hearing that the bodies were that of Muslims, the ambulance driver was beaten up so badly that he lost his teeth. Amina got out of the ambulance and asked the mob why the poor ambulance driver was being punished. She showed the mob the bodies. They wanted to know where the menfolk were and why she was accompanying the bodies. She replied, 'If the menfolk were around, would I be on the road? Should the dead not be buried?' Needless to say, she was allowed to proceed with the ambulance.

One day a girl called Munni, who lived in Matunga Labour Camp, came to meet me in Muslimnagar while the curfew was still in force. Munni told me she had come to seek help, as Haji Mastan (a smuggler-turned-politician) was not responding to their telephone calls. I was not sure what to make of this and certainly did not feel flattered. She complained about police harassment in her area. She insisted that the Hindus and the Muslims in her locality were united and no one had left. They were not afraid of each other but of attacks from outside. She

said that someone called Jabbar had been instrumental in preventing attacks from outside, but the police had driven him away. I wondered why the police were after Jabbar if he was indeed such a good man. Munni became very dramatic while describing Jabbar's good qualities, saying, '*Bacche bacche ki juban par hai Jabbar ka naam.*'

Although I was a little sceptical, I talked myself into visiting her area. She had gathered quite a few people in her home. They too told me how they were united although they belonged to different religious communities. But since Jabbar's departure, they were feeling very insecure, and they wanted me to speak to the police so he could return. After persistent questioning, I discovered that Jabbar was a well-known pickpocket and chain snatcher. I refused to plead the case of a petty criminal. Instead, I offered to tell the police to ensure their area was protected from outsiders, and the police did so.

In the post-riot scenario, many people looked at petty criminals such as Jabbar for protection. Very often such men were of great help to people amid whom they lived. Therefore local people preferred to ignore their criminal antecedents and treated them as godfathers. While I could understand this sentiment at one level, it also baffled me. They could not understand why I was not prepared to see the good they had done for their neighbourhood and excuse them for what they did outside. They were far more concerned with the immediate present and their security rather than with moral questions. Faced with life and death issues as they were during the riots, I suppose they could not afford the luxury of debating the finer points of ethics. When people did not feel assured of help coming from the law-enforcing machinery, it was natural for them to turn to whoever provided protection. Confidence in the police was the greatest casualty of the Mumbai riots.

Khatija was another woman who ventured out of her locality to seek help and ensure security in her neighbourhood. Khatija lives in Socialnagar and is perhaps among the oldest residents of her locality. This tall south Indian woman moved around fearlessly and provided all sorts of help to people at the time. During the December riots, without giving thought to the risks involved, she had taken several injured people on a hand cart to the Sion Hospital. On the way some policemen beat her but she continued undeterred. When I first met her, Khatija showed me the signs of the police beating. She told me jokingly, 'This is the police's gift for my humanitarian work.' Khatija has a great sense of humour and, like Amina, always managed to talk her way out of difficult situations. She had saved several people. Khatija introduced me to Osmanbhai, a shoemaker; Sathibhai; Haris Modak, a businessman who also worked with a Congress leader; Munnubhai, the imam of the Nurul Huda Mosque, who also owned a mutton shop, all residents of Socialnagar who together had formed a local watch group that kept a check on the troublemakers. It was through the local people that I discovered thirty-seven young men who had received bullet injuries in Socialnagar, when the police chased them in the narrow lanes and fired upon them. A lot of them were involved in arson and looting. The chief minister had announced that those injured during riots and had not gone to hospitals would also be considered for compensation. Hence some of us did the surveys which revealed some amazing facts. Some of the injured knew that going to hospital meant their names would enter the police records and they would be implicated in riot cases. Hence, in many localities injured people were not sent to hospitals. I was not aware of this until a police officer explained that in police perception only a rioter is likely to be hit by a police bullet.

One evening in mid-December a big demonstration of burka-clad women blocked 60 Feet Road in Dharavi, protesting the large-scale arrests of young men in their areas. They were loud and aggressive. The police were taken by surprise and they did not have enough women constables to deal with this demonstration. That afternoon I received a telephone call seeking my help. The caller informed me that women from Nagpada were demonstrating in Dharavi. By the time I reached, the road was cleared and the women had gone away. It was spearheaded by a few educated women who were upset by the behaviour of the state reserve police (SRP) unit in the Chamda Bazar area. The SRP unit was subsequently transferred from the area. Almost a year later I discovered that the demonstration was led by the women from Dharavi and not from Nagpada, as was thought at the time. Staging a street demonstration had meant a great deal to these women who belonged to one of the most conservative areas of Dharavi. They were very proud that they had effected a change through their demonstration. It is remarkable that these women ventured out for a demonstration, though several had kept this a secret from their menfolk.

Another extraordinary woman I worked with was Mariam Rashid, head of the Society for Human Environmental Development (SHED) centre in Dharavi. I first met her after the December riots. She was busy at the time in the distribution of relief, along with other members of the Rashtriya Ekta Samiti (RES, an umbrella organization of several NGOs). The RES relief centre was operated from SHED at the time. Mariam lives in the 'mixed' locality of Kamala Nehru Nagar in Dharavi with her husband, daughter and brothers-in-law. During the riots she helped organize the night watch. All over Mumbai—whether in slum colonies or in middle-class and upper-class localities

such as Warden Road—women provided hot cups of tea for the men as they kept a vigil through the night.

One day some goons went to Mariam's locality with an intent to attack her as she had successfully mobilized local people and foiled their previous attempts to attack the locality. As no one dared go to her locality at night, the attackers came during the day. When the men in the locality hesitated to come to her help, Mariam shouted that she would let the men loot their homes if they did not come out. The men did come out, but fearing retaliation all the Hindu and Muslim families later moved to safer areas elsewhere. Mariam and her husband decided to stay on. As a result they became even more vulnerable.

At our very first meeting, Mariam told me how she had seen me on the streets during the curfew and wished she could do the same. I promised myself that I would do something to make it possible for people like Mariam to be able to do what I did during the riots. Mariam later played a key role in setting up the Dharavi mohalla committee and was always available to resolve disputes at the community level. Her exceptional courage, coupled with her insights and deep social commitment, makes her an invaluable social worker.

But all the women I came in contact with were not above board. I was warned a few times about the dubious nature of some of the women I was working with. But I decided to ignore the warnings as I often counted on these women for help. I do not regret my team efforts with them, as we prevented many conflicts together. However, I was very alert that they did not take advantage of working with me.

The women of both communities displayed enormous courage. They responded to the crisis and did what seemed to them to be right. Mostly these were simple humanitarian gestures that assumed great importance in the existing situation.

They acted without caring about the risks involved. They were not affected by the communal propaganda at the time. Responding to such crises together also bonded them further as friends. In their stories lies a glimmer of hope that in India the social bonds will not be destroyed so easily by the passing hurricanes. The imman, or the sense of humanity, in the ordinary people of India can outlive momentary shocks. Women such as these had saved the day in many slums and localities around the city but their work has not been recognized. Nor has enough thought been given to how the fine qualities of such women could be channelled to transform the quality of life of their areas. In later years I tried to create a platform for such women and to involve them in addressing social issues in their areas. It is they who were doing conflict resolution at community level at the time.

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The work I did in Dharavi helped me understand the developmental issues that contributed to the conflict. Dharavi was one of the seven original islands of Mumbai. It had a prosperous fishing community whose occupation was prawn and crab farming. The older fishermen say proudly that they never went out to sell their fish. Instead customers came to Dharavi to buy their fish. Under the British, the fishermen signed a renewable twenty-five-year treaty for the fishing rights in the khadi, or creek. But after the mid-1950s these contracts were not renewed. As the development of Mumbai began to gather momentum, the creek slowly disappeared. The construction of the first railway line and later a pipeline for the city's water supply across the creek stopped the movement of the fishing boats. Soon the marshy areas around Dharavi began to be reclaimed and new migrants moved in.

Leather tanneries came up along the creek, and the dyes and chemicals pouring into the water finally killed the fishing. In the wider development of the city, the fishing communities of Dharavi, Mahim, Kurla and Bandra had lost out. No one had helped the fishermen to make a transition to another trade. They were marginalized and never consulted about the development of the creek or how it would affect their livelihood. The fishermen of Dharavi did try to save the situation and presented several schemes to the government in their personal capacity.

For instance, Kisan Killekar, whose wife, Triza, headed the women's wing of the Shiv Sena in Dharavi, presented a scheme requiring specific areas of the creek to be allotted to them for prawn farming, either at the Dharavi–Bandra end or outside Mumbai. The authorities ignored such petitions and allowed unchecked growth of slums around the creek in Dharavi, Mahim and Bandra. During the riots the Kolis took me to see an area near Mahim Nature Park, which had very few huts and a garage. They told me that the Kolis considered that part of the creek as property of the Koli Jamaat. During the riots, these huts made of bamboo and straw mats were burnt. Today the area has become a sprawling colony of several hundred huts.

Over the years there has been a slow build-up of anger and resentment in the fishing community over this neglect by the authorities and failure to help them make the transition to other trades. One of them told me bitterly, 'Development of Mumbai has meant the death of our community. Everyone else has benefited from development except us. We have lost our trade and our once-prosperous fishing village has been turned into the largest slum.' There was no way Mumbai could carry the bitterness of such marginalized communities and hope to survive. During the 1992–93 riots this factor played an important role.

The people in Dharavi are very industrious. Almost every household is a workshop manufacturing some goods. During the riots, there was large-scale looting of small factories of garments, timber, leather goods, sewing machines and so on. The police raided many places and recovered stolen goods. In several instances the owners whose sewing machines were stolen bought back their own machines for a price. New machines would have cost them much more. Reporting the matter would have involved time and effort. Hence many adopted a pragmatic approach.

It is difficult to say how many of the rioters had a genuine religious motive and how many took part in rioting to benefit economically. We may never be able to establish the motives of the rioters. In every riot often the main issue that triggers off the violence gets brushed aside and the secondary motive of arson, looting, land and property grabbing, and settling personal scores takes over.

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The police station diaries presented before the Srikrishna Commission reveal that Ramkrishna Keni, a Shiv Sena worker, had led a cycle rally around Dharavi on the evening of 6 December.

Some Muslims claimed to have protested to the police about the rally and the abusive slogans that were being shouted but they were brushed aside. Records clearly show that the commissioner of police had alerted all police stations in the city and issued instructions and prohibitory orders. But the Dharavi Police Station had obviously flouted the orders and neither prevented the rally nor arrested the leaders. Such incidents gave the impression of collusion between the police and the Shiv Sena leaders.

In the Dharavi Police Station, as in some other police stations in the city, the police were fully aware since October 1992 of the work and the movements of the extremist groups of Hindu and Muslim communities and several complaints were lodged at the police station against people who had made provocative speeches. Yet before the riots broke out, the police did not make any preventive arrests.

While it is true that the Dharavi police could not have anticipated all the developments and hence were unprepared for the events that unfolded from the evening of 6 December, it is also true that some proactive initiative and preventive arrests would have saved them much trouble later on. This was perhaps the case in the jurisdictions of many other police stations too. In Dharavi, we were told repeatedly, but for that cycle rally there would not have been such a massive turnout for the demonstrations which sparked the riots on 7 December.

Apart from the Shiv Sainiks, members of the Republican Party of India (RPI) and Congress workers actively took part in rioting. Some politicians sided with a particular community because that community happened to be their constituency and was their vote bank. It was alleged that a Congress corporator had joined the Muslims in protests against the demolition of the Babri Masjid, near Socialnagar on 7 December. This area came under his constituency.

Another allegation that caused a stir was one which claimed that M.Y. Shinde, an RPI corporator, had led a mob that looted and burnt down the Chamda Bazar with a sword in his hand. A large number of people from the area, claiming to be eyewitnesses, had jointly sent a letter to this effect to Shrikant Bapat, the police commissioner of Mumbai, and Sanjay Pande, DCP at the Dharavi Police Station. An officer of the Indian Police Service (IPS), Pande had been with the computer wing

before he was posted to Dharavi at the height of the December riots, along with other officers. The matter was also reported in the *Times of India*. This caused a flutter in the NGO circle. Initially it was believed that Dalits were not involved in rioting. M.Y. Shinde was close to some of the NGOs in Dharavi and helped to organize some relief. Bharati Sadasivam, who had filed the story, received flak from some quarters, but she stood her ground as she had seen the written complaint. The case caused quite a sensation and I decided to investigate it myself. The Chamda Bazar–Bagicha area was burnt during the night of 7 December and the early morning of 8 December. The arson and rioting broke out after Muslim mobs came out in large numbers to protest on the 7th morning. The portion of Chamda Bazar that was burnt consisted mostly of garment factories belonging to Muslims. The homes of the few Maharashtrian Hindu families living there or in the adjoining areas were also completely or partially burnt.

Chamda Bazar also houses godowns where animal hides are cured and stored. These were not affected by the riots. But the garment units were systematically looted and then set to fire so that the factories were razed to the ground. On 8 December, some Muslims from Chamda Bazar contacted the senior police inspector at the Dharavi Police Station. A meeting was arranged at which ten each from the Hindu and the Muslim side met and decided to maintain peace in Chamda Bazar. The senior police inspector was present at the meeting, as were Mujib Khan, Ashok Khandare and Pyarebhai, citizens who volunteered to maintain peace. By and large this group remained in contact with each other for several months and kept the lines of communication open between Hindu–Muslim communities during the crucial period. I too worked closely with this group. The group was very effective and for nearly two months kept

day and night vigil on the road in front of Bade Masjid. In spite of provocations we were able to hold peace and prevent large-scale violence in that area. Thanks to this during January when major riots occurred in Mahim, Bandra East, Kurla and other areas surrounding Dharavi, Dharavi seemed like an island of peace.

Those who felt the accusation against M.Y. Shinde was false pointed out that he was not capable of masterminding such an act. He met me one day, accompanied by a Muslim man, at a house in Kumbharwada. The Muslim man told me how Shinde had saved his house from being looted and burnt.

I told Shinde that the complaint filed by a large number of Muslims against him could not be ignored by people like me. He pleaded this was all part of a political conspiracy. To prove his innocence, he told me about an incident when a young Muslim man had attacked him near Bade Masjid. The policemen on the scene had rescued him. Shinde knew the name of the young man. Yet he had not registered a formal complaint, as he did not want to blow up the issue at a time when sentiments were running very high. I asked him if he had led the mob with a sword in his hand. But he kept saying that he was framed.

When I asked him the names of the real culprits, he did not give any. I tried to explain my stand in the matter. While I was against an innocent man being falsely accused, I also considered it my duty to help bring the real instigators and perpetrators to book. The encounter with Shinde left me feeling very uneasy and burdened by the moral responsibility this posed. Who were the guilty men?

Press reporters as well as members of the Muslim community wanted to know why Pande was not arresting those responsible for the burning of the Chamda Bazar. In the highly charged atmosphere of the time, it was important that the police did

not arrest people hastily but did so after some inquiry. Yet in some cases, the evidence was so strong that swift arrests of the criminals in December would have acted as deterrents. But, this was time consuming and the law-enforcing agency was busy coping with the aftermath.

Pande subsequently arrested Shinde, who was behind bars for some time. Later on, other Maharashtrians in the area said that although Shinde was leading the mob that destroyed Chamda Bazar, he was not the main instigator. However, no one was prepared to come forward to disclose other names. The incident made me realize that it was not going to be easy to register cases against rioters involved in the major incidents, as not many were prepared to stand witness against people who lived in their locality. Often I saw the main instigators of several serious riot cases get away scot-free. The police were subjected to many pressures from both the majority and the minority communities.

I was deeply conscious of the enormous responsibility borne by people like me who were in the field. Could we really vouch that we had perceived all sides of the truth? When emotions are running high, it is easy to lose one's balance and objectivity. Time and again, I had seen that all sides did not give us the entire story and hid a lot. Often I discovered another facet of the incident later on. Although I did on occasion tell those I was working with about such discoveries, there were times when I kept such information to myself. Was that a moral weakness? Everyone wants justice. Was reconciliation and healing possible without justice?

There are those who say it is best to forget the riot incidents. But the victims never forget, although over a period the intensity of those memories may subside. Only a deeper inner experience can help heal those memories. Often reconciliation may be possible, but it does not automatically heal relations. While fighting for justice, was it possible to continue to proceed on

the path of reconciliation? These issues occupied my mind and continue to do so to the present day. Throughout that period I was presented with choices: justice or reconciliation? I have tilted more towards the path of reconciliation. Was I wrong in that?

The burning of Chamda Bazar caused immense psychological damage. It was the first indication that the strategy was to destroy economic centres. Long before the media reported the matter, a large number of Muslims from Mahim, Bandra and further away came to see what remained of Chamda Bazar. The charred remains had assumed some importance in the public psyche. Increasingly, I became preoccupied with how to help the local Muslim community to cope with this. One side of Chamda Bazar was bordered by the Hindu majority area of Bagicha. It was clear that we had to go all out to cement relations between the communities in Bagicha to ensure that the destruction was not further exploited to fuel sentiments.

Shabana Azmi, a stage and film artiste and now a member of the Rajya Sabha, was a member of the Governor's peace committee. She took up the Chamda Bazar matter very strongly in public meetings in the city, as well as in New Delhi. Shabana often came to help and teamed up with me in Dharavi. I remember my first visit to Chamda Bazar along with Shabana Azmi. Seeing its charred remains affected her deeply. As we walked back slowly towards the main road, a group of young men surrounded us in front of a small mosque. They vociferously demanded justice and Shabana tried her best to pacify their anger. I often think of countless such angry young men around the city who never had a chance to express their anger. This then was the psychological climate in which the second round of riots in flared up January 1993.

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In the initial days after the December riots, I took time to get to know different areas and people of Dharavi, spending as many as eight to twelve hours there. The riot victims were living in fear and needed help. They were afraid of going to the police station to register their complaints, without which they were not entitled to receive government compensation. So we walked up the three steps to the police station with countless number of people. As I had never entered a police station or registered a complaint before, I had no idea of the procedure involved. It was all a learning experience. The police station was far too small to cope with the huge numbers. Finally, Sanjay Pande organized the registration process. A table was installed under a tree outside and an officer took down the name of each victim and gave him or her a number. They were then given a later date on which to come for full registration of their complaint. Thus the number of people waiting outside the police station was reduced and the victims began to receive the attention they needed. Hundreds of complaints were registered at the Dharavi Police Station.

Pande received a lot of media attention for his firm and fair handling of the riots there. We were particularly impressed by his sympathetic attitude towards riot victims and the poor in general. The roughness associated with the police was missing. As days went by, people noticed that this sympathetic attitude was matched by toughness towards troublemakers and criminal elements, irrespective of which religion they belonged to.

People began to respect his no-nonsense and fair attitude in one of the most communally sensitive areas of the city. Pande's personal involvement won him the trust of ordinary people, who though simple could be unruly. At the height of the riots, he spent the nights at the Dharavi Police Station, which was located halfway down 90 Feet Road, bang in the middle of

Dharavi. He spent the first few days trying to understand the area and the people—good, bad, politicians, criminals, etc. He made it known that people could approach him and they would be given a hearing. This was in sharp contrast to the oft-repeated complaints at the time, '*Hamari sunvai nahi hoti*'—We are not given a hearing. Small gestures like these easily won people's confidence. The process of confidence building had already begun at the Dharavi Police Station by the second week of December.

But Pande soon realized that policing a slum the size and density of Dharavi was not going to be easy. The police could lose their way in the maze of narrow lanes and bylanes in Dharavi. Rioters and arsonists could easily hide in those lanes from the police without being traced. In a short time, Pande learnt the topography of Dharavi and divided the slum into several areas for the purpose of policing.

Each pocket had its strongman who could either be a criminal or a politician—sometimes both. Pande collected information about such men from people before he moved into a particular area. Although Pande was not able to take action against several such strongmen during the riots, he did so when peace returned. During the riots, the police were kept on their toes, trying to quell trouble all over the slum. Pande also realized that policing would not be possible without the help of the people residing there. He found law-abiding citizens in each locality whose help he could seek when needed. We worked closely together, as I found he was responsive to requests for help and quickly arrived at the scene of trouble and took firm action. At times his actions seemed excessive, but the firmness did act as a deterrent.

Pande was able to make use of this strategy of people's involvement in a drive against the criminals when peace

returned. He showed that citizen–police partnership was not only possible but could be very effective. His methods could be unconventional, but they earned him the respect and confidence of poor people who were harassed and exploited by the slumlords, petty criminals and political workers. It is a great loss for the citizens that Pande, who had a deep social conscience and commitment, has now left the police service. People of Dharavi remember him with warmth and admiration even today.

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During the first meeting of the Governor's peace committee it was decided that apolitical peace committees should be set up at every police station. The police commissioner sent a circular to this effect to all the police stations in the city. As I was working in Dharavi, I was invited by the local police officers to participate in the peace committee meeting. I was surprised to find that all the elected representatives were present. All except one happened to belong to the ruling Congress Party. After the meeting someone asked an officer how they could invite those involved in rioting for such a meeting. The officer simply said they were going by the official circular. This matter was discussed again and again as the very credibility of the peace committees depended on it.

While defending the composition of the committee, Pande told us, 'If there are troublemakers, I would much rather have them sitting in front of me. This way I can keep an eye on them. Otherwise they would be out, creating trouble for us.'

After the riots, the stock of the politicians, as of the police, was very low in the public perception. It was often asked if the members of the peace committees had the ability to bring peace to their areas. Many police officers maintained that the peace

committees were ineffective. Often the members used them simply to fight their political battles or further their aims. On the other hand, not many among the public were aware of the existence of such committees, nor were they inclined to join if they heard about them. It was too much to have expected the police force, who had their hands full dealing with the aftermath of the riots, to give the kind of attention needed to set up committees that would do effective work. Most of them treated the mohalla committees as an extra burden.

One night in mid-December, Kalindi Mujumdar, vice-principal of the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, and I were invited for a peace committee meeting. Pande put forward a proposal to the committee members to repair the damaged temples and mosques in Dharavi, as was being done in other parts of the city by local citizens.

The proposal was discussed threadbare. Some people wanted Muslims to raise money to repair the temples and Hindus to raise money to repair the mosques. In Dharavi no temple or mosque was totally destroyed. So Pande suggested that it should be a joint venture rather than have each group working separately. This was agreed upon and we decided to take up one temple and one mosque for repair work as a start. A day was fixed. The work was to begin ceremoniously in the presence of all the peace committee members. Eknath Gaekawad, a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), was present at the meeting and was enthusiastic about this joint venture. He took the responsibility to get the material needed for the repair work as also the mason. The temple chosen was located by the side of the 60 Feet Road (this has now disappeared as the road was widened). Madina Masjid, in Transit Camp, near the Dharavi Police Station, was the mosque chosen for repair as its roof had been damaged during the riots.

The Transit Camp area has a predominantly Tamil-speaking population. During the December riots, there were repeated attacks on the mosque. The imam was not able to get out of the mosque. Some acid bulbs were thrown inside the mosque, causing minor injuries to people holed up inside. The imam had used the loudspeaker in the mosque to inform the police station that his mosque was being attacked and he needed help. He repeated this on the loudspeaker several times, but the police did not help. Later, the imam made a written complaint to the police commissioner to this effect. He said a police officer had come and reprimanded him for 'misusing' the loudspeaker and creating tension and taken away the loudspeaker. Even after the curfew was lifted in December, this mosque remained closed till the third week of January.

On the appointed day, members of the peace committee gathered outside the mosque. They were then taken upstairs to the first floor. It was suggested that we observe silence for a minute. The imam accepted the asbestos sheets for the roof. All those gathered put their hands on the sheets as they were raised to the roof to be fixed. Members of the peace committee then marched to the temple site. The priest who was present performed a puja. After this, the reconstruction work began. Among those present were the general secretary of the Bade Masjid—the oldest and the biggest mosque in Dharavi. This initiative was aired on national television and received much publicity. The publicity came as a psychological boost. Some good did come out of the Dharavi peace committee after all.

However, by early January, when riots broke out, Pande dissolved the local peace committee.

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One day, while walking along with Raji Ramgopal and her colleague from the *Indian Express*, in the Socialnagar area of Dharavi that faces Laxmibaug, I saw a small temple that was burnt. When we went to inspect it, a large crowd gathered around and told us that the idol had been stolen. While the other journalist walked away into a small lane, Raji Ramgopal and I walked towards a small madrasa and entered it through a side entrance. The roof of the madrasa had suffered some damage. We got talking to the maulvi and soon we had a lively discussion on the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the claims of the Hindus to the spot on which it stood.

Some time after we came out of the madrasa, we found the second journalist. He had trailed behind a man who was talking to another man in Tamil about the idol in that temple. The journalist cornered the man and finally got him to tell the full story. The small temple had been newly constructed. The idol had not even been installed in it when the riots broke out. The idol was removed for safe keeping and kept in someone's house. This was known to just a few people. The journalist was shown the idol. However, there were some press reports about the desecration of this temple in Dharavi, but no one came forward to correct the story.

The politics and heartburn over the temple continued as the debris was not cleared for a long time. There was also some dispute over the land. In 1994 the municipal corporation wanted to demolish it. However the local groups insisted that if the municipality wanted to demolish the temple structure it must also demolish the extended portions of the madrasa nearby. Quietly the madrasa had been turned into a mosque after the riots. The extensions were done ostensibly to create more room for the namazis to offer their namaz. But instead the space was given away for some shops. This has happened in many cases as commercial activity has taken over and the authorities have

looked the other way. The demolition squad had to return without completing their job.

Some days after the curfew was lifted, Bakul Patel, the then sheriff of Mumbai; Rahul Dev, editor of *Jansatta*; and I visited Dharavi in our capacity as members of the Governor's peace committee. One of the areas we went to was the site of the temple. Many women gathered around us and complained that they could not use the public toilets as they were adjacent to the Muslim locality and they were afraid of going near it.

I went back to the area a couple of days later to see how I could help. I went to the Tamil-speaking Hindu area. It was like being in a village in Tamil Nadu. This basti was not very far from the Central Railway tracks. Some of the local social workers joined me. As we sat around in a circle, people spoke of the vicious attacks on them and they showed one young man who had stitches from his forehead to the back of his head. They were suspicious of the Muslims living in the opposite locality and accused them of stockpiling swords and big knives in the toilets. Finding this the ideal opportunity to investigate the truth, I suggested that a small group go and search for the evidence to substantiate the allegation. The group went across the road and searched the toilet block, as well as the area around it, including the drainage area, but found nothing. The search party reported this to the residents. Thus the rumour had been scotched and the mischief makers exposed. This incident also helped to establish our credibility in the basti and taught the public to question everything they heard. However, during the combing operations in the same area in January, police and the army found a few swords, knives and sacks full of stones and bottles.

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Rumours of rape were rife during those days. When people in Chamda Bazar alleged a woman had been raped by an SRP jawan, Amina and I went to see the woman and talked to her. She said some SRP jawans had chased a rioter through their first floor house and shot him dead on their staircase. Fearing for her life, the woman had hidden in the godown. When a jawan came in, looking for more rioters, the woman tried to escape from her hideout. Her sari got caught on a nail and the people who saw her coming out of the room in a half-torn sari with a jawan close at her heels put two and two together and fabricated the rape story. She said she had not even been touched by the jawan. Her husband, who joined us later, corroborated the story and asked me not to proceed with my inquiry and disrupt their lives. 'Please do not wreck my marriage,' the woman said, and I promised to respect their wish.

I told those who had taken me there that the woman had denied the charge of rape and that they should bury the rumour in the interest of the woman and her family. They agreed and the story died a natural death. I was deeply touched by the way the woman's husband stood by her and by the ready acceptance of the community to my request. If the incident had actually occurred and the woman had decided to lodge a complaint, would her husband and the community have supported her in the same way, I wondered.

It may be argued that the matter should have been investigated further. But at that point we had to consider what was best for the woman. She and her husband had already gone through a traumatic experience and did not need to be subjected to further humiliation. They have rebuilt their home and are still living in the area. Not so long ago when I visited the area she greeted me very warmly and I was glad to see them happy.

Towards the end of December, Urdu newspapers carried the story of an attempted rape. A couple had arrived by bus in Mumbai from the Konkan at about 2 a.m. They got off at Sion and were walking along the Sion–Bandra highway to find an autorickshaw. As they passed through Dharavi, the man was attacked and was injured. The attackers then tore off the woman's clothes. A police jeep, which happened to come that way, heard her cries for help. The attackers ran away as the police jeep approached them. Inspector Bhilare, who was in the jeep, called some women from a house nearby and asked them to give a sari so that the woman could cover herself. The police later took the couple to their destination in Bandra East. The Urdu press praised the inspector for the way he had handled the incident.

Apart from these two incidents, there was no other incident of rape or attempt of molestation registered in Dharavi. At one stage, there was a rumour in some localities of Dharavi that a girl had been raped. It was meant to incite the youth to violence and in this it succeeded as 200 to 300 young men tried to attack the Laxmibaug–Transit Camp area. Luckily prompt police action prevented the situation from escalating. I was shocked that rape had been used as a political weapon to instigate trouble during the riots without sparing a thought for the trauma of the alleged victim.

There were other instances when I was called to help people in distress. One day when I was in Dharavi, a group of SRP men handed over a lost Maharashtrian woman to me. She was in her early twenties. I took the woman to a home by the side of the road. She was very frightened, agitated and worried for her husband, who had been missing for several days. After a cup of tea, she recovered enough to tell her story. She had come from a village near Kalyan, 60 kilometres north of Mumbai. Her husband was a cobbler and worked in Dharavi. She did

not know the name or address of his employer. She had come to Dharavi to look for him, as there was no one else to help.

I took her to the police station. The officers were very sympathetic. A large community of cobblers lived in an area close to the police station. They sent for a man from the area who had a large number of employees in his workshop. To our amazement, the woman's husband turned out to be his employee. In his excitement, the man ran out of the police station with the woman running behind him. A couple of constables and I followed them into a lane.

She was weeping as her husband scolded her. I had to intervene. I told him to appreciate her concern for him, which had prompted her to take the risk of coming to Dharavi at such a dangerous time. He asked me, 'Why did she take the risk? If something had happened to her, I would never have forgiven myself.' We left them to sort out matters and later took them to the Sion railway station.

For this couple it was a happy ending. But the incident made me think of scores of people who were thus stranded and unable to return to their homes. What agonies they and their families must have gone through! There were those who never returned home and their families never found out what happened to them.

One day around mid-December a man called me from Mahim saying that a large number of boys who were arrested from the area and were in police lock-up were now missing. People were worried that some harm had come to them. When I spoke to the police commissioner about this, he asked me to go to the Mahim Police Station with the list of the missing young men. The officer at the station checked the list and said all the boys were indeed in the lock-up at the police station. Apparently, they were on their way to school when they saw a protest march. Not thinking of the consequences, they joined

in the stone-throwing and were arrested. One of them was a bright student and had also made his mark as a sportsman. The boys were released after three weeks. My inquiry had at least put the parents' fears to rest.

There were scores of such young men whose careers would be affected by this one-time offence as their names appeared on the police records. Many were to suffer in the aftermath of the second round of riots in January 1993 and the serial bomb blasts in March. Many of them were repeatedly hauled to police stations for questioning or put under preventive arrest. Nobody gave them the special attention needed for full rehabilitation and the fallout was unfortunate.

Hindus living in predominantly Muslim areas and Muslims in predominantly Hindu areas became insecure after the turn of events and moved out to other neighbourhoods. One exception was Winayakwadi, a small compound next to Mahim Dargah, where about a dozen Hindu families live. Throughout the difficult period of 1992–93, these families moved out of their homes just for one night during the January riots. And even then, they did not leave Winayakwadi but moved into the homes of neighbouring Muslims. Many Hindus in Mahim found it hard to believe that they continued to live there and trust Muslims. But the Muslim community around the dargah were proud that the Hindu families had stayed on and that the events had not shattered the trust between them. However, by the late 1990s, this too had changed, proving that one cannot take relationships and links between communities for granted: it is a relationship that needs to be constantly renewed and strengthened.

IV

On 1 January 1993 Sanjay Pande invited several people for a meeting at the Dharavi Police Station. Pande informed the gathering that there had been numerous incidents of stabbing during the previous night. The number of incidents was too large to be put down to the result of drunken brawls, which are common in Dharavi. At one stage, Pande turned to the politicians present and told them, 'Keeping peace in Dharavi is not the job of the police alone.' The leaders were not doing their bit to support the police. Naresh Pahelwan, a Congress corporator, protested, saying, 'The politicians are being blamed for everything. The police could hang them if they are at fault.' He was reprimanded for being overdramatic. Finally it was decided that the political leaders should hold peace meetings all over Dharavi. Pauline Mary, another corporator, offered to organize the first meeting at Indiranagar, adjacent to Muslimnagar, the same evening. All present at the meeting were requested to attend.

Towards the end of the meeting, one man requested the police to conduct house-to-house searches and unearth any material that may have been collected to use for rioting. Pande explained that this was not such an easy task and that the public themselves should ensure that no trouble broke out in their areas. After the meeting, Pande asked a few of us our opinion regarding the house searches. We wanted to know what such searches would entail. He said that in a slum as congested as Dharavi, it would be virtually impossible to undertake house-to-house searches with the police force at his disposal. Moreover, the searches would create tension. But most of us realized that the man's statement was the first indication that something was brewing and preparations were being made for violence.

While arrangements were being made for the meeting in Indiranagar, there was some commotion over the alleged beating of a small boy. The boy had been helping to bring chairs for the meeting. In his enthusiasm, he picked up a chair in front of a shop without asking the owner. The owner misunderstood the boy's intention and beat him up. As the boy and the shopkeeper belonged to two different communities, tension began to build up in the area. Luckily, Varsha Jethava and I were close by, and we intervened. When the facts were uncovered, peace returned.

In the evening the open space in Indiranagar was packed with people. Many stirring speeches were made. Representatives of the different communities living in the area also spoke. The next morning Shabana Azmi, Farooq Shaikh, a stage and film actor, Rahul Dev and I met at the Dharavi Police Station. Pande informed us that there had been a riot during the night at the venue of the previous day's peace meeting. It was a shock to us all. At Pande's request, we visited the scene of the riot. Amina met us and narrated the events of the previous night. The riot had apparently started with a fight between a few drunken people. Before long, it turned into a violent clash, as bottles and stones were hurled at shops and bystanders. Many shops were damaged. Someone set fire to a few houses. Acid bulbs and firebombs were freely used.

When the police reached the scene, they had to abandon their vehicles and enter the narrow lanes on foot. The lanes were so narrow that the police had to move in a single file to reach the scene of the riot. Pande personally led his men. As the police did not know the lay of the land, local people showed them the way. As they came into the open square in Indiranagar, an acid bulb was thrown at them. This narrowly missed Pande and landed at his feet. A policeman was injured by a flying missile. The rioting was so vicious that the police had to resort

to firing. Three people were killed and twenty-eight injured. One bullet pierced a wall and killed an innocent man in his home. But the police action did bring the riot to a stop and control the damage.

When our group reached Indiranagar we were literally mobbed. Each community wanted us to come and see how badly they had suffered, first at the hands of the rioters and then the police who had come to search their homes and arrest their menfolk. They showed us the dents on their heavy brass pots and wooden doors made by police lathis. In some homes, canisters filled with grain were knocked down, spilling their contents all over the floor.

The police reaction to the Indiranagar riot was very severe. They arrested a large number of men of all the communities. Women complained that police had ransacked their homes and were indiscriminate in their arrests and were beating up their men at the police station. This complaint was universal. I received a message from a prominent Muslim via Farooq Shaikh that Pande should not beat up people. Having no illusion that if the rioters were not curtailed at that stage, the situation had potential to set the entire slum colony on fire, Pande said no rioter would be spared. Many complained to us about an officer with a big moustache who they said was particularly ruthless. The senior police inspector of Dharavi fitted the description, as did an SRP officer who was posted in Dharavi at the time. But Pande insisted that the inspector was not on duty on the night of the Indiranagar riot. Although we did not pursue our inquiry, the doubts remained.

Pointing to a bearded man, an old man whispered to a member of our party that the man was responsible for the previous night's riot. It was Mohammed Hayat, zonal secretary of Tanzeem Allah-O-Akbar, which ran some madrasas in

Dharavi. He was arrested the same evening as the main instigator of the Indiranagar riot, a charge he would deny saying, 'DCP Pande was misinformed.'

During the January riots, one of the madrasas run by the tanzeem and situated near its headquarters at Bhagatsinghnagar behind Kumbharwada was destroyed.

After a couple of hours of witnessing the high emotional display, we decided that we needed to talk to the representatives of all the various communities in a quiet place. Neither Indiranagar nor Muslimnagar had such a place to offer us. So we requested the Kumbharwada community to provide us a venue for the meeting, which they readily did.

People were given an hour's notice for the meeting. Farooq Shaikh, Rahul Dev and I stayed on for the meeting. The meeting took place at a school. Representatives of all the communities residing in Indiranagar came for the meeting. To start with, there was heated discussion as to who had started the trouble. Finally they seemed to agree on one point: the trouble started after an altercation between two groups outside a liquor shop in Indiranagar. But the free use of acid bulbs during the fight showed it was pre-planned. The people did not have an answer for this. We asked who all were prepared to take responsibility for their areas so that such drunken brawls did not turn into full-scale riot.

The people were concerned not so much with the riot as with the police ruthlessness during the house searches after the riot. We tried to make them understand that when a riot starts and the police arrive on the scene, police action to restore order is inevitable. So it was up to the people to ensure that such situations did not arise in the first place. We then discussed practical steps to be taken to ensure that peace would be maintained. A small committee that had representatives of all groups residing in the area was formed. It was decided that

they would all meet at a pre-appointed venue every couple of hours to make sure all was well. In case of any problems or rumours they would go together and deal with it. The members of the Governor's peace committee offered to be available if they needed any help. The police later took the decision to close all liquor shops. Two days after the riot, some people complained that inebriated policemen had committed atrocities during the house searches. It may well have been possible, but this allegation was not made on the first day and seemed like an afterthought.

Some days after the riot in Indiranagar, Farooq Shaikh, Dr G.H. Khan, who ran a clinic in Dharavi, and I visited Sion Hospital to meet the injured. The hospital was packed with injured people from Dharavi, Kurla and Mahim. We went from ward to ward looking for the victims from Dharavi. In one ward, we found a young man who was injured in police firing in Indiranagar. To our amazement, he produced acid bulbs from his pocket, proudly saying that these had been used abundantly during the riot. Instead of showing any remorse, he said his only regret was that he had not managed to hit more people as he himself got injured.

The Indiranagar riot had shown clearly that if the battles were taken from the main roads into the narrow lanes of the slums, the police would have an impossible job on their hands. It was simply not possible for the police to know what was happening inside those lanes from the main road. Policemen were reluctant to venture inside. So Pande hit upon an ingenious idea. He acquired two high trolley ladders from the BEST department. These were parked on the 90 Feet Road facing Muslimnagar for several weeks. Pande's policemen kept a watch from this high vantage point over what went on inside.

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On 3 January, a lot of people packed up and left Dharavi. By the following day it was like an exodus. That evening I tried to persuade one family from leaving. They had put their luggage in a taxi and were leaving for the railway station to go to their village in Tamil Nadu. When I persisted in my effort, the woman said, 'It is all right for you to ask us to stay here. How do you know what it is like to stay when there are acid bulbs, fire missiles, stones and bottles flying around us at night and our houses set on fire and damaged?' People were leaving out of fear of retaliation of the other community as well as repression of the police.

The woman's words were to ring in my ears for several days. She was right. Although I spent many hours each day in the riot-affected areas, in the late evening I did return to the safety of my home at the Worli Sea Face. I always had a feeling that there was something more to the Indiranagar riot than we had fathomed. But I did not have the time to talk with people to understand what lay behind the viciousness I saw there. What had terrorized people that made them flee their homes?

Within four days after the riots, most of Indiranagar was emptied of people. Most people had left in a hurry, leaving behind most of their belongings. Their homes were to be systematically looted. The protection of such homes became an added responsibility for the police. I often walked through the deserted area feeling very depressed. Those of us who had brought the Indiranagar communities together should have vigorously followed up the meeting of 2 January. I had suggested to Pande to call a meeting of the local peace committee. He bluntly told me that he had dissolved the peace committee. He was in no mood to entertain those talking about peace when the peace committee members had done nothing to stop the trouble in Indiranagar. He had given them an opportunity. But

the free use of acid bulbs meant the violence had been pre-planned and the police could not afford to take it lightly. In our first attempt at conflict prevention, we had not succeeded.

By the end of the first week of January, the railway stations were beginning to swell with the masses fleeing from the riot-torn areas. In fact the Dharavi exodus had triggered off a panic reaction elsewhere in the city too. Scores of people rushed to relief camps that were hastily set up. The humanity that thronged the railway stations was not able to get on to the trains. The stations lacked food and sanitary facilities. When this began to take the shape of emergency conditions, several organizations took up the task of providing food for the stranded people at the railway stations.

As members of the peace committees, we were simply not able to provide a sense of security to the people of our city. There was no attempt made by the state government, the Governor or the police to discuss the developing situation in the city and involve citizens in planning what could be done together. I have no doubt citizens could have been involved in more constructive action. As the police had their hands full, the chief minister or the Governor could have taken the initiative. Instead of anticipating and planning after the December experience, we remained mute spectators to the unfolding January crisis. In any town or city where such a situation develops, meetings with the public are not just helpful but can help the police to involve the public in a variety of ways that can reduce some of their own burdens.

On the night of 3 January, Raju Aruba Nayagam, son of the president of the Tamil Adi Dravida Mahasangha, disappeared from Palwadi. Palwadi is bordered by 60 Feet Road on one side and Dharavi Cross Road on the other. It has predominantly Tamil-speaking people, who have lived in Dharavi for many

years. The Tamils belong to the Thevar and Adimahasangha communities. Most of them came from Tirunelveli and Ramanad districts in Tamil Nadu. Many of them were initially involved in the tanning business, but today they have white-collar jobs in banks, Railways and government departments.

On 4 January, tension mounted in Palwadi and the areas surrounding it. On the previous night Raju Aruba Nayagam had left home at 9.15 p.m. to visit his friend in Nawab Chawl. Raju was last seen leaving the area with the young man. When there was no sign of Raju the next day, his father, Aruba Nayagam, registered a complaint with the police. Some of Raju's friends beat the Muslim youth badly. A police officer rescued him. Raju remains missing till date. The police officers who served in Dharavi at the time suspect Raju was killed. Raju's family has not received compensation as his case was in the category of missing persons.

On hearing the news of Raju's disappearance, Shabana Azmi and I visited Dharavi that night. We went to the police station to ask for directions to his house. We were taken to the first floor, where DCP Ingale was sitting with several people from Koliwada. I recognized Triza Killekar, Ramkrishna Keni and Francis Patil, head of the Koli Jamaat. We were not sure what we had walked into. While we sat there with them, Keni received a telephone call from his party office. They appeared to be inquiring about why the Kolis and Shiv Sena cadres were at the police station. Shabana was getting restless and wanted to go to the Tamil area without delay. I asked Triza if she would come with us. She readily agreed and walked out with us. The Koliwada group was kept at the police station for hours while the police were deciding if they should be arrested. We did not know this when we asked Triza to accompany us.

We went to the office of the Adi Dravida Mahasangha and

found Raju's father there. He told us he was anxious about his son but wanted his people to restrain their emotions. That Raju was last seen with his friend from Nawab Chawl was causing some problem. We went to meet some of the Muslims in the Bade Masjid area. They told us they had no idea of Raju's whereabouts.

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Several volunteers of the RES were holding meetings to address young people in different localities of Dharavi to maintain peace and harmony. Two social workers—Janaki and her husband, Kumar Prashant—and I were going to hold one on 6 January evening. While we waited for the others to join us, someone from the Bade Masjid area came towards us and said there had been four stabbing cases since morning on Dharavi Cross Road. Tension was high in the area and people were anticipating a major flare-up. The incidents on the Dharavi Cross Road were the direct consequence of the disappearance of Raju Aruba Nayagam.

Janaki, Prashant and I decided to abandon our meeting. We rushed to the Bade Masjid area and found a large group standing on the street. The air was charged. We were taken into a small office by the roadside. The people were angry at the events of the day and the inability of the police to protect lives. An elderly man expressed his concern about not being able to restrain the youth. He told us, 'I have told the young men to go and do what they like.' I realized that instead of dismissing this as the words of a helpless man, some people would take it as encouragement to attack the other community. Summoning all my courage, I told him, 'I can understand you saying that you cannot control the young men. But I can never accept you asking them to go and do what they liked in our presence. You

should take your words back.' As he was an elderly person, others were watching this interchange. Finally the old man backed away and said, 'Yes, I take back my words.'

Our group realized that the situation demanded some urgent action on the part of the police and there was not much we could do to help. I inquired if there was a quiet place from where I could make a call. Pyarebhai took Prashant and me to a godown in the compound of Aziz Mamu. As we could not reach the Dharavi Police Station, I contacted the police commissioner's office to inform him of the situation around the Bade Masjid area. Commissioner Bapat asked me the exact location from where I was speaking. He informed me that he would send some senior officers to the area and also some army trucks for a flag march. He suggested that I keep talking to people till police help arrived. I said, 'We'll do our best but are not sure if we will succeed.' Prashant and I walked back to the little office and decided to wait for the arrival of the officers.

Within fifteen minutes the army trucks rolled down the road from the direction of the Dharavi Koliwada. They stationed themselves outside the mosque. From the opposite direction, DCP P.D. Jadhav and DCP Ingale walked towards Bade Masjid. They had left their cars at the Cross Road junction. When I went to meet the officers, Ingale told me, 'So at last you have got people out.' I was baffled by his comment and thought it was very unfair as the three of us had taken enormous risk. I walked away from him. Whatever had prompted this remark, this was not the time for acrimony. The officers stood outside, surveying the scene for a while before coming into the office where we were sitting with the group. The group explained to them their concern over the growing number of stabbing cases in the area and their fear that the mosque was vulnerable to attack. They gave the officers the names of people whom they

suspected and the area from where the attacks were coming.

The officers listened carefully to everything that was said and took notes of all the details. In the middle of this discussion, Additional Commissioner A.A. Khan arrived. He looked around and told the assembled gathering, 'If you want to fight, I will not hesitate to shoot.' These words seemed to have a sobering effect. Although his presence created a sense of security, people also seemed to be in awe of him. After listening to his officers, Khan announced that a curfew would be imposed within half an hour. Some junior officers tried to say that it might be a little impractical, but Khan was firm in his decision. He walked away with his officers to survey the area.

Janaki and Prashant had left their young children at home and were anxious about them by now. Yet they did not want to leave me there alone. While we were discussing what to do, one of the people there said, 'Madam, today we won't let you go home.' I thought, 'This is a test. Am I prepared to stay with them on the day they feel most vulnerable? If I do, I will win their trust for life.' As a peacemaker, I had been telling them to be peaceful, not to retaliate, be courageous and stay put. Did I have the moral authority to say all this if I did not stay with them now? So I said, 'Yes, I will stay here tonight. Please find a home where I might stay.'

That night I stayed with Enaith Hussain and his family in Nagari Apartments, next to Bade Masjid. They had given me a separate room in their fourth-floor apartment. The room had a telephone and a good view of all of Dharavi. Some of my friends were concerned that I was camping there. My father too called. After listening to the detailed account of what happened during the day, he said, 'I trust you will be wise in all you do. Promise me you will not take any hasty step.' His support was a source of great encouragement to me.

During the evening, unknown to us in Dharavi, Javed Akhtar, poet and film lyricist, had been calling a lot of people in the media and also the police commissioner's office to be updated on the situation in Dharavi. The mediapersons in turn were calling the police control room. Our network consisted of people in the media, in the police and other prominent people. We had succeeded in fending off a crisis and had prevented a flare-up. We had in fact worked out a very effective system of communication. As soon as any one of us received or made a call to ask for urgent help, the network would be activated and we contacted each other to request and provide whatever help was needed. I have continued to use that network to this day during several crises in the city.

The entire episode achieved several things. Those who felt most vulnerable saw that the authorities could and would respond. An effective channel of communication was opened up between the Dharavi public and the police which was maintained throughout that period. This lessened people's bitterness and distrust of the police and stood us in good stead in the following days and weeks as we coped with crises and challenges. The next day, P.D. Jadhav told me, 'It was a good piece of work yesterday.' But some police officers continued to be suspicious of my presence in the Bade Masjid area and my decision to stay on at night.

I stayed five nights in the home of the Hussains, which culminated in a lifelong friendship. I have often been asked, 'Were you not afraid? Did you not fear an attack by one group or the other?' In fact, I considered police protection a hindrance. How can you build confidence in people if you go to them under police protection? The people of Dharavi knew that I was not attached to any political party nor worked with the police, although I had no hesitation in seeking police help if

the situation demanded it. They knew I was in Dharavi in my capacity as a member of the Governor's peace committee. They seemed to have accepted it and no one ever treated me as an outsider. Besides I reached out to all in need, irrespective of their religion, caste or creed.

Following Raju Aruba Nayagam's disappearance and several murders on the Dharavi Cross Road, all the people living in Nawab Chawl left their homes and moved in with people in the area around Bade Masjid.

Pande did not want another mass exodus, as happened in the aftermath of the Indiranagar riot on 1 January. He arranged for the people to return home on 8 January and arranged police protection for them. Three journalists—Kalpana Sharma, Rupa Chinai and Meher Pestonji—and I went to Dharavi to help in the return of the Nawab Chawl residents. But instead we got engrossed in talking to a group of people at Shafi building next to Bade Masjid.

Pande had gone ahead to Palwadi–Nawab Chawl to survey the scene. It was a Friday. The curfew had been relaxed so that people could offer their namaz. Pande gathered the residents of Nawab Chawl in Kuttiwadi. He talked to them about the desirability of their returning home and explained the security measures that were arranged by the police for their protection. Pyarebhai was also present. It was decided that Pyarebhai, along with a police officer, would accompany each family one at a time and get them to unlock their homes. A local BJP leader who had forcibly locked three rooms was called and made to vacate the rooms and hand them over to their rightful owners. He was also warned against creating mischief in the area. In the midst of this operation, Pande received a wireless message about some trouble near Koliwada and he left. Pyarebhai and other police officers continued to escort the families to Nawab Chawl.

We were sitting in Shafi building, overlooking the road near Bade Masjid, when we heard the shouts of 'They are coming from Koliwada.' We quickly rushed to the balcony to see what was happening. We could not see any group coming from the direction of the Koliwada. We did see an officer with a small posse of men standing in the middle of the road between Koliwada and Bade Masjid. Another officer with a small posse stood guarding the other end of the road between Dharavi Cross Road area and the namazis. The policemen were trying to cordon off the namazis from possible attackers. We realized that if a full-scale riot were to start these policemen would be outnumbered and overpowered. The namazis were running helter-skelter. Several of them picked up stones, smashed bricks that were stacked up by the side of the road and brought out bottles or whatever else they could lay their hands on.

Near Chamda Bazar, we saw smoke rising in the sky. We also saw people standing on the rooftops, throwing burning objects and missiles at each other. One of the burning objects landed on a godown, setting it on fire. Someone informed us that women from Koliwada were staging a demonstration and were walking down the road towards the mosque. Triza Killekar was leading the women. The journalists and I helped in making the necessary calls to all the relevant authorities—the fire brigade, the local police and the police commissioner's office—and alerting the local team to ensure their areas remained peaceful. Amid all this, we heard the sound of gunfire in the distance. By now a fire engine had come but it could not make its way inside Chamda Bazar to where the plastic godown was on fire.

Inspector Madhav Ahire came towards us from the Chamda Bazar side. He was shaken as a bullet had brushed past him, bruising his hand. He said the bullet had come from a building in the locality. Though it was said that it was a case of private

firing we never discovered who was responsible for it. (There was a rumour of another incident of private firing not far from that area. In this case too nothing was established at the time. Some months later, the police did book a number of people under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act [TADA] for possessing unlicensed firearms from that area.) By now some army trucks had also rolled down the road with white flags.

We heard that one boy was killed in the police firing in the Bagicha area. This news brought about a hushed silence in the area. By now Pande and DCP Rakesh Maria had come from the direction of Koliwada. They had succeeded in getting the women to go back inside their homes. Once outside Bade Masjid, they tried to get the namazis off the road, but some young men resisted and lay on the road saying they wanted to complete their namaz. But the police announced that they had reimposed the curfew. We saw a young doctor attending to a few injured people who had emerged from Chamda Bazar. He also treated Ahire. The entire incident could not have lasted for more than half an hour, although it seemed much longer then. Through those tension-filled moments we were afraid a riot would break out.

When all was quiet and the road empty of people, we came down to the road. I telephoned Triza Killekar. I asked her, 'What was this demonstration that you had staged about? Do you realize you are responsible for causing a near riot? A young man has unnecessarily lost his life.' Triza said, 'What could I do? All these women came to my home protesting that the police were specially favouring the Muslims by giving them concession for the namaz.' We had not been aware that this was the second relaxation of the curfew that day. According to Triza, the police had told them they were relaxing the curfew to enable people to shop. The women had pointed out to the police officers that

they had done their shopping that morning during the curfew relaxation.

Triza asked, 'Why do the police not tell the truth? This special concession is for the namaz.' She might not have been convinced of the police version, but taking out a demonstration was not the answer. There were other ways to take it up. Leaders have to be responsible for the consequences of their actions, I told her. And from what we had personally witnessed, she and her group were responsible for that day's unfortunate events.

After the riots we failed to follow up work in the Palwadi – Nawab Chawl area and a gate was erected there. Slowly what was known in 1993 as Nawab Chawl became Nawabnagar. In the Mumbai Municipal G-north ward records, Palwadi does not exist any more. This has become a cause for unhappiness and some old residents moved away from the area.

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In early January, the Governor called a meeting of the peace committee. The Darbar Hall of the Raj Bhavan was quite full. I recognized several politicians among them, who were agitated at not being included in the Governor's peace committee. The chief minister wanted to include them. Hence this meeting for the members of the reconstituted peace committee. One of the contentious issues raised was that Friday namaz was being offered on the street. Manohar Joshi, senior Shiv Sena leader (later to become chief minister of Maharashtra), said this caused inconvenience to people. But his main argument was that if the Muslims were allowed to offer namaz on the street, the Hindus should also be allowed maha artis.

Dr Rafiq Zaqaria, a well-known Muslim scholar and a former Congress minister, said it was a very sensitive issue that

should be discussed at length later. The Governor felt that 'No one should be stopped from saying prayers.' I felt differently. Clearly no one could be stopped from saying prayers. But as the maha artis had become a major issue in the city, causing tension as well as inconvenience and disruption, a smaller representative group should meet to thrash out the issue and find a solution, would have been my suggestion. An opportunity for a dialogue was missed.

But in Dharavi we were given such an opportunity and we seized it. On 9 January a maha arti was held in Mahim, blocking all traffic. According to the Srikrishna Commission Report, the local Shiv Sena leader and corporator, Prakash Ayare, gave a speech. He said that the maha artis were being held under the directions of Bal Thackeray because the government was partial to one particular community. Soon afterwards Shiv Sena leaders announced plans to hold a maha arti in Dharavi. Dharavi is situated at a strategic junction, connecting the eastern and western suburbs, bringing traffic from Sion to Bandra on one side and from Mahim to Sion Hospital, Matunga on the other side. This would have clogged one of the main traffic arteries in the city. Pande requested me to see him at his office.

When we met, he told me that Manohar Joshi had come to meet him that day in connection with the Shiv Sena workers arrested in Dharavi. Far from giving Joshi any concession, Pande had requested him not to go ahead with the maha arati. Joshi had responded by saying, 'If the Muslims of Dharavi give up street namaz, Shiv Sena will abandon the idea of holding maha arti.' Pande wanted to know if I would discuss the matter with the trustees as well as the maulvis of various mosques and come to an agreement. I was a little uncertain. He was persistent and explained to me the background against which he was making the request. He had no illusions that the maha artis were introduced in the city to cause major disruption. He was not

going to allow the disrupters to make any mischief in his area. He would do anything to prevent violence. I said, 'All right, I will do whatever I can to help.'

I left the police station and telephoned several people including Farooq Shaikh and Javed Akhtar. They encouraged me to work towards getting an agreement from the trustees of the Dharavi mosques. I was a little reluctant to proceed in the matter on my own. I was a Hindu and a woman. Would anyone listen to me? We had less than thirty-six hours before the first maha arti in the area. Javed Akhtar told me, 'Do not have any apprehensions. We will try to find someone to help you. But do not wait either—just get to work.'

I went first to meet Baqqasaheb, the general secretary of Bade Masjid. I explained to him the promise of Manohar Joshi: no street namaz, no maha arti. Baqqasaheb readily agreed and said until the tension was over, he would take an undertaking not to allow street namaz. He then guided me to other mosques in Dharavi where street namaz was prevalent. Within a matter of four hours, I visited most of the mosques in Dharavi. Not one maulvi or trustee raised any objection. In fact they were eager to register their sentiment that they did not wish to disturb peace in any way. It was a small gesture they could make towards peace, they said. One of them asked if Manohar Joshi would come to Dharavi, as they would prefer to speak to him directly.

I conveyed this to Pande, who thought it was a good idea as it would pin Joshi to his promise. He conveyed the decision of the Dharavi mosques to Joshi and invited him for a meeting on the following day. The next evening, to our surprise, a huge crowd turned up for the meeting at the Dharavi Police Station. Apart from the maulvis and trustees of different mosques, there were other Muslims who had come. A large number of local Shiv Sena leaders and their followers were also present. There

was great curiosity to see a senior Shiv Sena leader and have the opportunity for an exchange of ideas. Everyone waited for Joshi's arrival. After an hour, people began to get restless.

I went inside the police station to meet Pande. He told me that Joshi was not coming and wanted me to announce this to the assembled gathering. I refused flatly, as it was Pande who had invited the people and courtesy demanded that he tell them what had happened. Reluctantly, Pande came out to where the people were waiting. I sat on one side, nervous about how the news would be received. But Pande had found a way to make it less unpleasant for himself.

He announced, 'Due to some other pressing work, Mr Joshi cannot come today, but he has promised to come another day. I will let you know as soon as he confirms the date. Sushobhaji has made an agreement with the management of all the mosques in Dharavi that there will be no street namaz till peace returns. This means the Shiv Sena will not hold any maha arti in the jurisdiction of the Dharavi Police Station, as was promised to me by Mr Manohar Joshi.'

I was furious. I did not wish my name to be announced publicly and associated with this decision. Ramkrishna Keni asked, 'What about the loudspeakers used on top of the mosques?' Pande replied, 'This agreement covers only the street namaz and does not cover any other issue. All other matters will be dealt with strictly according to law by the police.' Saying this, he walked out of the meeting.

There was general disappointment among the Muslims present at not being able to meet a senior Shiv Sena leader. The Shiv Sena followers were unsure about the announcement of the DCP. I was worried that the whole incident might turn against me. We need not have been anxious. Everyone was tired of violence and did not wish to give any party an excuse to

start another round of rioting. Each side was keen to register that it was ready to accommodate the other side. This public sentiment needed to be cultivated further. Joshi did turn up four or five days later. Unfortunately, Pande could gather only a handful of maulvis for a meeting with him. The maulvis were dignified in their approach but Joshi seemed a little unsure of himself. The tone and substance of the discussion was cordial. Nothing of significance transpired during the meeting, as the agreement on the street namaz had already been reached and announced. The DCP was determined to hold each side to its part of the agreement.

All those whom I had consulted earlier were jubilant. Husain Dalvai, chairman of the State Minority Commission, congratulated me for reaching the agreement over disallowing maha artis and street namaz in Dharavi. Looking back, apart from the legwork I did meeting the trustees and the maulvis of the mosques, there was no difficulty encountered. All the same it was a significant agreement we had hammered out. The credit should go to Pande's initiative and his foresight and bold, proactive policing method during the crisis.

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A couple of days later Kalpana Sharma and I went to Dharavi along with Sanjoy Hazarika, a journalist, and Arvind Krishnaswami, an employee of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation who had take time off from work to help in restoring peace in the riot-affected areas. We first called on Amina. She said she had been trying to contact me at home as the dargah in Tarwadi, or Kabarstan, had been burnt down. I told her not to believe such rumours as this was not possible during curfew. But when we left her home she followed us,

persisting that we go and see it for ourselves. In the end we decided to verify her story if only to pacify her. She came along to show us the way, and narrated the following incident.

The previous day Amina's brother-in-law had reported that his father, Ebrahim, the mujawar of the dargah, had not returned home for three days. He wanted Amina to go and look for him in the Kabarstan, as it would be less risky for a woman to go through the predominantly Hindu areas to the Kabarstan. Amina went near the entrance of the Kabarstan and talked to the people living there but they said no one was inside. When Amina returned home, her brother-in-law insisted that she go out again. This time she went to the police station. Inspector Ahire accompanied her to the entrance of the Kabarstan but tried to dissuade her from going inside as it was risky. He stood guard while Amina went inside to look for Ebrahim. She found him hiding in a freshly dug grave, along with Muhammad, the grave-digger, and another man. Ahire escorted the three men and Amina back to Socialnagar. After this, there was heavy stone-throwing in the area. Amina thought this was reason enough for her to believe the dargah may have been burnt.

The Kabarstan was spread over a sprawling 7.5-acre property with many coconut palms and small shrubs. I had not seen so many trees in Dharavi. As we walked up the long path, we could see a huge structure, which seemed from a distance to be intact. So I scolded Amina for unnecessarily getting excited. But she would not give up and took us all the way up the path to the building. To our shock, there seemed to have been an attempt to burn down the building. As the building had a strong structure, the fire had not done much damage to it except blackened the walls. There was a gas cylinder lying about, which had clearly been used to set the fire.

The fire had caused damage in the prayer area. The wooden

frame surrounding the kabar was also damaged. Scribbled in black on all the walls were various slogans. Amina went around collecting everything and putting it in a neat pile. After examining the damage for a while, we asked Amina about the people responsible for the dargah. We also told her not to discuss the matter with others. We then went to the Bade Masjid area, looking for the trustees. In the Markazi Relief Committee office, we saw several elders of the Muslim community. We took Pyarebhai and Baqqasaheb aside and informed them of what we had found in Kabarstan, expressing our concern that this news might create another round of violence. A couple of trustees, along with Pyarebhai, came with us to see the dargah. A photographer took photos of all the damaged objects inside. I was not too happy about it initially, but later thought this was important, as I had no desire to be accused later on of suppressing the information.

All of us decided to get the place cleaned up before the Friday namaz two days later. Fresh copies of the Koran were brought, as also prayer mats and the walls whitewashed. I offered to raise the money. The next day half a dozen volunteers from the Muslim community, some police personnel, including the senior police inspector, Gharge, and P.D. Jadhav, and a few of us went to the dargah to clean it. Our presence was both a sign of respect and a symbolic gesture of repentance for the vandalism. I hoped the gesture would help assuage the feelings. Subsequently Rahul Dev undertook to raise the money for the material needed for the work.

While we were walking towards the dargah, a young man tried to attach himself to our group. I recognized him as someone Arvind and I had seen the previous day. We informed the police officers that the young man meant mischief and should be questioned about his motive for entering the premises. However,

when we pointed out the young man to Jadhav and Gharge, they only exchanged glances.

On the previous day, Arvind and I had been near Bhagatsinghnagar, looking at the garbage heap that had not been cleared for over three weeks. Nearby was a cluster of houses that had been burnt down. It was very eerie. Suddenly we noticed a group of boys on the rooftop of a building. We entered the compound and asked the boys what they were trying to do. They were surprised to see us. We realized they were on top of the dargah and were about to remove the green flag there. They also had a plastic bag in their hand. We told them to leave and warned them that the police could detain them as they had not sought police permission to enter the compound, which we realized was the Kabarstan, and the building they had climbed was the dargah. We walked out of the gate with them. By now Arvind had started a conversation with them in Tamil. We did not know that there was a side entrance to the dargah.

One morning a week or so later, some of the trustees and a few of us went to the dargah. I had already given the money that had been raised to one of the trustees. He did not want to take it and finally agreed to use it towards educating some poor children. Some of the money was used to buy a chaddar on behalf of the Hindus as a mark of respect, which was ceremoniously presented. For me it was also a thanksgiving. We had prevented a major flare-up in Dharavi and foiled the plan to create trouble. Four journalists were part of the team and had seen the damage, yet none of them wrote about the incident in the stories they filed for their papers.

I want to put it on record that several journalists who covered the riots acted very responsibly and did not treat everything they saw as a scoop. Many of them were deeply affected by what they saw and often went beyond their journalistic brief

to help people in a variety of ways. All those who had come to cover Dharavi at different stages helped us by translating what the non-Hindi-speaking victims said or in dispute solving, or just by sitting and listening to the victims. Throughout that period I told the journalists whom I met not to mention my name in the stories they filed. They respected my sentiment and I am very grateful to them as I felt my work needed to remain unpublicized at the time.

After we had finished cleaning up the dargah, one of the senior trustees expressed his apprehension to me and wanted to know what guarantee I could give that such attacks would not be repeated. I offered to organize a meeting between the trustees and the elders of the Kumbhar community who lived next to the Kabarstan. The police had registered an offence over the attempt to burn the dargah and had arrested young men from the Kumbhar community. Both sides agreed to attend the meeting if I arranged it.

After discussing this with the police officers, it was decided to hold the meeting at the police station. The curfew was still in force and we needed a neutral place for such a meeting. A police van brought both groups to the police station. Jadhav and some officers were present at the meeting. The trustees of the dargah described in detail the damage that the fire had caused. They also expressed their apprehensions that such attempts could be made again in the future. The trustees were also concerned that if the word spread about the damage caused to the dargah, it could start another round of violence in Dharavi. The Hindus from Kumbharwada expressed their regret at what had happened in the dargah and gave valuable suggestions for strengthening security. They pointed out that the back entrance to the dargah was wide open and suggested that the trustees put up an iron gate which could be locked. They also undertook

to keep an eye on the dargah from the houses adjoining the Kabarstan.

The Hindus also expressed their unhappiness that their young men had been arrested in connection with the burning of the dargah. I shared their feeling on this score especially as I had pointed out at least one of the culprits to the police officers. But no action had been taken against the young man and his friends. Instead, young Kumbhar boys who had had absolutely no part in any violence during the riots were arrested. If the police had questioned the man we had pointed out to them, many serious riot offences committed by him and his group would have come to light and we could have found out who the real instigators were.

Several years later, one of the young men who had taken part in the burning of the dargah was to inform me that they were about to plant a few crude bombs in the dargah when Arvind and I chanced upon them. The plastic bag they carried contained a few crude bombs that were made by one of them and among their tools of arson was a gas cylinder which they had taken inside. Although at the time I felt the entire episode was a good example of conflict resolution, I had not realized how close we were to a major incident.

The young man told me seven of them, including a Muslim and a Christian, had participated in the dargah incident and they were instigated by a right-wing Hindu ideologue. Most members of the group had been involved in small and big criminal offences during and prior to the riots. One of them took away all the money from the till in the dargah. These boys had committed some gruesome murders. The young man who spoke to me had killed four people. He committed one murder with a koyta, usually used to break coconuts, on Dharavi Cross Road to avenge the kidnapping of Raju Aruba Nayagam. The

second murder was committed to avenge the death of his friend's brother in police firing at the Holi Maidan. He and his friend had carried the injured on a hand cart to the Sion Hospital, but had not been able to save him. They took out their frustration by stoning a man to death. He committed the third murder near Murugan temple with a saw. His group made four attempts to burn down the mosque near the police station because some Muslim boys had beaten up their friend. He alleged that a constable posted near the Madina Masjid had told them to do whatever they wanted to in five minutes. They succeeded in causing some minor damage to the mosque. They had later looted and burned of several shops and the big timber mart near Madina Masjid.

Riot cases were registered against him and he spent time in the lock-up. Once released, this young man came in contact with a good NGO in Dharavi and was able to find a new direction to his life. He told me, 'I will never use violence again. I want to do good for society. If another riot breaks out, I will try to stop violence.' He has tried to help the family of one of his victims. This experience gave me a glimmer of hope that with concerted teamwork, it was possible to beat the evil plans of violence-mongers.

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It was rumoured at the time that 300 people from Dharavi had gone to Ayodhya in December 1992. For a short time, a relief camp was held at Kamraj High School, on the 90 Feet Road. Arvind Krishnaswami and I went to Kamraj High School on 12 January and found the relief camp quite well organized. But they wanted food rations and asked if we could help them. Arvind could talk to several people, as he was fluent in Tamil.

One of them told Arvind that he recognized me as he worked as a compounder with a doctor whom I knew. Later, the doctor confirmed that his compounder had gone to Ayodhya in December. Many of those who went were completely unprepared for what had happened in Ayodhya on 6 December. I wished we had talked to some of them about what went on in their minds. Very clearly, not all of them had returned with the euphoria of having achieved something grand. Many of them were confused and in shock.

We went back to look up the compounder, but did not see him. Seeing us, the camp organizers complained that they wished to celebrate Pongal, the Tamil New Year, but would not be able to do so as they did not expect the police to relax the curfew for that purpose. I agreed with them, saying the situation was far too tense for the curfew to be lifted. But, they pointed out, the following day was Friday and they were sure the police would make a special concession to the Muslims for namaz. I did not agree with them, but I felt concerned, sensing their anger.

Arvind and I left Kamraj High School and went directly to the police station. We met Pande, who told us he would not relax curfew in Dharavi under any circumstances. The experience of the previous Friday was fresh in his mind, when a riot broke out during curfew relaxation. That night I got a call, informing me that the curfew was being relaxed throughout the city. The faces of the belligerent people in Kamraj High School flashed through my mind telling me, 'We told you so. Police would rather pamper the Muslims than give a concession for a Hindu festival.' I knew there would be some elements itching to create trouble the next day.

I tried to contact the Dharavi Police Station but was not able to reach any of the officers. Early next morning, I decided to contact the police commissioner, Shrikant Bapat. I told him

that the Tamilians were upset at the relaxation of the curfew on Friday but not for Pongal. There could be trouble in Dharavi, I said.

Bapat said the curfew had been lifted as most parts of the city were running out of food grain and they needed to collect this from Dana Bazar near Crawford Market. There was no alternative but to relax the curfew for the free movement of trucks. However, an officer could decide what was right for his area. That day Dharavi remained under curfew, although it was lifted in other parts of the city. The Dharavi police kept a vigil, ensuring that peace was not disturbed.

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In Behrampada the riots were an opportunity for several groups to assert their supremacy: secular forces versus communal forces; the middle-class people living in high-rise buildings versus the slum dwellers who lived next to them; development planners who had plans for the land in Bandra East versus the poor who had developed the marshy land, thereby increasing its value.

On 17 January 1993, Behrampada saw a night of orchestrated attacks when about twenty huts were burnt. The incident received a lot of publicity and brought prominent citizens of Mumbai to Behrampada. On the following day, when Kalpana Sharma and I went there, we saw scores of people walking around Behrampada. We decided to go to the MIG colony opposite Behrampada. We entered one of the buildings. All the residents, including a large number of women, had gathered on the ground floor. They were quite agitated. They told us we were almost the first people to visit their colony since the night's incident.

They were angry about the reports in the morning

newspapers, particularly in the *Mid-day*, and said the reports, which alleged they had thrown lit torches from their building towards Behrampada, were biased and distorted. They denied the accusation. They felt persecuted by the media and accused the media and the politicians of destroying whatever they had painfully restored after the December riots. They were also angry and bitter towards Sunil Dutt, their MP. They felt he had time for the people of Behrampada but not for them.

Those who lived in the MIG colony were middle-class people who had bought these flats through their hard-earned savings. While booking the flats, they were told there would be a garden near the colony, for which they had paid extra money. Instead of a garden, the Behrampada slum had proliferated. Per se, they were not against the people of Behrampada and even employed many of them to work in their homes. But they wanted a decent and clean environment to live in. Sunil Dutt was seen as a man who overlooked their rights and championed the cause of the slum dwellers. I offered to arrange a meeting between them and Sunil Dutt so that they could air their grievances. They were very sceptical but agreed to let me try for such a meeting.

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Sunil Dutt, a senior Congress MP from the north-western suburbs, had resigned his parliamentary seat following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He was the only MP to do so. He and his daughter organized relief work from their house. They sent food grain to the community kitchen that was run for the riot victims in Mahim and to relief centres in Dharavi. Sunil Dutt was very critical of the state government and had publicly criticized it. He had also sat on a fast for a day in

protest against the events in Ayodhya.

Behrampada, a political hot-bed, had received a lot of adverse publicity during the Mumbai riots. The Behrampada slum has a population of nearly 100,000 that is predominantly Muslim. It has mushroomed on the land that mostly belonged to the Railways. When the slum dwellers were attacked, Sunil Dutt, as their elected representative, spoke up for them and did all he could to protect them and give relief. But the more he spoke up for the poor and the victims of violence, the more criticism he faced from the right-wing forces.

For Sunil Dutt, the Mumbai riots brought vivid memories of Partition when his family had lost everything in West Punjab. His mother became a widow at twenty-two, when he was five years old and his brother six months. He should have been the bitterest enemy of Muslims, but he had seen the same madness on both sides and felt there was no difference in what both sides had done at the time. His mother had taught them that if they nursed hatred, they would begin to want revenge next. It was a dead-end street.

He has never forgotten his suffering and has always reached out to people in need. He understands what life in Mumbai is like for the poor, lower- and middle-class people. He was at pains to explain to me that, as an MP, he was only doing his duty in addressing the problems of the slum dwellers and he could not help it if he was termed pro-poor. He was more than willing to meet people from the New MIG Colony as they too belonged to his constituency.

The meeting took place some weeks later at his home over breakfast. It went well and they agreed to meet again. Unfortunately, other events occupied Sunil Dutt and the dialogue between them did not proceed further.

During the December riots, a Ganesh temple near

Behrampada was desecrated. After the riots the Ganesh idol was installed in the temple. The local Shiv Sena leader, Madhukar Sarpotdar, led the procession in which the Ganesh idol was ceremoniously carried and installed in the temple. Fearing the procession might lead to further trouble, some prominent Muslims of Bandra joined the procession and walked with Sarpotdar as a goodwill gesture. Despite police prohibition, Sarpotdar went ahead with the procession, in heavy police presence. Such defiance of prohibitory orders was common where the Shiv Sena was concerned. I went to the area that morning, along with some others, but did not join the procession. Instead, we watched the scene from a home in the New MIG Colony.

Later, Shabana Azmi met Sarpotdar at a peace committee meeting at Nirmalnagar in Bandra East. Following this, Sarpotdar met Shabana and her husband, Javed Akhtar. The three visited Behrampada to try and get the two communities to sort out their differences. Shiv Sainiks and other Behrampada residents complained about each other, but finally agreed to compromise for peace. But the truce lasted only for three or four days, after which the hostilities returned.

The riots highlighted the problems which have arisen as our metropolises rapidly expand. People living in the MIG colony and those living in Behrampada had conflicting views. The slum dwellers had worked hard to fill the marshy land and build their homes. And now someone was trying to push them out. While the slum dwellers thought the planners, policy makers and politicians did not listen to them, the middle class all over the city felt particularly angry that the activists had very little time for their concerns. Who was responsible for the thoughtless way in which development was taking place? Who was responsible for the proliferation of the slums? These issues

continue to remain before us and are as unresolved, contentious and explosive as they were during the riots. A concerted effort to look at these issues holistically is lacking in the politicians, administration as well as the public and this may lead to violence in the future.

Throughout the two rounds of riots, Behrampada suffered less loss in terms of human lives and property compared to other areas of Nirmalnagar Police Station, and certainly far less killings and loss of property than in Dharavi. But because of the political importance of the area, it became known as one of the sensitive areas of the city. As a result while Behrampada got all the media attention, the areas and incidents not far from it either went unnoticed or were not given enough attention.

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During a visit to the Nagpada relief camps we met a small group of riot victims from Dharavi's Bhagatsinghnagar, situated at the back entrance of both the Kabarstan and the Kumbharwada. There had been an attempt to burn the dargah there. The Bhagatsinghnagar victims were too terrified to return. They asked us to help them. We arranged for them to visit their homes. Pande sent a police vehicle to bring the victims to Dharavi. ACP Sukhtankar was present in the locality when the victims from Nagpada arrived. I was also there.

The people in the group were shocked to see that their homes had not just been looted but completely burnt down. As the loss began to register, many men simply broke down. The women, on the other hand, started shouting abuses at Hindus, particularly some of the local leaders.

Hearing the commotion, many residents came out of their homes. A sizeable crowd gathered around us. The victims were

particularly incensed at seeing Gowardhan Chauhan, a BJP leader of the area. They accused him of destroying their homes. As the accusations became more bitter, the Hindus started responding with their own. Those standing around Gowardhan were very vocal. Sukhtankar and I were standing between the two groups. Amid the shouting, I told the residents that the riot victims were going to return to their homes and no one could frighten them away. If any harm came to any of them, we would hold the Hindus responsible. This incensed the residents. By now I was losing my patience. Fortunately Sukhtankar intervened and it was decided that we should take the riot victims back. A Hindu woman from the Kumbharwada offered to make tea for all the victims, as they had not had anything to eat or drink since that morning.

I felt very depressed by the encounter and was gripped by the enormity of the task. Could we really do it? I had been a strong advocate of getting people to return to their old homes, while others preferred that new homes be built for the riot victims in new areas where they would feel secure. Were we to allow our city to become like Beirut with a Muslim quarter and a Hindu quarter, I wondered. The desire of the riot victims to move to areas where their own community was predominant was understandable. But this would not help in the reconciliation process and could permanently divide the communities.

Physical integration was necessary before complete psychological integration was even attempted. I felt unhappy that we had not handled the situation tactfully or wisely. I had stepped into Bhagatsinghnagar without knowing its background. Nor did I know the dynamics of local social and political life. I was right in my principled stand, but I wondered if I was pragmatic, practical and sensitive in the way I went about resettling the riot victims. I realized that the government priority

had been to wind up the camps, but this was creating other tensions and complications. At the time I had not heard of the experience of other victims when they returned to their neighbourhoods. I did know that social workers belonging to different NGOs had helped the victims to resettle in several places. But not everyone was fortunate to have assistance or a well-thought-out plan.

The next day, during my morning reflection, I felt I had been too impatient with Gowardhan Chauhan. By chance, I met him later that morning in a shop. I apologized to him for my impatience of the previous day. He smiled and said, 'You don't really know the local situation, do you?' He suggested that I meet the local Hindus and find out for myself what the truth was. It was clear that some groundwork was needed before the victims returned. I decided to accept Chauhan's suggestion. A meeting was fixed, and Rupa Chinai, Satish Sutaria, a friend, and I went for it.

The meeting took place in a house and many women and some Muslims attended it. Chauhan was present when the meeting started but left soon after. One by one, people began to describe the events during the January riots. Nothing seemed to have happened during December. Their anger seemed to be against one man called Sharafat, who, they alleged, had a criminal background. Many of the riot victims in the party that had come from Nagpada were relatives of Sharafat. People described how Sharafat had been collecting money from them as part of the charges for cleaning the public toilets. He had locked two toilets, out of the ten or twelve, for the use of his family. The public toilet block served the needs of between 5000 and 8000 people. Local people alleged that a vacant plot of land reserved for a new toilet block had been appropriated and a madrasa had

been constructed there. Sharafat had been extremely aggressive during the January riots.

When the fire broke out, several Hindu houses were gutted, along with those of the Muslims. Local people were clearly unhappy about the prospect of Sharafat returning and were satisfied that at least he was on the police's wanted list. We convinced them they should not resist the return of the victims and assured them that the police would deal with the criminals among them. Eventually, the victims from Nagpada camp did return to Bhagatsinghnagar. Many had gone to the relief camp across the railway line in the Sion Hospital area that was run by the local Jain society citizen's group. This gesture of the Jains was much appreciated by the people of Dharavi and written about in the press.

The Hindus were at pains to tell us that they were not anti-Muslim per se but were only against Sharafat and his exploitation. The Muslims at the meeting confirmed the story, as did others we spoke to later. There were several versions of who started the riot first in their area. During the riots the madrasa was also demolished. In the debris, we found a board that had 'Tanzeem Allah-O-Akbar' written in English.

Several NGOs came to see me about the reconstruction of houses that were destroyed. I wrote a letter to the ward officer of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation, suggesting that the status of the land on which the madrasa had stood prior to the riots be clarified. I sent copies of the letter to Pande, the commissioner of the municipal corporation and the rehabilitation secretary, whom I was meeting frequently at the time. I received no reply from the officials. But soon afterwards the corporation rebuilt the madrasa and a new toilet block next to it. But they held no discussions with the residents or considered

the desirability of rebuilding the madrasa sandwiched between two toilet blocks. Such is the respect given by the politicians and the government machinery towards education and learning.

Many months after the riots, the Mumbai Municipal Corporation launched a massive construction programme to build public toilets in the slums of Mumbai. It will be a matter of satisfaction if my letter drew the attention of the authorities to how the lack of basic amenities in the slums had built tensions over a long period in certain areas prior to the riots. These acted as flashpoints for the riots after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The issue of public toilets was to feature in at least three areas of Dharavi, which were the scenes of intense rioting. Civic and developmental issues had added another dimension to the communal conflagration.

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One evening, Raji Ramgopal telephoned me to inquire about the situation in Dharavi. I described to her how people had begun to leave Indiranagar for their villages in Tamil Nadu. I said, 'For whatever reason, if the police are not able to control the area and prevent localized riots, they should not hesitate to seek help of the army.' Apparently, the next morning, Raji used my quote about seeking help from the army on the front page of the *Indian Express*. Pande was very annoyed and said I was creating trouble for him.

On the afternoon of 12 January, Pande handed over charge of the Dharavi Police Station and the area under it to Captain Das, who was heading Column No. 3 of the Indian Army. With this handover, Captain Das moved into Dharavi. People were told that the army unit was going to conduct house searches. Under the command of Captain Das, the army and the police

conducted the combing operations in areas including Mahatma Gandhi Nagar, Shivneri Rahivasi Sangh, Jyoti Chawl, Tata Power, Socialnagar and Transit Camp. A large number of people were arrested during these operations. But, after three or four days, Captain Das left Dharavi with his column. The departure of the army unit was as sudden as its arrival in Dharavi. A senior police officer told me that he had asked Captain Das to leave as the house searches were causing too much tension and several people had complained to him. But I wondered if that was the real reason.

There seemed to be some confusion at the Dharavi Police Station about who was really in charge during those early days of January. Although Pande was given charge of Dharavi, P.D. Jadhav was also on duty there. The joint commissioner of police, Ambedkar, too was camping in Dharavi around 6 January. Different officers gave conflicting orders or advice to those who went to the police station. While this went on for a few days, the incidents of stabbing and arson went on in different parts of the colony. These incidents took place in all major cross points of Dharavi one at a time and not all together. This made the police run from place to place and they were fully stretched. However, the situation did not reach the level of the December riots. By and large, the police were able to contain the trouble, though they were not able to prevent small incidents.

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As the curfew was lifted, several groups started to do relief work. Towards the end of December, the relief activity gathered speed.

The Muslim community in Mahim set up relief camps in Yatimkhana, Memon Hall, Maqdoomia School and RC Mahim School. Relief for the 5000-odd victims in these camps came not just from Mahim but from other parts of Mumbai. These camps that were set up in December were operational for three or four months. In January, more victims from other areas came there. The stories of the victims made a deep impact on the care givers in those relief camps.

The three main relief centres in Dharavi were run by the RES, SPARKE and the Markazi Relief Committee. The first two groups had volunteers from all communities working with them, who distributed relief to all those affected.

The Markazi committee did not have any non-Muslims working with them and tended to receive relief mostly from Muslim organizations. Bakul Khote, representing Citizens for Peace, interacted with the Markazi committee. His organization helped to build some houses for the Markazi committee. Local people were unhappy with the way the Markazi committee worked and this divided the Muslim community living around Bade Masjid. It grew into a major dispute some years later.

Initially all relief centres in Dharavi distributed food rations and clothes. As the government machinery got into action, these groups helped in distributing government compensation in cash and kind. I was in touch with all these centres and would inform them of small pockets of riot victims who had received no help. For a while, I worked with some college volunteers. From the beginning I decided not to get involved in the distribution of relief but to direct my efforts towards helping ease the trauma. I knew from personal experience how important it is to help the riot victims to stand on their feet. Often all that victims need are sympathetic and compassionate listeners to unburden themselves and help in small and practical ways. I felt I could play that role.

Teams of student volunteers from the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences worked under the guidance of their faculty members in the field, conducting surveys and helping with relief work. Both the institutions undertook a systematic survey of all the areas affected by the riots. This included number of houses that were damaged, number of family members affected and so on. It was useful, authentic information and contributed greatly to the relief work.

Once the curfew was lifted, many groups, organizations and individuals came forward with relief or simply to help. This was the finest hour for our city. At a time when the government machinery seemed to flounder, citizens stepped forward and upheld the banner of humanism. We saw it as a sign that the conscience of our countrymen was alive. Little did we know then that more was to follow.

The worst rioting in Mumbai took place from 7 to 10 December 1992 and 4 to 15 January 1993. Initially all efforts were concentrated on immediate relief. Long-term rehabilitation was discussed only when the extent of destruction in slum colonies across the city became clear. The government invited NGO representatives to participate in coordinating these efforts. Twice I went for these meetings at the chief minister's house. The government had announced compensation to the families of those killed during the riots, a large number of them in police firing. Many police officers were indignant that rioters were being rewarded. The police force came under tremendous criticism for their use of excessive force and indiscriminate firing and the high casualties it caused. This debate over the way police handled the two rounds of riots began in December and continued for months.

Several NGOs and citizens' groups did remarkable work. During the first week of January, hearing about a lot of ailing

and injured people in the curfew-bound bylanes of Dharavi, R.K. Anand, a well-known paediatrician, came to Dharavi to treat patients at Indiranagar and Muslimnagar. He sat in the clinic of Dr G.H. Khan, who was unable to come from Sewri during the curfew, and attended to patients. We were concerned about using the clinic without the owner's permission but were assured that the doctor would not mind. Dr Khan has since worked closely with me. P.D. Jadhav requested Dr Anand to examine some of the policemen too. Most of them were suffering from cold and exhaustion. One SRP jawan who was brought in was in a state of shock, but Gharge insisted he had met with an accident. We later found out from the man that he had had a panic attack when he found himself in front of a rampaging mob. Dr Anand said he was having a nervous breakdown and suggested that he be sent home.

I too started carrying a supply of basic medicines such as aspirin, antiseptics, medicated plasters and cough mixture in my sling bag. I distributed these to the people I came across during my rounds and to the policemen who needed them.

Mumbai had in fact set an example of close teamwork between NGOs and the government in distribution of relief and rehabilitation work. Each week, all the concerned government officials, headed by the relief and rehabilitation secretary of the Maharashtra government, met the representatives of the NGOs. Farida Lambey, vice-principal of Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, coordinated the work from the citizens' side. Different areas were allotted to the NGOs to avoid duplication of work. The government willingly sought the help of NGOs to distribute relief material as well as compensation. At the meetings each week, the progress was reported and the difficulties faced were discussed. This helped to bring a certain order to the relief work. In spite of some complaints, by and

large the work done was satisfactory.

What was not satisfactory was the economic rehabilitation of the victims. The government secretary in charge of these efforts tried his best to help, but it needed major policy decisions and interventions. The government had issued instructions to the banks to give soft loans to the traders and businessmen to restart their businesses. But in most cases banks did not clear the applications, as the victims were not able to fulfil all requirements. As most small businesses and shops were not insured, they did not get any compensation either. We never succeeded in translating the government promises into reality. As a nation we are not good at seeing the rehabilitation process through to completion. The victims are left to fend for themselves.

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In early January many Muslims from Tirunelveli district left Indiranagar. News of the trainloads of riot victims fleeing to Tamil Nadu was widely covered in the media there. In several parts of Tamil Nadu, posters were put up saying that the Shiv Sena had attacked Tamils. It soon got clarified that those who were fleeing from Mumbai to Tamil Nadu were Tamil Muslims who had been attacked by Tamil Hindus. D.K. Oza, former chief secretary of Tamil Nadu, was the vice-chancellor of the Gandhigram Rural Institute in Dindigul district. Concerned about the Tamil riot victims, he came to Mumbai and visited Dharavi to see first-hand what had happened. On his return, he called a meeting of the heads of departments of his institute. He suggested that a team go to Tirunelveli to meet the riot victims and see what could be done for them. He felt people needed to go back to the place from where they had come. It

was decided that this project could be undertaken by the university's Shanti Sena unit.

Professor Raghupathy and Dr Mallammal and some others went to Tirunelveli. They went to the office of the collector, Velu, who agreed to help. The Mumbai riot victims were traced to a village called Pattammadai. The district administration organized a meeting in the village with the riot victims to discuss the problem. Representatives of the departments of revenue, social welfare and police, the university group and community leaders attended the meeting. The vice-chancellor of the local Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Dr Vasanthi Devi, a well-known social worker, also helped in these efforts.

At the meetings many issues were discussed. Several victims worked in the Railways or other government departments in Mumbai. They wanted a permanent transfer to Madras. Others asked for some income-generating projects in their village. Oza discouraged them from insisting on this, saying this was not the Gandhian way. However the district administration agreed to provide immediate relief in way of monetary assistance and food rations. Temporary ration cards were issued to the riot victims in the village. It was about mid-January 1993 and Mumbai was still burning. The village-level meetings continued. The victims were scared to return. They did not want to take their families back, as they did not wish their women and children to go through the riot experience again.

Finally the Gandhigram University team and the collector succeeded in persuading them to return. But there were practical problems. The riot victims wanted compensation for the loss of property in Mumbai. Those working in the Railways and in private firms wanted their leave of absence to be officially sanctioned, as they were worried they might lose their jobs. It

was decided that five community representatives would first go to Mumbai to prepare the ground. But they were too scared to go alone. Oza then discussed the matter with the chief secretary of the Tamil Nadu government. It was decided that Professor Raghupathy, Sundaresan, a social worker, and five community representatives would go to Mumbai, along with Velu and Chandrakant Kamble, an officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), who represented the state government. The Tamil Nadu government paid the expenses for their trip.

This team spent nearly twelve days in Dharavi. Velu was in touch with the Maharashtra government regarding the resettlement of the riot victims. The victims wanted security in Dharavi, as well as compensation. They also wanted some representation made on their behalf by the Maharashtra government to the Railways and other employers about the long absence from work without sanction of leave. On arrival, the team met the local police officers and the additional home secretary. They also had a meeting in Dharavi with the members of the Adi Dravida Mahasangha. Velu easily established rapport with the people of Dharavi. It was crucial that they accepted the return of the people of Pattammadai among them. The rehabilitation secretary of Maharashtra arranged for a special survey of their damaged homes to determine who should get compensation. Four to five hundred new ration cards were speedily arranged for them.

After some days the five representatives from Pattammadai telephoned people back home saying that the atmosphere had improved and they could now return with the women and children. People returned from their village in small batches. Pande specially gave statements for publication in various Tamil and English newspapers of south India. Appealing to those who

had fled from Dharavi to return, he guaranteed their safety and security. Towards the end of April 1993 most of these people had returned.

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For a long time after my interaction with the Tamilians in Kamraj school on 11 and 12 January, I was angry with myself for being afraid of their reaction. Why had I become so preoccupied by what a handful of people felt? Why had it become so important to prove they were wrong? They challenged something deep within me that was to always fill me with unease. What was that? Did I actually believe their arguments on Ayodhya?

One cannot alter certain facts of history. Yes, without doubt Muslim invaders and kings have desecrated temples in India. And Hindus have desecrated Buddhist monasteries. But there are also numerous examples of Muslim rulers either having built temples or given land for building temples. One cannot be selective about remembering history. You cannot undo history by seeking to change a wrong committed in the past by committing another in the present age. When one looks at areas of conflict in the world, at Ireland, the Middle-East, Bosnia or Kosovo, one realizes that wrongs of history are not easily forgotten. The collective memory is a strong force whose influence extends from one generation to the next. The bitter past is revived and manipulated for political purposes or when a community feels threatened—politically, economically or socially.

It is my belief that Hindus can show their greatness by demonstrating that we are tolerant of differing ideas. Instead, the Hindu right is competing with those they consider villains of history and whom they accuse of being religiously intolerant and barbaric. In repeating similar wrongs supposedly to correct

the wrongs of history, in my opinion, the Hindu fundamentalists have lowered the image of India and Hinduism. Even people as conservative as my maternal and paternal grandmothers, both of whom were orthodox Hindus, would never have sanctioned disrespect or desecration of others' places of worship.

Why do some of us have an aversion to the right-wing Hindu groups? Would distancing from them in this manner be effective? Are some of us trying to bury our identity as Hindus, out of shame and disgust at what our brethren did in Ayodhya? Sometimes, I have tried hard to prove I was even-handed in my attitude and treatment to all, when perhaps there was no need to have done so. Would this not amount to a form of reverse appeasement? That I was often defensive with the Hindus because they thought I was siding with the Muslims made me both angry and uneasy.

I was out on the streets during the riots because I could not stand by and watch innocents get hurt. As also because I felt what happened in Ayodhya was wrong. So was I in part working in riot-affected areas to assuage my sense of guilt? As an escape from having to confront the Hindus for their wrongdoing? It was also easier to reach out to the victims on both sides rather than to a wrongdoer who equally needed help to understand the consequences of the Babri demolition to our society. How could I escape being part of the larger Hindu society by simply distancing myself from self-righteous Hindus? Was it not a denial on my part? A good and kind act cannot replace the burden of wrongs. But can it be treated as a penance? Though the majority of Hindus are averse to violence, there are some who want to 'teach the other side of lesson'. But like my sister-in-law, when asked after the Mumbai riots, 'What kind of lesson?' do not have an answer. She categorically said she did not wish innocents to die, be maimed or lose their livelihoods.

Polarization takes place when we treat some people as untouchables. Even while taking a stand against what we disagree with, it is important to engage people in a dialogue in a civilized society. Polarization breeds anger, hate and revenge, and eventually violence. In times of crisis it is important for some people to work towards tempering emotions. This too needs a certain discipline, grace and patience rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

There was an overriding concern about the outbreak of instigated violence during the second round of riots in January. I had seen how vicious it could be. Like others, I too felt that violence should not start all over again, especially as the peace was holding for some days in Dharavi. There were so many conflicting emotions and no time for reflection to sort things out. While the expectations of people of Dharavi became a burden, it also gave me a false sense of importance, as they began to look at me as if I were indispensable and could help at every juncture.

I have often been asked, 'Were you not afraid? Did you not fear an attack by the Shiv Sena or the strangers amid whom you stayed?' My real encounters with the Shiv Sena cadres took place during the January riots. No, I did not fear Shiv Sena then nor do so today. I do not think one should give in to a bully.

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The phase at the end of the riots was a very difficult one. In Dharavi most people needed help with the construction of their homes and business premises. The majority of Dharavi's population lives on daily earnings. For almost seven weeks, all work had come to a standstill in Dharavi, as in many other parts of the city. Children were not going to school. Normalcy meant restoring a sense of security and confidence in people so

that they could begin to go about their normal life. After the meeting at which the agreement regarding the street namaz and the maha artis was announced, Triza Killekar suggested that I take the initiative to bring about mandavali, or compromise, between the Hindus and the Muslims. I told her perhaps I was not the right person and suggested that she directly meet the members of the Muslim community and ask if they were ready to talk. She asked for my help and I agreed. As Mujib Khan, or Munna, of Dharavi Main Road was standing nearby, I took Triza to him. She told him, 'Should we not have mandavali between Hindus and Muslims? People have suffered a lot and need to get back to work and earn their living if they are not to starve.' Munna replied, 'I cannot take a decision on my own. I need to talk to my elders. But I promise to let you know by tomorrow.'

Munna, Eklakh and Pyarebhai had worked very hard during the riots and kept vigil on the road outside Bade Masjid to ensure nobody from their area created trouble. Munna talked to the elders of the community and they asked for my view. I backed Triza's request and felt it was made at an opportune moment. They asked me if I would come along for the meeting with them. I had no hesitation in accepting this request. It took more than twenty-four hours to work out the details of the meeting: the day, the time, the venue, the number of areas from which to invite people, etc. The meeting was to be held on 20 January at Dharavi Koli Jamaat Hall. It was a good venue and a strategic place from where to send peace signals all over Dharavi. It was decided to invite not just people from areas close to Dharavi Main Road but also those living on the Cross Road for the meeting. People had been murdered in these areas, making the Muslims and Tamilians suspicious of each other. It was a welcome sign that the peace initiative was involving larger

areas and a larger number of communities.

Although Muslims from the Bade Masjid–Chamda Bazar area agreed to come, they were quite apprehensive. Farooq Shaikh and I arrived about half an hour before the meeting and joined those who had gathered near the Bade Masjid. We could see a large number had gathered but it was not really certain as to who would come for the meeting. At the fixed time, Farooq Shaikh and I, along with Dr Azar Qureshi, Pyarebhai, Parvanaji, Mujib Khan, Baqqasaheb, Enaith Hussain and others, started walking towards Dharavi Koliwada. People standing on both sides of the road watched as the group walked past in silence. The walk from Bade Masjid to Koli Jamaat Hall would have taken us less than ten minutes, but it seemed an eternity.

I wondered what emotions these people must be experiencing as they took each step towards Koliwada. It was this route that the cycle rally led by the Shiv Sena leaders had taken. Just a fortnight earlier a women's demonstration led by Triza Killekar from Koliwada had almost sparked off a full-scale conflict between the two communities on this road. Some of these people believed that a large amount of property looted during the riots was stored in the Koliwada homes. But the Muslims of the area had taken a deliberate and pragmatic step to walk the same road for peace. Although hazardous, as there was not much to build on except risk trusting the olive branch extended towards them, the path was worth treading on. It was on such courageous steps and risks that peace was restored in Dharavi.

It was the first time that the members of the Muslim community were walking up that road since the riots began in December. We had no idea how many were walking behind us. I did not expect more than ten people but I was in for a surprise. I was among the first to enter the meeting hall. As I sat down at the far end of the hall, I could not take my eyes off the door as

one after the other Muslims kept pouring through the door. Over 150 people had come of their own initiative. The Tamils from Palwadi, Thekda and Ganesh Mandir came, as did others from Dhorwada and Kalyanwadi. A large number of Maharashtrians had come too. Inspector Ahire and a few other policemen sat in a corner as observers. We had not informed the police about the meeting. Obviously, they had got wind of it. But they need not have worried. No one was in any mood for confrontation, verbal or physical. People were going out of their way to convey their desire for peace.

The meeting began with a welcome by Francis Patil, after which Ramkrishna Keni spoke about how everyone in Dharavi had suffered during the past seven weeks irrespective of their community or economic background. They had learnt that violence did not pay, as it brought along with it not just physical suffering but also economic suffering. As people of Dharavi were daily wagers, it was important to create an atmosphere in which economic activity could be restarted. Dr Qureshi in turn spoke on behalf of the Muslims and assured that they would extend all their support towards creating the right atmosphere where people felt confident to walk from Koliwada down the road to Mahim station in front of the Bade Masjid and those from the Bade Masjid area felt safe enough to walk through Koliwada to go either to Sion station or to Bandra East.

Several emotional and impromptu speeches were made. People spoke of how they had grown up together and how the short, ugly spell of riots could not really wipe out those childhood bonds. It was time to remember those bonds which connected the old communities of Dharavi. I was just content to listen. Did these people really mean what they were saying? Was it so easy to forget all that had happened? Was there any

hidden agenda? After all, no one had categorically expressed regret over the killings and destruction of property. That speaker after speaker acknowledged the pain and suffering of all the people in the area conveyed the sense of responsibility each one attached to publicly state he would not let this happen again in Dharavi. Somehow I was convinced by what they said, enough to put aside my doubts and trust this process of peacemaking. It sent a strong signal to the rest of Dharavi that peace was made between the major communities that had been in conflict with each other until recently. All those present knew we were fully supportive of them.

The success of the meeting encouraged us to try it in another area of Dharavi. The next venue chosen was Kamraj High School. We had carefully invited people from Muslimnagar, Kumbharwada, Transit Camp, Socialnagar, Saibabanagar and other adjoining areas. Arvind Krishnaswami had done a lot of legwork to get the right Tamilians for the meeting on 22 January.

As people started to arrive we realized we had again underestimated the number of people willing to take steps for peace. The classroom we had chosen for the meeting was overflowing, but it was too late to do anything. We got a message from the police station asking us if we wanted to have police support, but we declined the offer. But Pande posted a police contingent outside the school in case of an emergency. I was chairing the meeting and explained that we had called them to see how we could maintain peace in the area so that people felt safe enough to return to their homes. A couple of days before the meeting, the newspapers had reported that the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid in Delhi had issued a fatwa asking all Muslims to boycott the Republic Day celebrations. Hardly had I finished when a belligerent voice demanded to know if the Muslims of Dharavi were going to follow the fatwa issued by the Shahi Imam.

As if on cue, another stood up and said it was unpatriotic to boycott Republic Day celebrations and, if Muslims followed the fatwa, it was bound to create tension and conflict. I suggested that we give the Muslims present a chance to express their views on the fatwa and what they were going to do about it. The imam of the Nurul Huda Masjid in Socialnagar stood up and in a calm, collected tone told the audience that fatwas are issued only on religious matters. As Republic Day celebrations were secular, there was no question of the Muslims of Mumbai heeding the Shahi Imam's call. The Muslims of Dharavi had every intention of joining in the celebrations with others. 'Can we not plan together how to celebrate Republic Day?' the imam asked. His speech deflated the belligerency of the Hindus.

But they were not going to give in easily. They started raking up incident after incident where they alleged the Muslims had been the aggressors. Some from the Transit Camp accused that missiles were thrown from inside the Madina Masjid. While refuting the charge, Muslims pointed out that the namazis had been attacked with acid bombs some weeks ago. Accusations and counter-accusations flew freely across the room and people were getting worked up. Arvind slowly found his way out of the room and signalled to me if he should get the police. He was greatly worried about the tone of the discussion.

But I felt that after weeks of tension, violence and living under curfew, this letting off of steam was a necessary process. Both sides needed to know what each thought of the other. We could not talk about Hindu–Muslim brotherhood, pretending nothing had happened between 6 December and 17 January in Dharavi, Mumbai and the rest of the country. After a while, I brought the discussion back to the Republic Day celebrations, inviting ideas from the audience. Someone came up with the idea of distributing a pamphlet signed by a few people who

had attended the meeting, announcing Republic Day celebrations. This was the best way to inform the public that the Muslims and the Hindus were to jointly hold celebrations in Dharavi, he said. Others said this should also be printed in Tamil and Urdu newspapers, while still others said it should be broadcast on the cable TV. We formed a representative group that took the responsibility for planning the details. After the meeting the group stayed behind to plan the event.

Just as we were about to finish for the day, the imam of the Madina Masjid asked me if he could hold namaz that Friday in his mosque, which had been locked for several weeks after acid bulbs were thrown at the namazis during Friday prayers. I asked the imam to talk to the whole group about his difficulty. Someone suggested that we inform the police. I said, 'What good is that going to do? We have just had a peace meeting and have decided to take responsibility to maintain peace in our areas. We must do so without police help if we mean business. Surely it is possible to help the imam so that he is not afraid of opening the mosque.'

This obviously worked, for several people asked the imam when he wanted to go to the mosque and what he expected them to do. They offered to stand outside the mosque during the namaz. The imam told them that he would like to go a couple of hours before the namaz time to clean and wash the mosque. People assured him that they would be there when he opened the lock. As promised, the group kept vigil during the Friday namaz. This boosted the confidence of the imam. In December, it was in his mosque that the peace committee had done the repair of the roof as a gesture of peace and harmony.

I felt all these processes in which both communities helped each other in a practical way were important, as they helped remove the fear and distrust that had gripped the hearts during

and following the riots. Providing opportunities for close contact and constructive action would accelerate the process. No amount of speech making could achieve this. I decided to walk through whichever door seemed to open. Arvind felt sometimes I was taking risks. But could we achieve anything without taking risks? If we did not succeed, at least we would have the satisfaction that we had tried.

About the same time as the meeting at Kamraj school, Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar went to Behrampada to met the leaders there. Scores of angry young men also joined the meeting. They discussed the boycott call given by the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid in Delhi. Javed Akhtar explained that the boycott would amount to abdicating one's responsibility as a citizen. Within three to four hours, over 3000 signatures were collected in Behrampada against the boycott call.

In the following days, the people of Dharavi were busy preparing for the celebrations. But our spirits were to be jolted in Dharavi by an unfortunate incident. On the night of 24 January and early hours of 25 January, there was trouble outside the Madina Masjid. Hindu and Muslim miscreants threw stones at each other and soon bottles too were thrown as more and more people joined the melee. The police station was informed and the police lobbed tear gas shells to disperse the mob. This added to the panic, as some thought bombs were exploding. At one stage, some of the SRP jawans who were chasing the miscreants into a narrow lane opened fire at them.

Pande rushed to Dharavi when he heard that the police had resorted to firing. Three people were injured in the police firing and sent to hospital.

I went to the area the next morning. In one corner of Socialnagar, behind the public toilets not very far from the road, a group of women had gathered. They insisted that I see

for myself how the SRP men who came looking for the rioters had ransacked their homes. One woman showed me a cupboard from which clothes were half pulled out. She accused an SRP officer of stealing some cash and her gold chain. Her shrill voice had gathered a little crowd. One by one, the women started telling me of the high-handedness of the police the previous night. The police had rounded up a large number of people.

I went to see the people who had been injured. They told me they were huddled behind the shut door of their house. The bullet had pierced through the door and passed through the shoulder of the man. It then hit the TV screen, ricocheted and injured the wife. The flying glass from the shattered TV set injured their little daughter. Both the husband and the wife lost the use of one of their hands. We later succeeded in getting them compensation for permanent disability.

A sizeable number seemed genuinely scared after what happened and were whispering about leaving Dharavi. I was alarmed by this and decided to meet Pande. I told him and Sukhtankar what I had heard from the women about the behaviour of some of the SRP men. I also expressed concern over the talk of some people wanting to leave Dharavi. The memory of the mass exodus from Dharavi in the first week of January was still fresh in my mind. The officers seemed very tired and were taken aback at the fresh trouble before them. I requested Pande to meet the people and hear what they had to say. At any cost, we had to prevent anyone from leaving. He asked Sukhtankar to meet the people. I insisted that the Pande also come along. Finally they agreed to come and meet a small group.

I went ahead and gathered a small group of women and a few male elders from the Muslim community. But when the police officers arrived, the crowd suddenly swelled. A few chairs were brought for the officers to sit. The meeting took place on

the road near Laxmibaug. Several people complained about the rough treatment meted out to them by the SRP. Some announced their desire to pack up and leave. The woman who had taken me to her home told the officers that one SRP officer had tried to molest her. She had not mentioned this to me earlier. Several women then added their bit and described the filthy language that was used by the SRP.

Finally Pande interrupted and spoke from his heart. He expressed his regret at the incident of firing but explained that there was mischief played by the young men of both the communities. He told them how he had stayed in Dharavi for several weeks night after night to be close at hand as most riot incidents broke out during the night. It was the first night in weeks that he had gone home and the trouble had taken place. He had done his best to provide protection. He admitted that the police had made a mistake the previous night, but was this one mistake going to wipe out all the good work the police had done during the previous weeks? He requested them to trust him and not panic and leave.

He was speaking without being defensive. It was this quality of Pande's of being very straightforward that had earned him a special place in the hearts of Dharavi's people. Several responded to his appeal in a positive manner. The imam of the Nurul Huda Masjid spoke for the people and assured Pande that they had full faith in him and no one would leave the area. Pande announced that he would ask Sukhtankar to hold an inquiry into the alleged misbehaviour of the SRP men. He asked me to bring the woman to the police station. Sukhtankar took down her statement.

That night we held a peace meeting in the area and brought people from all over Dharavi. Everyone was determined that the Republic Day celebrations should pass off peacefully. The

following day, Dharavi donned a festive look. We lost count of the number of flag-hoisting ceremonies held there that day. Practically every small lane had its own tricolour flying. As we walked through Dharavi, we could not but feel proud of the way people had risen to the occasion and were showing solidarity in putting the past behind them. That Dharavi had passed a major crisis just twenty-four hours earlier made the event even more special and remarkable.

The woman who had accused the SRP men of trying to molest her was creating waves. Journalists flocked down to interview her and she kept embellishing her story. Finally, some of her neighbours and I confronted her and demanded to know why she was telling such lies to the newspapers. She had said the police had stolen her refrigerator. I told the woman I could not vouch for her statement to the police, since she had turned out to be unreliable.

Then her neighbours began talking about her. They told me she was involved in the flesh trade and her house was used as a transit place for girls who were brought from the villages to be sold in the city. I asked them why they had allowed this woman to get away with her allegations against the SRP in front of Pande. They said they were embarrassed by her and did not want to expose her then. I felt deeply concerned for the way I was fooled by the woman.

Once again I learnt how easily one can get misled when the atmosphere is emotionally charged and how important it is to not draw hasty conclusions. I apologized to Pande for backing a thoroughly unreliable person. As social activists, while helping the people, it was important to admit when we made mistakes. Later we saw to it that the woman was not allowed to continue her illegal activities from that area. After a while, she moved away from there.

VI

By the beginning of March 1993, Maharashtra had a new Governor and a new chief minister and Mumbai had a new police commissioner. On 8 March, Governor Dr P.C. Alexander called a meeting of the newly reconstituted 'Governor's peace committee. Present at the meeting were the chief minister, Sharad Pawar, the director general of police, S. Ramamurthy, the commissioner of police for Mumbai, A.S. Samra, J.R.D. Tata, Dr Usha Mehta, Dilip Kumar, Shabana Azmi, Bakul Patel, F.T. Khorakiwala, Dr Vijaya Patil, Kekoo Gandhy, Alyque Padamsee and Rahul Dev. At the meeting, Dilip Kumar expressed the need for economic rehabilitation of the riot victims. J.R.D. Tata suggested establishing community centres in the slum colonies and poorer localities to overcome the hate in people. Khorakiwala spoke of the need to set up mohalla committees in Mumbai, on the pattern of Bhiwandi town. He informed the meeting that a team had prepared such a plan for Mumbai. Some thought the entire relief work needed to come to a halt, as there was no end to it. I was the last speaker from the citizens' side. I spoke of the enormous task still ahead of us and pleaded that relief work should not be stopped as psychological and economic rehabilitation was yet to be done. There was a large number of angry young men around the city who had not verbalized their anger. We needed to listen to them or this would lead to future trouble. We needed to do a study of riot-affected areas to discover if there were issues prior to the riots that had contributed to the tension. I was convinced if local issues were not addressed, they were bound to explode again. The next time the provocation could be different. The chief minister expressed his commitment to the rehabilitation of the riot victims. He had no objection to the setting up of

mohalla committees and thought it was a good idea to make a study of the riot-affected areas. That was the first and last meeting of the peace committee. This was unfortunate, as the committee could have played an important role in the new crisis that was to overtake our city in a matter of days. This challenge was taken up by others later.

On 12 March, the city was rocked by serial blasts. Within a span of two hours, thirteen powerful blasts across the city had ripped apart the Bombay Stock Exchange, the Air-India building, Sea Rock hotel, Plaza Cinema, a double-decker bus and several residential buildings. That morning I was in Dharavi. I started for home when I heard of these blasts. It took me over four hours to get home, as I was stuck in the traffic. Finally I had to get out of the taxi and walk. I was stunned when I heard of the blast in Worli. As I walked home, I felt drained of all energy.

As bits of news kept coming in, it became clear that the blasts had targeted financial and economic nerve centres of the city. I seemed to be frozen into inaction. I felt numb and just did not want to go out to help, even in Worli. I heard that people had come forward to help in any way they could—putting the injured into ambulances, rushing them to hospital and donating blood. After 11 p.m. my telephone rang.

It was Dilip Kumar on the line. He wanted to know what news I had regarding the blasts. As I answered some of his questions, we both seemed to know what the truth was but did not want to express it. Suddenly I found myself saying, '*Ab bahar jakar madad karne ki himmat nahi hai.*' He sounded alarmed and replied, 'If you say this, what will happen to the rest of us?' I don't know how long Dilip Kumar spoke, pleading with me not to give up courage. I promised not to give up.

Dilip Kumar had worked through the night to help organize volunteers to donate blood needed urgently in the hospitals for

the hundreds of injured people. The next morning, Kumar Prashant and I decided to visit the blast sites in Worli, Shivaji Park and Mahim. In Worli, outside the Passport Office, a BEST bus had been blown to pieces. Other buses and vehicles were also blown up, showering the debris and mutilated human bodies on the houses in the Nehru Nagar slum nearby. As a result 350 houses out of 750 were damaged. I spoke to the women there. They told us how the tiled roofs of their houses had caved in, bringing down the ceiling fan along with the roof. Through the gaps in the roof, bits and pieces of the blast victims had fallen in. Apart from the slum, the blast in Worli had severely damaged several residential buildings and killed several people working in the roadside shops.

On the night of the blasts, angry residents did not allow Sharad Dighe, a Congress MP, and L.K. Advani, leader of the BJP, to enter Nehru Nagar slum. Kumar Prashant and I were confronted by a hefty young man who demanded to know who we were and where we had been the previous day when help was needed. After he cooled down a little, he took us around the slum and showed us the devastation. The blast had snapped the water and electricity supply. They wanted meals for several hundred people, before the individual households could organize themselves.

At Shivaji Park, a residential building next to Sena Bhavan, the Shiv Sena headquarters, was damaged by a blast at the petrol pump. The building was far too unsafe and damaged for anyone to live in it, but the residents were denied permission to take shelter in the Sena Bhavan. This angered and hurt them, as they needed urgent alternative accommodation.

That afternoon, I returned home and called Sunil Dutt to tell him the needs of the blast victims in Worli and Shivaji Park. In the evening, he met the chief minister and passed on the

information. The chief minister ensured the water and power supply was restored by that night. Sunil Dutt contacted Dilip Kumar, who promised to do something about the meals and food grain for the victims. Vipula Kadri, chairperson of Pride India, along with others from Worli and Koliwada, took meals for the Nehru Nagar victims. I personally collected the grain and sugar for the Worli and Shivaji Park victims from Sunil Dutt's house. This was distributed to them.

After some negotiations, the Shivaji Park victims were given alternative accommodation in Parel. I met them several times in their new homes. We met a schoolteacher who had suffered a miscarriage as a result of the blast. We arranged for her medical treatment. She for one was convinced of the need to pass on to young people the message of communal harmony. Other people too came forward to help. I worked with Father Lourdino and his team from Pragati Kendra for many months at Nehru Nagar. We undertook surveys, distributed material for rebuilding houses and found donors for the construction work. Gandhi Smarak Nidhi gave money for the reconstruction of one row of houses facing the main road.

There was one general proposal put forward by the government: demolishing the buildings and the slums that were devastated by the blast and building new high-rise buildings in their place. I was present at a meeting chaired by Sharad Pawar in the Mantralaya when this proposal was discussed with the representatives of residents of Worli slums and high-rise buildings of Worli and Shivaji Park. Secretaries of various government departments and Manohar Joshi were also present. Both Worli and Shivaji Park were part of Joshi's constituency and he gave his consent. But the plan did not materialize, as the terms offered were not satisfactory to those who lived in high-rise buildings. The delay in the final decision caused much bitterness, as the

blast victims had to face immense hardship and uncertainty. Months later, the Maharashtra Housing and Development Authority (MHADA) repaired the buildings and the slum dwellers received help in both cash and kind from the government to build their semi-pukka houses.

Two victims of Nehru Nagar are etched deeply in my heart. Prashant, a boy of eight years, was at home with his mother, Baby Gondhali. Following the blast, the debris began to fall through their roof and Prashant crawled under the bed for safety. No one realized that he was injured. It was some time before this was discovered and he was sent to hospital. But by then he had lost a lot of blood and died in the hospital. Baby Gondhali had lost her husband a few months earlier and so she was not told about her son's death. I went to see her the evening his body was to be brought home. She told me her injured son would be home soon. When the body of her son arrived, the woman started screaming. The people of the basti stood in silence while a mother grieved for her son and the body was taken for the cremation. It was unbearable to see her pain.

The second victim was registered as missing with police from the day of the blast. He worked as an assistant to a tailor in the basti. His father had searched for him in the hospitals and in the morgue. Several months later, someone spotted a photograph on the cover of *Gentleman* magazine of a severed head without a body, in the wreckage of the blast at Worli. The people of Nehru Nagar recognized the face as being that of the missing boy from their basti. They informed me. For months we followed the case with the Dadar Police Station officers and others. It turned out after an inquiry that the severed head was claimed by the family of another victim and they had been given the compensation. The mistake, if it was one, was not made deliberately. The police arranged a meeting with both

the families, which turned out to be highly emotional. With the help of Satish Tripathi, rehabilitation secretary of the Government of Maharashtra, we succeeded in getting the compensation sanctioned to the other family as well.

But I often think of Prashant and others like him. What was their fault? Why were their lives snuffed out untimely? Would those who planned the blasts answer if their fight was against little Prashant or those innocent bus passengers who were blown to pieces? When powerful enemies fight or want revenge, most often it is the poor and the innocents who suffer for no fault of theirs. For those of us who had worked tirelessly addressing the problems faced by the victims of the two rounds of riots and the serial blasts, one thing was clear: our city was badly fractured and needed a long-term recovery plan if terrorism was to be kept at bay.

Chapter Four

Mohalla Committees: Experiment in Community Policing

F.T. Khorakiwala became the sheriff of Mumbai towards the end of December 1992. The sheriff's office was kept busy answering distress calls and providing all kinds of help to the terrorized people of Mumbai. The office also became a rallying point for citizens from different walks of life to come together. Khorakiwala and a team went to Bhiwandi, a small town not far from Mumbai, to study why that city with its background of communal riots had remained peaceful and not gone up in flames while Mumbai burned. Bhiwandi had witnessed major riots in 1960, 1965, 1970 and 1988. The team also studied an experiment of mohalla committees that was implemented for some years in Bhiwandi. The experiment was started by the deputy superintendent of police, Suresh Khopade, during his tenure in that town to curb communal tensions. He set up seventy mohalla committees, each having 100 people from Muslim and Hindu communities. They met once a month and before religious festivals. This ensured communication among members of the group and between the group and the police. The model worked well and had succeeded in keeping harmony and peace during the critical time following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Khorakiwala and the team were impressed by the Bhiwandi model and decided to draw up a similar plan for Mumbai.

The plan was placed before the Governor's peace committee meeting in the first week of March 1993. P.C. Alexander, Sharad Pawar and A.S. Samra were present at the meeting. The chief minister said he had no objection to starting mohalla committees in Mumbai. Khorakiwala, in consultation with the police commissioner, launched mohalla committees in four police stations of the city: Jogeshwari, Mahim, Ghatkopar and Colaba. The police wanted to see how the experiment worked in these four areas before starting it throughout the city. Within six months, before Khorakiwala's term was over, mohalla committees were started throughout the city.

Although the inspiration for Mumbai mohalla committees was drawn from the Bhiwandi model, there were notable differences. The Mumbai model was initiated by the citizens and not by the police. Mumbai mohalla committees were apolitical. Each police station mohalla committee was to have a citizen facilitator but, in practice, it fell on the police station staff to start the mohalla committees. These met with the same fate as the peace committees that were started after the December 1992 riots. In March 1994, Khorakiwala requested J.F. Ribeiro, former director-general of police in Punjab, who had recently returned as India's ambassador to Romania, to help get the mohalla committees off the ground.

Ribeiro had also served as the police commissioner of Mumbai for three years in the early 1980s. He enjoyed the respect, goodwill and confidence of the citizens of Mumbai. On his return from Romania, he wanted to do some social work. He had thought of getting back to the police lines in Worli, where he had started a project to help policemen with a drinking problem, with the help of Kalindi Mujumdar from Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work. But he discovered that the Shiv Sena had taken over and hijacked what he had

started there. He was trying to decide what he should do when Khorakiwala requested him to take on the work of mohalla committees.

As this was the first concrete suggestion that was put to him, he accepted it. Besides he wanted to do something for and with the police. Many people, including Khorakiwala, complained to him about the partisan behaviour of the Mumbai police during the riots of 1992–93. As the city police held Ribeiro in high regard, it was a good opportunity to do something about complaints against them, he thought. He could use his influence to change attitudes, if it was needed. Also, his equation with the Muslims was good. He said, 'The police force is used to obeying orders. Their mental make-up has not changed very much from my time in early 1980s to the '90s. What has changed is political interference. During my time when riots broke out, I had given orders to arrest all those who were inciting violence. These were obeyed. Even though there were prejudices against the Muslims at the lower rung of the police force, in crime detection the relations between the two were good. But after the riots and the blasts in 1992–93, these sources of information dried up.'

Ribeiro had no strategy in mind when he accepted Khorakiwala's request. His first action was to find out from the new police commissioner, Satish Sahney, whom he knew, how he could help the police. The day after Khorakiwala asked him to help with the mohalla committees, Kekoo Gandhy invited him to the MRA centre, where Ribeiro and I met for the first time. I asked him if he would help us with the problems of Dharavi. He agreed and also asked me if I would assist him with the mohalla committee work. Ribeiro and his wife knew of my work during the riots, while they were in Romania, through the newspapers. Ribeiro felt I could give some inputs

towards the process, as I had already started the work. I considered it a privilege to have been invited to assist a man like him.

Ribeiro later said, 'The confluence of forces by three individuals gave a good start. Basically I lent my name, which was important for the Muslims. They had confidence in me. Without the police commissioner's support, police commitment was not possible. Sushobha's inputs and grassroots contacts and the legwork she did were not possible for us to do. It took a lot of persuasion and patience to convince the Muslims who were alienated. We have been able to make some contribution through our work with the mohalla committees. The core of communal discord is the fundamentalists in both the communities. These elements are kept out of the mohalla committees. A city like Mumbai can't afford rioting for long periods of time. Life has to carry on. My expectation is, if there is another outburst, those we have touched will come out and stop it and say, "We don't agree with it."'

When Satish Sahney took over as the commissioner of police, Mumbai, on 16 November 1993, the city was still reeling under the impact of the 1992–93 riots and the serial bomb blasts. Relations between Hindus and Muslims were hostile. Much worse was the relationship between the police and the Muslims. The latter had lost all trust and faith in the police and were not prepared to communicate with the police. The first anniversary of the riots was approaching and Sahney's priority was to do everything possible to prevent a recurrence of the communal flare-up.

Recalling those days Sahney said, 'The rapprochement between the police and the Muslims would have not been possible without the involvement of someone with a secular image. Ribeiro's presence in Mumbai at that point and his desire

to bring about communal harmony was a godsend. He had earned the admiration of the citizens of Mumbai. Besides, he had an associate in Sushobha, who enjoyed the trust and confidence of the Muslim community. I could not have hoped for anything better and hence I responded to Ribeiro's initiative wholeheartedly.'

A few days after Ribeiro invited me to assist him with mohalla committee work, he took me for a meeting at the police commissioner's office. The others at the meeting were the joint commissioner for law and order and three additional commissioners. The discussion revolved around how we could make mohalla committees an effective instrument. I was asked for my views.

I had been at the launch of the Mahim Mohalla Committee, along with Khorakiwala, some months earlier. I had realized that the first step in the process of forming mohalla committees should have been restoring the trust and confidence of the Muslim community in the police force. We could not expect their meaningful participation without that confidence building first step. According to me, the failure of the first attempt in 1993 to start mohalla committees was on account of the inability to accomplish trust building as a first step.

In trying to follow the Bhiwandi pattern, some factors were perhaps overlooked. In Bhiwandi, the mohalla committees were set up several years after the riots there. People had therefore had time to recover. In Mumbai, the mohalla committees were being set up in the immediate aftermath of the riots. The serial blasts following the riots had also complicated the matters, as the investigations into the serial blasts conspiracy had further angered the Muslim community. The police were asked to form the committees at a time when they did not enjoy the confidence of the citizens of Mumbai. I said there was need for

the senior police leadership to listen to the grievances of the minority community.

One of the officers present remarked, 'The police are always ready to listen to the grievances of the Muslim community, provided they have an open mind.' But it was a two-way process, I told him. We could bring any number from the Muslim community with an open mind, but the police too needed to have an open mind to listen to them. We also evaluated the cause of the Mumbai riots. It was not just a 'communal' clash like many others that had taken place in the past elsewhere in the state. The provocation that triggered the Mumbai riots and its scale were much greater than those of all the earlier riots that had taken place in Maharashtra, and the serial bomb blasts added a new dimension to the violence. We talked of how the 1984 anti-Sikh riots had spurred the terrorist activity in Punjab and the direct link between the two. The Mumbai riots could be compared to that rather than to Bhiwandi.

We decided to arrange a meeting between some members of the Muslim community and the senior police officers. Ribeiro and I had a few smaller meetings with members from the Muslim community. We informed them that the new police commissioner was very keen to have interaction with their community. It needed lots of persuasion with some people. Several flatly refused to come for such a meeting, saying they did not trust the police. Others who had accepted the invitation did not show up. Some questioned my motive in helping to facilitate such a meeting. I was beginning to get mired in allegations. At no point had I underestimated the depth of feelings against the police that existed at the time, but I certainly did not anticipate such resistance to even consider participation in a closed-door meeting.

I was deeply convinced that drastic change in police behaviour, which the citizenry desired, was only possible through

a process of honest discussion between the citizens and the police. Citizens needed to ensure that the police did not get away with anti-people behaviour that hurt communal peace and harmony. I had become convinced of this over the years and after witnessing the aftermath of three major riots since 1984. Could we change things by sitting on the sidelines, criticizing the police for the way they had handled riots and their bias towards minorities? Did we not need to engage in a process of changing the police culture? If we could be part of initiating such a process, we would have to overcome many obstacles and not give up even before the process had started.

We decided that this informal interaction needed to take place in an environment where the people felt safe to come. For such interactions to become transformative dialogues, the venue and the atmosphere are very important. The meeting finally took place in June 1994 at the MRA centre on Worli Sea Face. We had promised not to divulge the proceedings of the meeting. About a dozen citizens—doctors, journalists, teachers, businessmen and human rights activists—were present. This included Asgar Ali Engineer, Teesta Setalvad, Javed Anand, K.M. Aarif, Zaibunissa Bakerywala, Dr Zahir Kazi, Dr A.R. Undre and Dr R.K. Anand.

It was a Sunday morning. Several policemen had checked the house as well as the surrounding areas of the building. We did not have any clue as to who would finally turn up. To his credit, Sahney neither asked for the list beforehand nor showed any hesitation about the venue of the meeting. He was coming in good faith. I was struck by this and decided to reciprocate this good faith and go all the way with the transformative dialogue, a process in which I strongly believed. I felt a little nervous when Sahney walked in with five senior officers of the city police. At that moment, I realized the importance the city

police were attaching to this first meeting. Would we be able to live up to their expectations?

Ribeiro's presence at the meeting was an important element. His three-year stint as the city police commissioner had given him a special place in the hearts of Mumbai's citizens. He was remembered for his tough but fair attitude. He chaired the meeting and said how sad he had felt as he followed the events of 1992–93 in Mumbai from Romania. He wanted to do something for the city he loved. He invited those present to speak frankly, as the commissioner had come to listen to them. After some hesitation, several people spoke of the police bias and misconduct during the riots.

They told Sahney of the human rights violations during the bomb blasts investigation. Several of them gave concrete examples of these. Although each speaker was restrained, the resentment, anger and hurt they felt were clearly evident on their faces. One of the officers, whom the public perceived as secular and was involved in the bomb blasts investigation, spoke of how he saw the issue of human rights differently from others in the room. But such was the atmosphere in that room that the officer too was given a patient hearing. It was clear that there was a gap between the perception of police officers (even those with unquestionable professional, secular credentials) and the liberal secularists from both the majority and the minority communities about the way the police had handled the 1992–93 riots and the bomb blasts investigation. However, the commissioner and other officers mostly listened that morning. They came in civilian clothes and did not adopt any defensive posture during the entire interaction.

Bakerywala lives in Mahim. She was the principal of Farooq Girls' High School in Jogeshwari. She spoke of what they had gone through as members of the minority community. First

there was the trauma of the riots. Next it was the investigation into the serial blasts conspiracy case. Initially this was conducted from the Mahim Police Station and the local community underwent a great deal of stress. She spoke of how their relatives and friends had stopped visiting or even contacting them over the telephone out of fear that they might be hauled up by the police. Those who lived in Mahim were looked at with deep suspicion as if each one was connected in some way with the bomb blasts conspiracy. This fear was at the heart of the problem. Were the police and the general public going to treat every Muslim as an anti-national and a criminal? The Muslim community was deeply pained by this, resented it and could not understand why the bomb blasts investigation had superseded the earlier unlawful and criminal act of the Babri Masjid demolition. Everyone in the room was deeply moved by Bakerywala's pain.

At one point, Sahney said how uncomfortable he was listening to their bitter words. He turned to Ribeiro and asked, 'Can we have the next meeting at Mahim?' Ribeiro looked inquiringly at me to ask if it would be possible. I nodded to convey my support. Ribeiro then announced that the next meeting would be held in Mahim.

Satish Sahney later said, 'The beginning was not easy. It was not possible to get any Muslim to a police station or to a government office for a dialogue. It was only when they were assured of Ribeiro's and Sushobha's presence that they agreed to meet me in a private residence. That meeting was the experience of a lifetime. In my thirty years of professional police work, I had never encountered such bitterness and hostility in members of one community against another community and utter disgust for the police force. I had never been subjected to such invective. It required considerable effort to absorb what

was said without reacting. The meeting lasted for over three hours with only one side speaking, yet they were not through. So we met again and again. It was only after the third meeting that the Muslims, both men and women, began to feel that we were not indulging in mere lip service to assuage their feelings but were genuinely seeking peace and amity.'

We got down to work. Bakerywala I started visiting several people individually in Mahim. Initially we listened to their views about events that took place in the city from December 1992 to March 1993 and their aftermath. The bitterness was deep, but the terror people felt was also very real, especially after the arrest of an eminent and respected person like Amin Khandwani. We met Khandwani and he agreed to come for a meeting with the police commissioner and persuaded a few others to come as well. But not everyone was so amenable. They wanted to know why the police wanted to see them. Was there some hidden agenda? No, they would certainly not talk in front of any police officer about what they saw in Mahim and their feelings. I remember one particular meeting. We had gone to see a timber merchant in his home. As soon as he saw Bakerywala, he inquired, 'Is anyone or the police harassing you? Don't be afraid. Tell me. I will contact people who will take care of it straight away.' Bakerywala explained that she had come to invite him to an informal meeting with the new police commissioner, who was keen to change things in Mumbai. He advised her not to get fooled by such talk; the police were using them. Needless to say, he did not come for the meeting.

So it went on and on for three weeks. Finally I spoke to Dr Azar Qureshi. I knew him from my days in Dharavi. He runs a clinic and he had helped and participated in the peace process after the riots. He agreed to come and persuaded others also to participate in the meeting. We chose a small room at the Victoria

School on LJ Road for our meeting. It was a quiet room at the back and sheltered from the busy traffic on the main road.

Bakerywala, Amin Khandwani, Afzal Tameez, Dr Qureshi, the Khatkhate brothers, Irfan Merchant and a few others attended the meeting. The ACP and the DCP were present. The local police station staff were not invited to this meeting since the people were still wary of them. When one of the officers saw a particular individual walk in, I saw him stiffen. He wanted to know why I had invited him. I explained that the list of invitees had been sent to the commissioner and he had not taken any objections. The officer continued to have his reservations towards certain people, although he supported our efforts and helped in every way.

Finally Sahney arrived. It was hard going. People were not as forthcoming as in the previous meetings. Dr Qureshi's presence helped. He had persuaded several people to come and at least listen and observe. On the first day the discussion went on till quite late at night. We decided to meet again in the morning the following Sunday. The group had slightly expanded. The police personnel remained the same. The discussion centred mostly on Khandwani's arrest during the riots and the ill-treatment meted out to him and others at the Mahim Police Station. The local people narrated various incidents during the riots, describing how the police had not heeded the warning about the sprinkling of oil around the timber mart. They had been warned several hours before the mart was torched during the January riots. The fire from the timber mart had endangered the police lines behind the Mahim Police Station as well.

The speakers wanted justice. They wanted to know what was being done about those who had committed serious criminal acts. The police had shown their bias against the

community by putting 200 Muslims under TADA in the bomb blasts case but had failed to show similar zeal in the riot cases, they said.

At one stage Sahney tried to explain the difference between acts of violence during a riot and a serial blasts conspiracy that was hatched along with outside forces. The latter act was clearly anti-national. At this there was pandemonium in the room. One of the men said he was against violence and was sorry for the lives that were lost in the bomb blasts. But he wanted to know why the police were not accepting that the bomb blasts were the direct result of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the ensuing riots during which the Muslim community had been more victimized than the Hindus. He said they had all come out of the riots feeling so insecure and terrorized that people like him were afraid of travelling alone in buses or trains in Mumbai in case they were singled out for attack. But the blasts had changed things. They could now move around without fear. The police officers were silent.

One man in the last row stood up and asked Sahney, 'Sir, you explained to us why the serial bomb blasts were an anti-national act and a conspiracy. I accept it. But please tell us if the demolition of the Babri Masjid was an anti-national act and a conspiracy that was planned, rehearsed and executed. What is the police doing about this?'

We had started at 9.30 a.m. and now it was almost 2 p.m. The meeting ended in disarray. If the police officers were disappointed, they did not show it. One officer told me the meeting helped him understand for the first time the psychological dimension of the problem and the alienation that was felt by the community. To that extent, the meeting was not entirely a failure. The opportunity provided to the residents to express their feelings was a first step in the process of confidence

building. That afternoon, however, I certainly did not share this perspective and instead felt overwhelmed by the task before me.

It took me three or four days to recover from the impact of the meeting and realize that all was not lost, that whatever had happened was actually a necessary first step in the task of reopening communication channels. We all needed time to absorb all that was said or left unsaid. But our desire and attitudes were right as well as conducive for future interaction. We needed to follow up these meetings. I consulted one of the senior men who had attended both these meetings. He suggested that we arrange a meeting with some of the women who had been tortured and humiliated by the police. I spoke to Ribeiro and the commissioner. They had no objection if the women were willing. Finally it was decided that I should meet a smaller group initially to find out their response.

I met seven or eight women at a house in Mahim. I explained to them that we were trying to bring the Hindu and the Muslim communities together, as well as give opportunities to people to communicate their grievances to the new police commissioner. We wanted to change the atmosphere of distrust, fear and insecurity in the city. Would they be willing to tell the commissioner what they felt? Without exception, they agreed. They asked me if I could invite some of the women who were kept at the Mahim Police Station as hostages and tortured. There were allegations of molestation. I said that whoever wanted to come could indeed come. There were no restrictions.

It was at this meeting that I first met Azra. Her father is a retired government official and had attended the meeting at the Victoria School. A spirited young woman, Azra is a mother of two children and wife of a customs official. Azra's in-laws were old residents of Dadar. Their timber shop was set on fire

during the riots. When they called the fire brigade, the fire tenders were not allowed to enter the lane. It was traumatic for this Konkani family to see their business burn to ashes. Yet Azra was open to what was needed now to heal the psychological scars.

A few days later, the larger meeting was fixed. A careful list was made and our Mahim contacts sent messages to the women. The meeting was held in a women's community centre in front of the Mahim Dargah. There was an electrifying effect in the area surrounding the hall and the dargah when the police cars arrived at the venue.

Seventy to seventy-five women and two men from different strata of society came for the meeting. Again the same officers accompanied the commissioner as in the previous two meetings in Mahim. It was my turn to make the opening remarks. I started by saying, 'Our city has gone through difficult times. Many have suffered, including those sitting in this room. It is time to heal the wounds and look ahead. Members of any society are like five fingers of our hand. We need all the five fingers to make effective use of the hand while cooking or sewing or doing other chores. Just as five fingers of our hand are not alike, members of any society are also very different. When one finger is injured and becomes septic, we apply medicines and treat it till it is cured and do not rush to cut it off. At the moment there are many festering sores in this city. We have to look at the wounds that are inflicted on people in our society. As women we need to treat them and cure them.' I invited the women to tell the commissioner their grievances, as he had specially come to hear them.

Hardly had I finished when Mrs Chunawala spoke up. She said that the example I gave was not acceptable, as those who were to be protectors had violated and abdicated their

responsibility. She narrated her experience of the riots and the police misbehaviour. Her invalid husband had gone to the police station to inquire about Amin Khandwani's arrest. But her husband was detained. When he did not return for some time, she went to the Mahim Police Station and found her husband was in the lock-up. She told one of the officers that he needed to be on oxygen and had to have his medicines. But the officer abused her in filthy language and did not help her. How could men of such a force be trusted, she asked.

Another woman, who was the sister of one of the four men burnt alive in a van at Antop Hill during the January riots, said, 'All those who were burnt could hardly be recognized. Yet the police knew their names and addresses. How was that possible? I am not going to get my brother back. But I am thinking of the men who committed that heinous crime and are roaming around free to repeat their crimes on other people. Should the police not be worried about this? What are you going to do to prevent such incidents from happening in the future?' There was no trace of bitterness in her voice, only concern.

Azra spoke eloquently about the way her children had to face prejudice in the school. Whenever there was a rumour of some incident, they were panic-stricken. How long could they live with this fear, she wanted to know.

Zubaida related a recent experience when there was an accident outside her home. She was about to rush out to help when her husband restrained her saying, 'Don't you know how suspicious the police are of Muslims?' Should we not even extend simple gestures of humanity without feeling this too may be misunderstood, she asked.

Several of the women had come with photo albums to show the commissioner the relative killed during the riots and explain what had happened. One after the other, they told their stories.

There was no anger or rancour—just pain and incomprehension. Sahney listened to each one patiently. He asked some of them about their daily needs. One widow who had lost her house was looking for a place to live. Her daughter had passed high school and wanted to go to college but they had no resources to do this. Sahney asked the DCP to help the widow and her daughter with the college admission. Several other women were also offered help on the spot.

Several women told the commissioner how their sons continued to be arrested before every festival. He promised to look into this. A policy decision was later taken to the effect that except for those who were hardened criminals, the police would not arrest everyone whose name had appeared on the record for the first time during the riot period. The list would be reviewed carefully.

After listening to their stories, Sahney said, 'I have not come here to put a lid on what went wrong during the riots. But I have come here to seek your help so that what happened in the past does not get repeated. If even one of my constables has insulted you, I ask for your forgiveness.' The words were like a balm to the women.

After the commissioner's acknowledgement of the failures and lapses on the part of the police, several women, especially Zarina, a teacher in a Mahim school, wanted to know from him about the working of the police force. Was it true that many policemen lived in the slums due to lack of official accommodation? Did they really have sixteen to seventeen-hour duty very often? Did they get a weekly holiday?

The commissioner had acknowledged their stories and their pain. Now he had to deliver.

At the end of the meeting, I discovered that some women who had been detained by the Mahim police had stood outside

the hall, afraid to come in. When the meeting ended, the commissioner and his officers stood outside for a few minutes at the junction opposite the dargah. It is a busy road and a spot from which nothing goes unnoticed. The meeting between the women and the police, in that sense, was held under the public eye. There was no opposition from the community. We did have the breakthrough that we wanted. The news about the Mahim meetings slowly began to spread. This unusual process of dialogue was beginning to show results.

The city and especially the minority community needed to be assured that they were secure, that they need not be afraid of the police, that they would be heard. Were we raising their expectations too high? For the moment, we were taking the necessary first step in psychological healing. The city could not afford to live with continued hostility between the police and the citizens. We decided to use this method of interaction, one by one, in all the sensitive police stations under which riots had taken place.

However, when we began to meet people of different communities in Mahim to start mohalla committees, we discovered that the majority Hindu community too had equally strong feelings against the police. A respected doctor who had initially shown interest turned hostile when he learnt that the police would be part of these committees. He said, 'I am all for communal harmony and for the efforts to be made at the citizens' level. But I will not be part of anything in which the police from Mahim Police Station are involved. Everything during 1992–93 happened under their noses. They are therefore responsible for letting it happen. How can you expect decent, law-abiding citizens like us to be associated with the police and work with them?'

The doctor refused to have anything to do with mohalla

committees. We were stunned by such a reaction from the middle-class Hindus towards the police. Extreme though the reaction was, it was not an isolated one.

Some of the Hindus in Mahim were particularly frightened of attacks by Muslims during the riots. In Makarand Society, a building close to the Muslim mohallas behind the dargah, residents were evacuated during the riots. Their fear was as real as the fear of the Muslims. The memory of that period was fresh in their minds. We needed a separate dialogue between the police leaders and the Hindus of the area. Their doubts went deep. We missed out on not addressing them at the time. They remained outside the mohalla committee's reach. Ribeiro felt we had done enough and needed to move on to other areas. Or perhaps we failed to evaluate correctly the depth of the Hindu feelings against the police. Either way, we missed an opportunity during that early period to redress the Hindu sentiment in Mahim.

Setting up the mohalla committees involved endless telephone calls, legwork, reflection and planning. Slowly I began to give all my time to this work, but without any monetary benefit. People found this difficult to believe. So they began to spread rumours that there must be something in this for me, as they could not imagine that anyone would do this kind of work for nothing. I am grateful to MRA for looking after me financially for the work I did for the city.

There was pressure to move to other areas. I felt torn between staying in one area to consolidate what was started and using the momentum to open up other areas of the city. In Mahim the doctor's withdrawal also affected the others' enthusiasm for several months. One or two others came under severe opposition from family and local organizations and withdrew. The whole process was beginning to stall even before it started. We never

succeeded in creating a strong local team that facilitated greater interaction among Mahim's diverse communities. But for the moment we decided to leave the process of reconciliation in Mahim in the hands of some of the local Muslims and Hindus as we had to begin the process in another area.

Each one who joined always had his/her particular reason or understanding for joining the mohalla committees. This did not always coincide with the larger picture we had in mind. But during those early days, we welcomed whoever responded and came forward. This was to create some contradictions later on. My sincere belief in building up local capacity and allowing people to learn as they went along prevented me from realizing that one cannot apply all principles to all places. Mahim was a difficult area and needed more inputs than we realized right at the start to allow the communication channels to begin to function better. Looking back, this was a mistake, and a costly one at that.

A small group in the dargah area with whom we started the mohalla committee work in Mahim have continued to play their part in maintaining communal harmony. Their efforts have been noteworthy, specially on two occasions when there was tension following the murder of two Hindus during the Ganesh festival between 1995 and 1997. They worked tirelessly with the police to ensure the procession during the festival passed off peacefully.

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After Mahim we decided to work in the Bhendi Bazar, a predominantly Muslim area of south Mumbai. It is home to Aga Khanis, Bohris, Kutchi Memons, Konkani Muslims and Muslims from Uttar Pradesh and Malabar. Some of the oldest

churches, synagogues, temples and mosques are situated here. Adjacent to it are the main shipping dockyards. It has the Dana Bazar and other main wholesale bazars, including Umarkhadi, one of the original Koliwadas. We decided to start our work in the area under the Dongri Police Station. There we received much help from two people: Farida Charania, vice-principal of Diamond Jubilee Boys' School, and Syed A.I. Vohra, general secretary of MESCO. Vohra's business premises, located close to the Dongri Police Station, was set on fire during the riots. But no help had come from the Dongri Police Station. Vohra and Farida organized a meeting with some of the local people one Sunday morning. That was to be my first meeting with Safdar Karmali, who has an old business of marriage hall decorations and is a well-known local personality. At the meeting, we went over the attempt being made to rejuvenate the mohalla committees. People were so terrified of the police that the mention of police tended to make them withdraw.

Karmali was very bitter and told me of various incidents in and around Dongri that had taken place during the riots and the number of people he had stood surety for at the Dongri Police Station. The Dongri Police Station too had become infamous because the area under it had seen heavy rioting and the alleged police torture of those who were arrested. Karmali told me about a number of people who were detained under TADA but, he claimed, were innocent. He wanted me to meet the parents or the relatives of these people. He also wanted me to take up the matter of the minors who were held under TADA. I told him I had repeatedly heard the last allegation, but no one so far had told me of a specific case. If he knew of any such case, we could certainly take it up with the commissioner. He wanted me to meet a man whose son was held under TADA in the bomb blasts case. The man told me of his son who was

working in Dubai. The son was newly married and had just come home when he was arrested. He was not involved in any crime, he insisted. Could I not help him?

It was difficult for him and many others to understand that I had a very limited role where crime or the specific bomb blasts conspiracy case was concerned. All I could do was listen to these parents sympathetically. I always suggested that they meet the new commissioner and put forward their case. It took several meetings with the small group in Dongri to get them to de-link the TADA cases from the process of setting up mohalla committees.

I realized that we would not get very far unless Karmali and others who had such strong feelings and grievances against the police were given a chance to air them before the new commissioner. Finally we reached a compromise. Some of those who had complaints against the police could be invited for the meeting. Karmali agreed to help. We fixed a date for the meeting, when both Sahney and Ribeiro could come.

One day, after meeting some people in Dongri, I got the feeling that I was being followed. Later a police officer from the local police station met me and inquired what I was doing in Dongri and why I was meeting people in the area. For a few seconds I was gripped by fear. But I took charge of the situation and told the officer that I did not need to answer his questions, as there were no restrictions on a citizen from moving freely in any part of Mumbai. The officer withdrew. But I did not like the idea of being followed in this manner. Here I was trying to win the confidence of the local people by trying to remove their fear and suspicions and now the police were being suspicious of me. The experience deepened my understanding of why and how the people felt terrorized by the police. I told Ribeiro that I did not like police following me and it could

prevent people who were slowly coming forward from joining us. He asked me not to worry and to proceed with my work. He would convey this to the commissioner.

The Mahim experience was very fresh in our minds. It brought home to us how bad the relations between the police and the minority Muslim community were in the jurisdiction of police stations where major riots had taken place. In Bhendi Bazar, the Hindus are in the minority and have the same complex emotional problems minorities may have elsewhere. We decided to bring both the communities into the process from the beginning. Two meetings were fixed in July 1994, the first one for the Hindus and the second for the Muslims.

It was the commissioner's decision not to include the local police station staff in the initial meetings, to help those coming for the meetings to speak freely about their grievances. These usually concerned the local police station. The local police officers felt left out and some of them made this known in an unpleasant way.

I had visited the Dongri Police Station after the January 1993 riots with Shahnaz Shaikh, accompanying the residents of the Dargah Chawl that was vandalized during the riots. I had met ACP Jhende at the time. People spoke with respect of the officer and told us how he had protected people during the riots. In July 1994, on arrival at the venue of the meeting for the Hindus of Dongri, a senior officer wanted to know why just one community was invited for the meeting. I tried to explain that we felt the need to have separate meetings with both the communities before holding a joint one. He did not agree with me. We had a difficult relationship throughout his tenure. Perhaps we were both mistaken in our attitude of 'I know best' and could have worked better as a team with a little openness of mind.

In those early days I made many mistakes. I did not have

previous experience of working with the police. I also lacked a teammate to work with in the field and with whom I could have discussed issues and problems that came up and strategies to tackle these on a day-to-day basis. We needed simultaneously to enlarge our team so that more people shouldered the responsibility. This was an unconscious omission. Looking back, my self-confidence and understanding was at times misplaced. With a slightly bigger team, we would have done better at consolidating our gains in each area. Ribeiro was, of course, always available for consultation, but I did not involve him in the details. He left me entirely free to do the field work and never hampered my method, style of work or judgement. But he did not hesitate to tell me if he disagreed with something or wanted me to drop an idea or a move. Our motives were sincere but we had little previous experience.

The meeting with the Hindus went fairly smoothly. Some politicians also came for the meeting. People expressed their willingness to participate in the mohalla committee. One man disagreed with our concept of making the committees apolitical. In the conditions prevalent in Dongri, he felt, only strong political leaders would be able to give leadership and bring people out of their homes and overcome their prejudices. The minority Hindu community was very fearful after the riots and felt insecure. We pointed out to him that any new attempt would involve some trial and error. He never showed up again, which was a pity, as we needed such spirited and independent-minded people who did not hesitate to question.

Before the meeting with the Muslims took place, I met a large cross-section of people in Dongri. These included several school principals in the area. One principal told me of the difficult time they had during the riots. She had seen some stabbing cases in the bylanes of Bhendi Bazar. When the school

reopened after the riots two teachers had argued about the riots in the staff room. The two came to blows and the principal had to intervene and physically separate them. They belonged to different communities. After that violent scene between the two teachers, they decided not to discuss the riots in their school premises. It was an unrealistic expectation perhaps, but she could not afford to have another scene like the one they had witnessed in the staff room. She was very concerned about the impact of violence on the children in the area. There was growing intimidation by criminal elements in school admissions. She was finding it difficult to cope with this and wanted to leave the job, although she liked it very much. She has since left the school, as she could not take the strain.

This principal was convinced of the benefits of the new efforts being made to set up mohalla committees and wanted me to include some members of her Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and set up a meeting with the president of the PTA of her school. The man concerned was educated and cultured and wanted to help. He agreed to invite some people and come himself for the meeting with the commissioner.

The meeting with members of the Muslim community took place on the second floor hall of Kaiser Baug. On arrival there, I was surprised to find tight security on the grounds of Kaiser Baug. Even inside the hall there were policemen with machine guns. I felt it was slightly overdone, but it was too late to change the arrangements.

There was marked difference between the relaxed manner in which we held the Mahim meetings and the surcharged atmosphere that was created in Dongri. There had been security around the venue in Mahim as well, but it was discreet. I wondered if it had to do with the local officers and how they looked at the meeting or was it how the police at the senior

level looked at the Muslim-majority area of Bhendi Bazar. If police leaders felt they had to come with such tight security to meet the citizens, would it not send wrong signal to the residents? It was just such an atmosphere of distrust that we needed to change.

There were 150 to 160 people present at the meeting. Many of these were new faces for me. The president of the PTA, whom I had met earlier, was present with some people. But he looked unhappy and seemed to feel out of place that evening. I had insisted on women's presence and was glad to see at least some women. Some of them were from Imamwada BIT chawls. During the riots the area had been under the Dongri Police Station but now it is under the JJ Marg Police Station that was set up after the riots. The principal of the Diamond Jubilee Boys' School in Mazgaon spoke movingly about the impact of riots on the children and what they had to cope with in the classrooms. She spoke of some of her students who were detained by the police in riot cases and how the school had tried to help get them released.

Two women, Sugara and Shakila, led the group of women from Imamwada. Sugara spoke fearlessly of the terror that was unleashed by the police and the SRP in Imamwada. She had filed an affidavit with the Srikrishna Commission, and a senior CID officer who was inquiring into the incident and a specific allegation of misbehaviour of an SRP officer with a minor girl had contacted her for her viewpoint.

There was one woman in the meeting whose husband had been killed in a police encounter during the riots. Her son was arrested by the police and put under TADA. She had brought his case papers. She was asked to show her papers to the DCP and me. I was keen to take up her case, as I had been told her son was a minor. Muslims in Mumbai were agitated by the

cases of minors held under TADA in connection with the riots. This particular case was followed up and it was found that the boy was indeed a minor at the time of his arrest. Subsequently Sahney put up the boy's case before the state TADA cases review committee and the TADA charges were dropped.

The meeting was large, noisy and at times belligerent and highly emotional. In Mahim, although the meetings were difficult, those we were dealing with were educated people. They were bitter but not loud and aggressive. The Dongri meeting did have some educated men but a large number of them were uneducated. We were glad to be interacting with them. One after the other, they spoke of the police brutality and how they had resorted to unrestrained firing on the demonstrators during the riots. They spoke of the police torture during the bomb blasts investigation, the unfair use of TADA, the police bias against the Muslims and the police disparity while treating the riot cases and the bomb blasts case.

One of the speakers was a young man named Iqbal Hirji, who worked with the Jaffrey Ambulance Service. Iqbal graphically recounted how two drivers of the ambulance were pulled out and shot dead by the police. There was a lot of anger and bitterness in Iqbal. At one point, one of the junior officers tried to stop a speaker. But the speaker was allowed to continue and Sahney listened to everyone with patience and restraint.

Clearly the emotional outburst was the result of pent-up feelings. For the first time since the riots an officer as senior as the police commissioner had come to meet them and listen to their grievances. Perhaps it was good for the police officers to know exactly how explosive those pent-up feelings in Mumbai's mohallas were. They would have to work hard to soothe those feelings and address the hurt and the alienation caused largely by police action. Many like me had been listening to people's

wrath and their bitterness and showing empathy. But today they had an opportunity to have such an interaction with people in authority, which they could not have dreamt was possible.

When Sahney got up to speak, people from the back rushed forward, so as not to miss what he was saying. But the police officers present also closed in and kept a safe distance between the officers and the audience. Sahney spoke of how easy it was to gather a mob of thousands of people in a matter of minutes in Bhendi Bazar as people could pour on to the main road from hundreds of side-lanes. Such mobs easily became violent, which they knew as well as anyone else. But it was not so easy to disperse such mobs quickly. While he could understand their anger at the police firing, he asked them if any authority would allow a violent mob to move around unchallenged. Did they have any suggestions as to how such mobs could be dispersed without having to use force, Sahney asked. He told them to put the past behind and work for peace and harmony in the city. He also promised to look into some of the complaints they had raised during the meeting.

Everyone in the room listened to him attentively. That he had not hedged the issues they raised earned him their respect. This airing of feelings in front of people in authority was an important first step towards the reduction of hostility in Muslim mohallas towards the police. On the whole the audience seemed to be satisfied, except for the president of the PTA, who had come for the meeting with certain expectations and ideas. He was clearly put off by the tone of the meeting and the behaviour of several speakers. If mohalla committees were to have such people in them, he said, he would not be able to join. I explained that the selection process was to begin after the meeting and invited him to help so that we would not have any dubious characters. But something seemed to have scared him off. I

never discovered what it was. Was it this or the sheer realization of how difficult a task it was to build trust and confidence between people and the police as well as between the communities?

A few days after the meeting, I met some people in Dongri to start putting the mohalla committee together. The plan was to set up mohalla committees in each of the seventy-two police stations of Mumbai city. Most police stations in the city have four or five beats. Each beat would have a separate beat committee. We decided to start the committees by selecting ten to fifteen people, representing the cross-section of people living in that area, for each beat committee. The committees could be expanded further.

After several meetings and with the help of many local people we managed to put the committees together in different areas. The police officers ensured that no one with a police record was taken into the mohalla committees. The police could also suggest some names. Some people took objection to this process of police scrutiny. Some, as in Mahim, bluntly asked me if the citizens would be allowed to make a scrutiny of police officers. But we could not vouch for each individual and relied on the local people helping us. It needed great skill to find a middle path in the midst of such divergent viewpoints. We did not succeed in pleasing everyone.

Several police officers voiced their reservations about the success of forming apolitical mohalla committees. Their belief was that any committee that did not have political leaders would be ineffective. But in Mumbai's case the decision regarding this was made in 1993. As many politicians were accused of participating in or fomenting violence during the riots, the question of who to take and who not to take became very problematic. Although there were good and secular politicians,

it was better to make one rule for all. How could we have gone to people who were bitter against the politicians as well as the police with a mission to rebuild trust?

Though we succeeded in keeping the mohalla committees apolitical for a while, some police officers slowly and subtly brought in political elements into their respective committees. Towards the end of the tenure of Commissioner R.D. Tyagi, who succeeded Sahney, the presence of politicians in small or big mohalla committee functions had become the accepted norm. Bowing to pressure from the elected politicians, the state government sent a circular to the city police to invite politicians for the mohalla committee meetings. Apart from Sahney, no police commissioner has taken a clear stand with the state government regarding the need for mohalla committees to remain apolitical or to have the government circular withdrawn. Nor has there been much initiative regarding the expansion or further development of mohalla committees. Over a period, the lines began to get blurred between the informal, apolitical mohalla committees we had started and the official peace committees which included elected representatives. In the end, in several places, all those who had initially helped us were marginalized and the political elements took over. Most of the apolitical members did not wish to be part of token committees and eventually withdrew as none of them wished to join issue with the local officers. The emphasis of mohalla committees on deeper communal harmony was thus reduced. As work expanded, it became increasingly challenging to address difficulties cropping up in different places on a day-to-day basis.

A couple of months after we launched the mohalla committee in Dongri, local people called a meeting, at which Iqbal Hirji asked those assembled to help with a blood donation camp he planned to organize. He had put the question directly

to Raju Fondkar, a local Shiv Sena leader, who responded positively. A day or two later Iqbal told me that he would like to invite the police commissioner to inaugurate his blood donation camp and asked me to help. I suggested that he personally invite the commissioner. The blood donation camp was a great success. The commissioner not only came but also donated blood. What words perhaps could not have done, the small gesture by the police commissioner had done to win the heart of an angry and bitter young man.

After this, Raju wanted to hold an eye camp and distribute spectacles in the predominantly Hindu area of Umarkhadi. Raju asked for Iqbal's help, as he wanted all the communities of Dongri to take advantage of the medical camp. Iqbal took Raju to meet the editors of Urdu papers to put in an advertisement about the medical camp. Next he suggested that he and Raju go from house to house in the Muslim mohallas to inform the people. On the first day, Raju was very scared as he ventured into some of the mohallas with Iqbal. He had not stepped into those areas since the riots and some of them ever before. As they both walked up the dark alleys and went up the rickety staircases, Raju was apprehensive of how he would be received. To his surprise, he was given a very warm welcome and offered tea in every home they visited. When he could not take any more tea, he made sure at least to have a sip of water as a gesture of courtesy. These visits freed Raju of his fear of Muslims and Muslim mohallas. On the day of the eye camp a large number of Muslims came and more than half were women. Raju was a happy man that day. In the following months and years, several people would stop Raju and thank him when they saw him. The mohalla committee had thus provided a platform for young men like Raju and Iqbal to meet and forge friendships.

The senior police inspector at Dongri made good use of

these two men as also other youth of the area to clean up an open ground which was frequented by antisocial elements and turn it into a good playground.

Some months after the Dongri committee was formed, a few local residents who felt unhappy about the way the committee was being slowly hijacked invited Ribeiro and me to a meeting. This meeting took place at the clinic of Dr Abdul Karim Naik. The room was jam-packed. It was clear that the residents of Dongri were keen to be part of the process of reconciliation and have a voice in developments taking place in their area. Unfortunately, we did not find a strong enough facilitator to counterbalance the other forces that clearly did not want our apolitical committees to become successful—someone who could build a team of those who wanted to help and could keep the vested interests at bay.

Those first few meetings marked the beginning of a continuing interaction between the police and the citizens of Mumbai. From the time mohalla committees were launched, the movement continued its slow but steady progress. The city felt the impact of its work and the media frequently noted its effectiveness. The mohalla committees began to show their capacity for dispute solving at community level, as well as mitigating tensions and violence. The authorities too recognized how the mohalla committee network could be utilized to defuse tensions in the city in the face of looming law and order problems.

This was tested when Mani Ratnam's film *Bombay*, based on the Mumbai riots, was to be released. Cinema halls in Hyderabad had been burnt following the release of the film and there was discontent among the Muslim community. Sahney sought ten days' extension for the release of the film in Mumbai. During that period he arranged for facilitators of the mohalla

committees to have a preview of the film. They went back and discussed the film with the people in their areas. Thus rumours that were creating tensions were scotched and the tension that was built up was reduced, even as the police made arrangements to reinforce law and order.

In 2001, a rumour about an alleged act of desecration in Delhi caused tension in the city. But the swift action of the city police and the proactive work done by some citizens, mohalla committee facilitators and journalists prevented any outbreak of violence, despite provocation. In Kanpur, however, violence could not be controlled and riots took place.

Perhaps the most severe test came in February 2002. Hearing news of the burning of the railway coach carrying kar sevaks in Godhra and the outbreak of violence in Gujarat, the Mumbai police activated the mohalla committee network throughout the city and increased the interaction between the citizens and the police officers to prevent and defuse tension. For weeks, while Gujarat burnt, and while it seemed Ayodhya was once again coming to a boiling point, mohalla committees became a focus of media attention for their work at the grassroots. Mumbai was once again to witness the combined resolve of the police and the citizens to prevent a spillover effect of violence in Gujarat to save their city from strife.

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In Dharavi the mohalla committees grew out of our peacemaking efforts. By May 1993, in consultation with Sanjay Pande, informal committees were formed. I enlisted those who had played key roles in initiating the peace process into these committees. Each week, we held meetings in three police beats and the beat officer was present at Pande's instruction. These

meetings were held at the mohallas, often in the small bylanes of Dharavi. These were interesting encounters at the community level, as people raised small mohalla-level problems such as complaints that referred to disputes between neighbours over a water tap, open sewerage in front of their homes or even those against local policemen or municipal employees. We sent reports of these meetings to Pande. During the first eight or nine months, I attended each of these meetings in Dharavi and built a good network of volunteers. The police were cooperative and Pande took keen interest in the committees' growth. He used the mohalla committees to tackle some of the criminal activity that affected women and schoolchildren, such as bootlegging and illegal video parlours, and took action against the local mafia.

In October 1993, the Dharavi mohalla committees were given a formal shape when the members invited the sheriff, F.T. Khorakiwala, to launch them. An Ekta Daud, or Peace March, was conducted to mark this. Throughout 1994, the Dharavi committees grew from strength to strength. The committee members solved local disputes at the mohalla level and addressed several 'non-cognizable' complaints. They worked in tandem with the police officers to curb organized social crime.

The testing time came for the Dharavi mohalla committees during the Ganesh festival of 1995. In V.K. Wadi, the local Hindus, according to their annual practice, were building a platform for the installation of the Ganesh idol. But some of the Muslims feared that a temple was being constructed. They objected to the erection of the platform. The tension gripped not just V.K. Wadi but also the areas close to it. Rumours were doing the rounds that a Shiv Sena MLA was supervising the construction of the platform. Some people from V.K. Wadi approached the

mohalla committee facilitators. They went to the area and quickly discovered that the tension arose from a misunderstanding. After talking to both the groups, the mohalla committee undertook to ensure that the platform would be demolished once the idol was immersed.

Sahney instructed his local officers to let the citizens deal with this issue and to stay outside the area of dispute but to remain vigilant. The facilitators too kept a day-and-night vigil at V.K. Wadi during the Ganesh Utsav and ensured that nothing untoward took place. When the festival ended, the mohalla committee facilitators, under the supervision of Dr G.H. Khan and the police, ensured that the platform was demolished and the debris removed the same night to prevent any further tension. The action was handled sensitively and without causing any disturbance. The mohalla committee had proved that it had the capacity to deal with disputes that could lead to communal discord. If the citizens could thus handle sensitive matters with a communal dimension, there would be no need for the police to come into the picture. They could then shift their attention to crime matters. This helped firmly establish the credibility of mohalla committee and the police.

The V.K. Wadi gain, unfortunately, was not consolidated. Five years later, a dispute over a game of cricket turned into a conflagration. The demographic character of V.K. Wadi had changed since 1995. There was a quiet attempt to change its name. A dispute over land and housing societies had been brewing between the communities. It proved that such festering situations need long-term combined efforts by the mohalla committees and the police, till local capacities that can defuse tensions and settle disputes are in place. The fresh trouble in V.K. Wadi showed the need for training in conflict resolution and problem solving. Such training would give facilitators a

long-term view of disputes, and not just fire fighting capabilities. There is need for both strategies to be applied simultaneously.

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In October 1993, Pande started the Nirmalnagar mohalla committee with the help of Dr P.P. Jamkhedkar. Over the years the committee ensured that the police–public communication channel was kept open and it tackled a variety of issues that threatened to breach peace. But its most important contribution has been to transform the hostile atmosphere prevalent in the area during the Mumbai riots and in their immediate aftermath.

In eighteen months, over the years 1994 to 1995, twenty-two mohalla committees were set up in Nirmalnagar, Nagpada, Agripada, Bandra West, Khar, D.N. Nagar, Sakainaka, Wadala, Malwani, Meghwadi, Pydhonie, etc. All these committees had facilitators. The success was uneven in the different committees. We had started work in the predominantly Muslim areas of south Mumbai, middle-class areas of central Mumbai, slums and some wealthy parts of the city. Now we needed to see how the committees worked in different areas. This would give us an idea of whether the model worked or not, what changes it needed and the capacity of the local members as well as the facilitators. The success and effectiveness of the movement depended on these factors.

The local committees had evolved a variety of programmes to keep the contact with the communities alive. The initiators gave each local committee a free hand and did not interfere in their work. Over a period they started the women's grievance redressal cells run by mohalla committee women volunteers, integrated sports project, painting competitions for schoolchildren and so on. The women's grievance redressal cells,

under the leadership of Maria Eashwaran and Yasmin Shaikh, provide a much-needed and useful counselling service to the local communities. In 1995, following some clashes between the two communities over a game of cricket, the mohalla committees set up the annual Cricket for Peace tournament, with the Mumbai Police Commissioner's Trophy being given to the winning team. Achintya Mukherjee was responsible for popularizing it. The tournament aimed to demonstrate that cricket need not become a point of conflict but can unite people and promote friendship. All this gave the committee members something to do besides promoting communal harmony and keeping communication channels open. It was an important movement in the life of our city and in the concept of people's involvement in its well-being. While some committees survived, others were absorbed into new committees formed by the police. Two among those that thus continued were Nagpada and Imamwada, in south Mumbai's Bhendi Bazar. They deserve special mention as they show the scope of mohalla committees. However, except in the case of two or three committees, we did not succeed in getting involved with addressing all issues affecting total quality of life in those areas. This evolution is yet to happen.

In 1996 B.G. Deshmukh, J.F. Ribeiro, Satish Sahney, Achintya Mukherjee, K.M. Aarif, Farida Lambey, Farooq Shaikh and I pitched in resources and started the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust to enable the smooth functioning of the committees in the city.

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In Nagpada, I met Yasmin Shaikh, an advocate, soon after the Mumbai riots. We quickly became friends. She joined us when

the mohalla committee was set up in her area and became a facilitator. It gave many like her a sense of hope in the aftermath of riots. They felt it was worthwhile to join in the efforts to rebuild the city. Yasmin had lived a sheltered life. She says we were responsible for bringing her out for community service. She has shown tremendous courage and good skill at settling disputes on the streets of Nagpada. Time and again the Nagpada committee showed the ability and effectiveness in times of crises.

Several mosques in Mumbai city have disputes over the trusteeship and they are sectarian in nature. Jamil Mosque, in Madanpura in Nagpada, too had a dispute over trusteeship. Matters came to a head on 27 June 1999. That afternoon, namazis were attacked while they were praying. An old man succumbed to injuries on the spot inside the masjid. This incensed the local people and hundreds, including women, came out on the road. Yasmin and her team rushed to the area. She saw women who were usually in burka shouting slogans. The police, though in full force, could not pacify the agitated people. The public directed their wrath at the senior police officers who were on the spot. There were no women police constables or inspectors on the scene.

People demanded that the police either punish the chairman of the Mufdul Yatama Trust, who was running the mosque, or hand him over to them. That morning the police had called both the disputing parties to the police station. The dispute centred on the election of a new imam. The police requested both parties to amicably settle the matter and choose an imam acceptable to both. The chairman and the other trustees were adamant that the imam would have to be from a specific sect. This was not acceptable to others. From the police station, the groups went for the afternoon namaz and trouble broke out. It seemed pre-planned and the chairman of the trust had joined

the attackers. Lathis and riyals from the masjid were used to beat people.

Yasmin saw three women leading the women's group. They were about to assault the ACP when Yasmin came between them and the officer. She pushed the women inside a lane and told them, 'We can talk over the matter peacefully now. There is no need to stage a violent demonstration.' The women were abusing their menfolk and the police for not solving the Jamil Masjid dispute for eighteen months. And now a man had been murdered. The women's grievance against the police was that they had not removed the chairman from the masjid trust despite knowing that he was implicated in two murder cases, extortion and robbery cases. Yasmin explained to them that police had no power to dismiss anyone from a trust. She told them about the office of the charity commissioner, who is responsible for trusts and charitable institutions. They could send a complaint to the charity commissioner and ask him to conduct an inquiry. The women had not known this. When the police were taking away the chairman of Jamil Masjid, they came under heavy stone-pelting and had to resort to lathi charge. This fuelled the anger of the crowd on the street even further.

Throughout the day the mohalla committee members stayed around to help the police handle the situation and ensured that it did not take an ugly turn. At night residents of Madanpura turned up at the police station in large numbers on hearing a rumour that the police was about to release the main accused (chairman of the masjid trust). They threatened to burn down the police station if he got away. The crowd was in no mood to listen. The mohalla committee members once again were on the scene and pacified the crowd. They suggested that a small team of observers be sent inside. A maulana was given the copy of the first information report, which he read out to the crowd.

Satisfied, the crowd dispersed quietly. It was 1 a.m. then. Excellent teamwork between the police and the mohalla committee members had saved the day and prevented a delicate situation from turning into widespread violence. The Nagpada team had proved that they have the courage and capacity to intervene when disputes arise and threaten to erupt into violence. Over the years, the team intervened on a number of occasions at community level to resolve sectarian as well as communal disputes before they flared up into violent conflagrations. The team used simple conflict resolution methods of fact finding, patient listening, being present on the scene till dispute and tension are resolved, dealing with rumours and creative negotiations with police and other authorities. Such mohalla-level intervention is the only guarantee of preserving peace and harmony.

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In July 1995 the newspapers reported on their front pages about a riot in Bhendi Bazar the previous night. Apparently, someone had blown his nose and thrown the snot out of his second-floor window and it had fallen on some young men standing below. The two parties belonged to different communities. An angry altercation followed and before long there was free use of stones and bottles as missiles. I telephoned the police commissioner and asked him if we could work in Imamwada. He readily agreed and informed me that the DCP and officers at the JJ Marg Police Station would help. I got in touch with the police officers and we called Hindus and Muslims of Imamwada to a meeting that evening.

As we could not find a neutral place to hold the meeting, it took place at the local police station. We explained to the

assembled group that we had to find a solution to the frequent disturbances that were taking place in Imamwada.

Since the riots of 1993, a platoon of SRP had been stationed in Imamwada because of the sensitive nature of the area. There had been ugly incidents in Imamwada during the riots, which had left a trail of anger and bitterness against the police and suspicion between the two communities in Imamwada. On that night of July 1995, the SRP men fired in the air to disperse the mob.

Both groups were very critical of the police for allowing the riot to take place on the previous night. After listening to them for some time, I intervened and told them the police could not be blamed for what had happened. Surely there must be deeper reasons that were provoking such outbursts. We needed to understand them if we were to find a solution. One of the men said that we needed to talk to the young men of Imamwada to find the reasons for these communal outbursts. I asked him why the young men were not present at the meeting. He said that the young men would never come to the police station for a meeting. So we decided to go and talk to them wherever they were. This shifted the direction of the meeting. Another man said we would have to meet the young men in Imamwada, and that the meetings with the two groups should be separate. I agreed. Now it was the police officers, including the senior inspector, who were nervous. Some of them felt the meetings in Imamwada could be explosive as feelings were still running very high. But after consultation they agreed that the meetings should take place in Imamwada.

Problem solving is based on the assumption that crime and disorder can be reduced in small geographic areas by carefully studying the characteristics of a problem in the area and then applying the appropriate resources. Underlying conditions including the social setting in which communities interact, the

physical environment and the way the public deals with these conditions are responsible for creating problems. There are as many solutions as there are problems. Community policing allows solutions to be tailor-made to the specific concerns of people living in that area. Therefore we had to first understand the root cause and the dimension of the problems of Imamwada before deciding on what solutions were applicable. The community would not only inform us what lay at the root but also give clues to the possible solutions. We needed to go with an open mind and listen carefully. We decided to treat this as a learning process.

The dialogue with the community at which the police were present was the first of its kind in Imamwada. The police officers had never been inside those buildings other than to arrest people during riots or for some crime. The meetings took place in the long corridors inside the buildings belonging to BIT chawls—the chawls built at the turn of the century by the British for those who came from the Konkan region to work on the first railway line that was being laid in Mumbai. From the beginning, the people were housed on communal lines in these buildings. The ageing buildings were rundown and gloomy. The surroundings were not very cheerful and clean. But these unusual dialogues drew large numbers, with both men and women participating. Grievances that had been bottled up for several years were brought out in the open.

At the meeting, we informed the people that the police officers and I had come to listen to them and their problems. If we had come prepared to listen, they had come prepared to talk. There was a certain expectancy in the air. Grievances against the police and people in the other community were aired frankly. Many harsh words were spoken, but once the grievances were exhausted, the people, particularly the young, began to talk about

their personal problems. They said the ten by twelve feet one-room tenements they lived in made it difficult for them to study in peace, and often many of them failed in their exams or dropped out of school. They also spoke of lack of playgrounds in the area, which meant they were always hanging around idly, ready to fight at the slightest provocation. They thought trouble could be kept at bay if the residents were gainfully employed.

The dialogue went on for several days. In the beginning, we talked to both communities separately. I went to Imamwada every day and talked to everyone, including small children. It was very educative for me. The women prevented their children from going to the buildings of the other community and playing with the children there. Seeing this, we decided to hold a separate meeting for women. The police officers were worried that I had no one to assist me at the meeting. I had invited a couple of women members of mohalla committees from elsewhere in the city. But they had not turned up. I was told a couple of officers would be there to assist me. I declined the offer but agreed to let two women police constables in civil clothes be present in the hall. Inspector Vanjari joined the men from Imamwada in the room above the hall where they sat while the women's meeting was on. A large number of women from both communities were present.

I began by telling the women what the children of Imamwada had told me about their mothers and what they were told at home. I also told them of the allegation by each side that during the most recent riot women from either side had been instigating and actively providing the boys with empty bottles and other missiles. So peace could be established if women stopped such activities. Both sides denied that they had actively instigated their boys. But soon there was a quarrel when a couple of women from each side pointed to the other and

reminded them of what they had said on the night of the riot.

As their arguments got more heated, they began to get closer to each other. The constables sitting beside me were concerned that the women would come to blows. They wanted to get up and separate them. But I suggested that we sit and watch. The constables were wary of the risk I was taking. It is my firm belief that sometimes it is necessary for people to vent their anger openly to clear the air and release pent-up feelings and frustrations. The poison has to come out. Besides we also got to know of the instigators on both sides. When their argument had become particularly heated, I intervened and told the two women that they had actually demonstrated how conflicts began.

After this we began a meaningful discussion as they were now prepared to listen. I told them that without their active support and help, peace and harmony would not be possible in Imamwada. They had to stop their young men from fighting and disallow collection of material that could be used as missiles in their buildings. Many women spoke of their weariness and their sense of insecurity when such violent incidents occurred. They wanted both peace and emotional relief. We ended on an optimistic note with all the women assembled pledging full cooperation to the efforts the police and the mohalla committee were making.

I made a chart of the common factors and issues that both communities had told us about in those meetings. Sahney read the report of the meeting with the young people and asked to meet the young boys. He attended the last meeting in this dialogue series with the communities. We ensured that the young men who had been telling us of their difficulties came for the meeting. The presence of these young men was a feat of sorts. They told the commissioner they were tired of the violence and wanted peace. Several of them gave suggestions on what

could be done towards peace. One young man said, 'We often dream of games like table tennis and wish we could also play such games.' Sahney was touched by this and offered to give a table tennis table if they found a place for it.

Later, B.G. Deshmukh, former cabinet secretary and now director with Tata Sons, R.M. Lala of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, DCPs D.D. Padsalgikar and Sanjay Barve, Ribeiro and I met at Sahney's office to look into the problems the young men had told us about. The main complaints of the Imamwada boys were that they had no study room and no playgrounds; school dropouts were idling around the place, ready to fight at the slightest provocation; and the BIT chawl buildings were rundown. We realized that unless we addressed some of these problems, peace could not be achieved. So we did just that.

The JJ Marg Police Station gave a few volleyballs and nets to the boys, who created courts in the space between the buildings. Initially the young men played only with those of their community. Then one of the officers had an idea. He invited the boys from both communities to play volleyball with the policemen in the compound of JJ Marg Police Station. It would be a match between Imamwada and the police. The police station compound had a proper court on which matches began to be played. Without giving any lectures on communal harmony, the police had succeeded in bringing the Hindu and Muslim boys together on a volleyball court. Community policing allows such interventions.

We then took possession of three classrooms in a municipal school nearby and turned it into a community centre, with a study room, a table tennis room and a newspaper reading room. The Adi Billimoria Trust gave an initial grant of Rs 50,000 to renovate the classrooms and buy furniture for the study room. We then approached Sir Dorabji Tata Trust with a scheme for

imparting skills to the unemployed youth of Imamwada. About 200 young boys and girls got trained under this scheme in four batches. Children of policemen from the local police station, too, availed of this scheme and did quite well. At about the same time, a similar scheme was implemented for the unemployed youth in Behrampada, Bandra East. Under the guidance of Sanjay Barve and his team of officers, two batches were selected and sent for vocational courses specially designed for them by the Patuck Institute, Vakola. Barve and one of the police inspectors took personal interest in the scheme and ensured that the young men were regular in their attendance. The director of the Patuck Institute, Kurup, and his staff worked after office hours to train these young men. These efforts were rewarding. One of the young men in the batch, prior to taking this training made his living by stealing metal scrap from the Bandra Railway Yard. At the Patuck Institute he was taught a new trade—that of laying tiles—and he began to earn more money. Now he did not need to steal from the Railway Yard. His wife told the police inspector, 'In the past I used to keep awake at night, dreading the knock of the police on our door to take away my husband. Now I sleep soundly at night.' In Imamwada the community centre became an instant success. The young men who were looked upon as the troublemakers began to come to the community centre to play table tennis. The studious among them made use of the study room and the elders were happy in the reading room that now provided them with daily newspapers. Today the community centre runs computer classes. Citibank gave the computers and the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust pays the salaries of the teachers. Students pay just the registration fee. These classes have been a huge success. Hindu and Muslim women are taking advantage of acquiring skills to operate computers.

Apart from these educational activities, the people of Imamwada wanted to improve their physical environment. The water pipelines in the buildings had decayed. In the rainy season of 1995, several children were struck by diarrhoea and one child died. A small number from the newly formed mohalla committee decided to go to the hydraulic engineer of Mumbai Municipal Corporation. They invited the senior inspector at JJ Marg Police Station and their elected corporator to join them. During the meeting with the concerned officer, the Imamwada group told him, 'Sir, until recently Hindus and Muslims of Imamwada were constantly fighting with each other. But today we have come together to fight with you.' They told him the changes they had brought about in Imamwada and their efforts to improve their environment. They needed his help to get clean water supply. The officer responded positively. He promised to lay a new pipeline within a month.

When this was done within the deadline promised, the Imamwada residents were brimming with enthusiasm. It was a record, considering the work culture of the municipal corporation. Suddenly the Imamwada residents realized that there was strength in their unity. What they had not succeeded in getting from the municipal corporation for years was achieved through their combined efforts. They next turned to replacing the old electrical cables, which caused small fires frequently when they short-circuited. Thus the mohalla committee discovered that there would be no dearth of avenues for it to work on if the objective was to improve the total quality of life in their areas.

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The Imamwada experiment continues to grow from strength to strength. In this effort, the senior inspector in charge of JJ

Marg Police Station, Isapure, and Inspector Vanjari played a constructive and imaginative role in the beginning, as did Padsalgikar. They were quickly able to establish trust and confidence with the Imamwada communities. What was once a source of headache for the police was turned into an island of peace within six months and the police withdrew the SRP platoon that was posted there since the riots of 1992–93. We solved the personal concerns of the local people, which resulted in general peace and order there. It has banished the criminal elements from the area. At one stage when drug peddlers and criminal elements surfaced again in the area, the alert citizens and the police cooperated with each other to take necessary action.

When disputes crop up, which they do from time to time, the local mohalla committee team gets together and deals with them, mostly without outside help. This was tested on one occasion when one afternoon a maulvi who was walking past a building found himself drenched in curry thrown from a window. Throwing leftovers and garbage from windows is a common occurrence in the area. Before long a crowd gathered around the maulvi. A member of the mohalla committee watched this from his window to see how the people were going to react. Only when the crowd around the maulvi swelled did he come on the scene. He sent away the young men surrounding the maulvi and then took him inside the building from which the curry was thrown. Residents of the building quickly offered to wash the maulvi's shirt. The guilty household was chided for creating unnecessary trouble. By the time the police arrived on the scene, all was quiet. Within twenty minutes the crowd had dispersed and the maulvi had gone for his namaz. Earlier such incidents would have led to communal violence. But the new spirit in Imamwada had encouraged people to give constructive leadership during times of crisis.

From the Imamwada example it was clear that once we accepted problem solving as our goal, community involvement was essential for its success. We succeeded due to the partnerships between the police, the local community, a charitable trust of a corporate house and a technical institute. Problem solving requires great emphasis on analytic skills. Analysis must go beyond identifying and forecasting conflict and crime patterns. It must include strategic analysis, which attempts to identify why problems exist in certain areas and the conditions that contribute to and perpetuate crime, conflict and violence.

Nafis Sardar, a resident of Imamwada, said, 'There have been a lot of changes in Imamwada since 1995 because of the mohalla committee movement. Earlier we stored bottles in case a riot broke out suddenly. We found more security in a sack of empty bottles outside our doors than in a bank account. Now we do not feel the need to store anything with harmful intentions. Whereas earlier we never went into the buildings where Hindus lived, because of suspicion and doubt, today that fear has disappeared. We have exchanged each other's telephone numbers and contact one another for consultation if a problem crops up. Prior to 1995, we solved our problems with the help of our respective community welfare associations; today through teamwork we are able to solve our problems relating to water, electricity and waterproofing. This we had not been able to do for years. Today we jointly run computer education classes, and a community centre with facilities for a study room, reading room and indoor games. We would never have dreamt of all this in the early 1990s. Earlier we were very cautious of talking to police officers, but today we do not hesitate to telephone them when there is a problem and police help is needed.'

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In the future too, the police will have to devote attention to, and recognize the validity of, community concerns, apart from addressing serious crime problems. Community policing allows the public to bring their problems to the attention of the police. It also allows a variety of redressal mechanisms to be introduced to address community concerns. Once problems are brought to their notice, police must work with the citizens to solve them. The best solutions are those that satisfy the community and strengthen the ties between the communities and the police.

In Imamwada, community policing and partnership with the community and the problem-solving approach were successfully utilized. The result was the resolution of the ongoing communal conflict. There is no doubt that community policing offers us in India a new approach in the prevention of communal, caste and tribal conflicts at least in small geographic areas. All that is needed is the determination to attempt bold experiments.

I have been asked if this experiment has reduced the communal prejudices in people of Imamwada, if not eliminated them. It is not an easy answer to give. We began by attempting conflict resolution and slowly progressed to conflict prevention by strengthening the socio-civic environment and removing the daily irritants faced by the people of Imamwada. Throughout these past six years there have been many testing moments when it seemed the entire progress would be derailed. But in spite of ups and downs the process has moved forward. Mohalla committees provided the people a platform on which they could meet, interact and know the reality on the other side. At least some individuals have shed their earlier stereotypes of the other community. One Muslim man who had never interacted with Hindus today has Hindu employees in his workshop, having overcome his deep-rooted mistrust. Some Hindus in Imamwada seek the help of their Muslim neighbours when faced with

personal problems, again because of the new-found trust.

Not so long ago, a five-year-old Muslim boy was dying of leukaemia in the hospital and needed blood. When residents of Imamwada came to know about it, Muslims as well as Hindus voluntarily went to the hospital and donated blood. This also included several women. When the boy died, a large number from both communities turned up for his funeral. If such deep bonds between the communities develop, the likelihood of them picking up stones, bottles or other missiles in a crisis would be reduced. But the shedding of mistrust and prejudices between Hindus and Muslims will have to be a continuous process, perhaps needing sensitive outside intervention. It is in knowing when to move into a situation and when to step aside that the skill may lie. In the end, people have to grow and make their own discoveries in human relations. A facilitator's role is to understand this and help people find their own potential. The Imamwada experiment is a good prototype for mohalla committees. Its lessons can be utilized in sensitive areas for longer intervention and peace building.

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The police officers and men who had to face the worst of communal violence are keen to maintain a dialogue with all sections of the population. This helps the police understand the problems faced by the citizens and develop a working equation with the public.

Many police officers at various levels are still not convinced of the importance of citizens' groups and, therefore, feel that interacting with mohalla committees is a formality they must observe. Those who started mohalla committees were independent people and not establishment supporters. They

wanted to give their time and talent towards establishing communal harmony in their city. But there are police officers at all levels who are beginning to appreciate the fact that without people's support they are badly handicapped.

The movement has given Mumbai a mechanism that can be activated at a short notice and can assist the police in defusing tensions and maintaining peace with public support in a crisis. This has also acted as an early warning mechanism. This mechanism worked in the crisis that threatened to breach peace following the disturbances in Gujarat in 2002.

Peace building and recovery of Mumbai has been painstaking work. It was based on the trust building work that was undertaken across the city. It was the result of great effort and convergence of many forces. But these efforts have shown that if citizens are willing to give their time, recovery of our towns and cities is possible. The Mumbai example thus provides processes that should be utilized in post-riot recoveries.

Chapter Five

Who Will Break the Chain?

Who will break the chain of hate
Who will break the chain of sorrow
Ancient wrongs shed blood today
Wrongs today shed blood tomorrow
Who will break before too late
Break the chain of hate

These lines are from a song in the play *Mother and Three Sons.* It is a story of a Naga mother who had lost her three sons and is pleading with her surviving son to show courage and not to avenge his brothers' killings.

Just after I finished writing this book, the Godhra incident took place, in which fifty-seven people, the majority of them women and children, were burnt alive when their train carriage was set on fire. The passengers were among a group of kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya. It was a tragedy beyond belief, but what followed was equally barbaric. This provocative act set off a chain of retribution not unlike what happened in 1984 following Indira Gandhi's assassination.

Both Godhra and the retaliatory violence are equally condemnable. As courts deliberate on a solution to the Ayodhya dispute, the cycle of violence goes on, committing new hostages to history, daily creating new victims on both sides and passing on the chain of hate and revenge to future generations.

Teesta Setalvad and I went to Gujarat barely five days after

the Godhra incident took place. We were among the first to arrive from outside Gujarat. What we heard and saw in those early days was worse than what we imagined possible.

I do not have the words to describe the sense of terror I have seen in the eyes and the faces of children, women and men in the relief camps in Gujarat following this tragedy. I also met Gayatri Panchal, one of the survivors of the burning coach of the Godhra train carnage, whose parents and sister had perished in the train. The suffering of the victims we met, the incomprehension of what happened to them still haunts. Had I not seen this terror in the eyes of those Sikh passengers on the train back in 1984, in Bhagalpur in 1990 and then in Mumbai? Whose turn will it be next?

Once again in Gujarat I had to often suppress the rage and a deep pain that rose within me on hearing tales of the rape and humiliation of women, the sense of utter helplessness of the victims when they were refused help and succour by state functionaries and by the betrayal and abdication of responsibility on the part of the police leaders. The plight of the victims threatened to overwhelm the care givers at times. But they had to be strong. They tried to be alongside the victims, to mourn and share their tragedy, comfort them, be compassionate, listen and do whatever they could to bring in some relief in kind.

Why are women and children and the most vulnerable always subjected to this? What makes human beings so bestial? Are these perpetrators really our brothers? What kind of valour did the mobs try to prove by acting against the innocents in this manner? Through their criminal acts did they uphold Hindu honour or lower it? As Indians, such criminal acts are totally unacceptable to us. What has ignited these insatiable fires of hate, lust and these killer instincts? Will we ever know the masterminds who planned and recruited these mercenaries?

Will they be brought to book? Can the victims ever believe that justice is possible in the Indian republic? Or has the truth disappeared like the blood of the victims mixed in the soil or scattered like the ashes after the infernos died down? All the recent events have dangerously polarized India, pitting one community against the other; they have fractured the polity and shaken our self-confidence.

Many tales and stories we heard from the victims in Gujarat are similar to those that have been narrated in this book and what I had seen and heard in the earlier riots elsewhere. Yet Gujarat did not lessen the shock. It shamed those Indians who have a conscience. Many wondered if they could ever again say proudly that they belong to a country called 'India'. What has made Indian civil society so weak and vulnerable that we are not able to deal with the poison of communal hatred? The questions we asked ourselves after the 1984 riots and the Bombay riots were being raised all over again.

What relevance do my experiences of the past eighteen years have to the India of the twenty-first century? I am more than ever convinced that civil society will have to be more active and take more responsibility to ensure that our lives are not disrupted and endangered. Whereas prejudices and stereotypes about 'other' communities may not disappear overnight, at least citizens can organize themselves towards reducing and eliminating violence by putting in place various mechanisms similar to mohalla committees. Mechanisms that can be institutionalized to provide platforms for greater interaction among diverse segments of Indian society. Such interaction can go a long way towards reducing hostility and distrust of the 'other' as I have experienced in my own life and as has been seen in the Imamwada example in Mumbai.

The India we love is home to both the victims and their

perpetrators. Both are children of this land. As our hearts reach out to the victims, can we make space for the misguided perpetrators? As we fight for justice and human rights will we also be open to the possibility that a perpetrator of heinous crimes can reform, as was seen in some South Africans who came before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in their country?

We have seen in some ordinary men and women of India the magnanimity to forgive and a spirit of accommodation. They have shown both the courage and the humility to accept wrongs and acknowledge the pain caused to others. We have numerous examples of men and women who have shown the courage to break the chain of hate and revenge. They inspire us at a time leaders have failed to inspire. We need urgently to increase their numbers.

There is Hamzabhai who lives in Dharavi. He is an illiterate hawker, selling plastic rope on the streets of Mumbai. His son was killed during the Mumbai riots. Before his death the son had told the father who the murderers were. Hamzabhai refused to reveal their names to his relatives, because, he said, 'I do not want another father to go through what I have gone through—the pain of losing a son.' In the aftermath of the riots, he played a constructive role in his mohalla in defusing tension and helping people see reason on numerous occasions. Hamzabhai travelled with me to Shillong and narrated his story to different conflicting tribes in Manipur. The feuding tribal leaders took Hamzabhai's story to the distant hill districts of Manipur and Nagaland.

A Tamilian who killed four people during the Mumbai riots and later served a prison term has taken steps to mend his life and to help the family of one of his victims.

There is Rano Shaiza of Kohima. At the funeral of her

husband, Lungshim Shaiza, who was killed while addressing an election rally in Manipur, Rano told the assembled, 'I forbid anyone in the name of my family or our clan to seek revenge for the murder of my husband.' Later she told some young men who pleaded with her that revenge was part of Naga tradition, 'Revenge may have been part of Naga tradition, but it is against Christianity to which I belong. Hence I will not give you permission.' I have told her story to women in Bhagalpur and to young men in the slums of Mumbai.

We have several Kashmiri Pandit and Muslim women who have had the courage to listen to each other's grievances and suffering and later acknowledge the other's pain. Indu Kilam-Raina, a migrant Kashmiri Pandit, who has been living in Jammu for the past thirteen years, said at one such gathering, 'We have suffered and the Valley people have suffered and we continue to suffer. But we have to move on. We have to leave our past behind and together address what is before us.' There is Naseem Shifie, a poetess. Her husband was seriously injured in a gun attack and miraculously survived. She had the courage to say at the same gathering, 'I looked in the mirror this morning and saw how distorted my face has become with hatred. I have decided to leave hate behind for the sake of my son.' Naseem took steps to initiate a dialogue between the Kashmiri Muslim and Kashmiri Hindu women as well as between Kashmiri women and Indian civil society. This is an ongoing story among the women of Jammu and Kashmir. Through the turmoil of the past thirteen years, many friendships such as that between Indu and Naseem have survived. It is such bonds through which new attempts are being made to mend the frayed fabric of Kashmiri society. These attempts inspire us to address Hindu–Muslim relations elsewhere in India. How long can we continue to hold the future of Kashmir and Hindu–Muslim relations

hostage in India? Hindus of India have to realize that their actions have a direct spillover and a negative impact on minority Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Do we have the right to put their lives at risk?

There are scores of men and women in Gujarat who have wept and silently gone about helping the victims, refusing to equate the criminal act of some to the entire community. How can one forget several Gujarati women asking with deep concern in their eyes, 'Are these stories we are hearing of rape and burning of women and children and men really true?' They were troubled on hearing my affirmative answer. It is they who understood that this violence would enter Hindu homes one day, and turn against the family members of those who have committed ghastly crimes. No one can live with their conscience after committing such crimes. A former chief secretary, a Gujarati, told me, 'I cannot face these victims. Please, tell the people that they can live with all the prejudices they have against the minority in their hearts. But let them not be cruel and resort to such violence.' Should these people be dismissed as weak-hearted and inconsequential? Should their questions and pleas for help not be responded to?

We know of some Gujarati businessmen and others who have provided relief and are helping in the rehabilitation of the victims. Even though few in numbers, they have told us, 'If we do not do something constructive this will kill us one day.'

While we fight for the issues of justice and accountability, the deeper questions regarding the breakdown of our society too have to be addressed. A deeper reflection on this can give us clues about the rebuilding of our society and the relationships that have broken down. How is the Hindu majority of India going to treat the minorities of this country? Will each group be treated as equal and be given equal opportunity to play a

part in the development of India? What about the blindness in the Hindu society that perpetuates the caste as well as minority discrimination and blindly accepts demonization of the other?

It is when we turn inwards and root out the seeds of hate, revenge, prejudices, humiliation and hurt from our own hearts that we become instruments of change in turning the tide of history to a brighter and more positive future, where every group and every community feels secure and feels it has a part in building the future; where, rather than blaming the other, each one takes the responsibility of his or her share in the upheavals happening around them. We need small islands of hope which demonstrate that individual or small groups can make a difference. This book has provided evidence of such small islands of hope created by men and women who have dared to step out and release healing streams to douse the raging fires of communal hatreds and division.

Epilogue

In January 2000, when I started thinking of writing this book and what should go into it, I decided to visit those who had touched my life during the past fifteen years and in a way helped change the course of my life. I was apprehensive, as it meant visiting Bhupender Singh and Davendra Singh. For some time after I visited them in 1985, I had kept in touch with them, but many years had gone by without any communication between us.

I wondered how the two men and their families had coped during the intervening years. Would they have been able to live with that same spirit of generosity they had shown towards those who had wronged them when I last met them in January 1985? Would the very basis of my writing a book come to naught if they had changed?

I remembered my earlier uncertainty when I first visited them. That step into the unknown had been very rewarding and I hoped the experience would be repeated. This time too there were friends who helped me discover the whereabouts of the families. But when I went to Kanpur in March 2000 I found that Bhupender Singh and family had shifted to Ludhiana and Davendra Singh and family had gone on a holiday. But at least I got their addresses and telephone numbers.

I contacted Bhupender Singh on the telephone from Delhi. The voice on the other end was very warm and welcoming. He had heard from his relatives in Kanpur that I was looking for them and was expecting my call. A date was fixed for me to visit them in Ludhiana and stay overnight with them.

I arrived in Ludhiana by train. Bhupender Singh was at the railway station to receive me. While he recognized me instantly, I had some initial difficulty. He seemed shorter and smaller. I realized I had been carrying a larger-than-life image of the people and events of the 1984 riots in my memory. He took me to his home, where his wife, two sons and daughters-in-law were waiting for me. What an amazing and touching welcome they gave me! After lunch we settled down to catch up on the intervening years since we last met.

Surrounded by his family, Bhupender Singh told me of all the travails he had faced since I last saw him. 'I was laid up in bed for six months. The wounds on the head took time to heal. The fracture on my ribs had to heal naturally, as they could not be put in plaster. But the most stubborn wound was the burn on my back. A particular ointment the doctors suggested was not available in Kanpur, and we finally got it from Delhi. We had lost property worth many lakhs, but got very little as compensation. There were difficulties every step of the way—in getting the insurance dues for the house, car and my brother's shop. Even trying to procure a new gas cylinder was not easy. In spite of producing all the papers to prove our house was looted and damaged during the riots, and the gas cylinder stolen, no consideration was given and we had to pay the deposit all over again to procure a new one. This at a time when we were short of funds. Such things added to our bitterness.

'Finding the daily ordeal of survival too much to handle, my parents and children shifted to Ludhiana. My colleagues and relatives helped in many small ways. But all our belongings were gone and for a long time we took turns eating out of the only plate we had. It was as if the clock had been turned back by ten years.

'I had to return to work after six months when I could barely walk. I remember the first day back at work. Because I had got my promotion, I was reporting at a new office. As I entered the gate, someone from the back shouted, "Here comes the terrorist." It cut through me like a knife. But such insensitive remarks were common in those days.'

As he was not permanent in his job, he received less than half pay for his six months of leave. He tried his best to convince his employers to make an exception as he was a riot victim. But they refused to bend the rules. 'We had to count every penny in those days and felt bitter about such unsympathetic treatment. We were often shown the rulebook, which did not bring any solace to us, but were to add further to our hardship.

'There were times when I sat alone and wept, as things we needed desperately and had taken for granted earlier were no longer there. It took nearly three years for me to reconcile myself to my fate. But my children were accommodating and never asked for new clothes or their favourite foods. They were sensitive to their plight and silently adjusted to it. I wanted to make my eldest son an engineer. But as I had no savings left and was struggling to stay afloat, I had to abandon my plans for his higher education.'

After a couple of years he was transferred to Bareilly, where they spent eight happy years. The children came back to live with them. In 1994 he took premature retirement and moved to Ludhiana, where he ran a shop selling electrical goods and his two young sons started a new business. Sometimes other Sikhs treated them as outsiders. Bhupender said, 'But for the 1984 riots and our experience at the time, we would still be happily living in Kanpur. Today our main anger is against the government, both past and present, and with the Akalis, who promised us a lot but gave nothing.'

Bhupender's sons told me that they were happy and content most of the time. But now and again their hearts fill up with anger against those who tortured and tormented their father. They confessed to having moments when they would like to seek revenge against their father's tormentors. They kept reiterating however that their anger was against individuals and political leaders rather than against the Hindu community in general.

I asked them if revenge would help solve the problems before India. Does it not take more courage to forgive than to kill someone? Revenge had brought more pain to Punjab, than solved the problems it faced in the 1980s. Jaspal agreed with me, but felt the majority of human beings think that violence and retribution are the only way to get justice. As we discussed the pros and cons of revenge and forgiveness the two young men actively took part in it. Bhupender told me he had not visited Mumbai since 1984 and would not be able to make that journey again. I stayed the night with the family and left the next morning.

I visited Davendra Singh in Kanpur a month later. The house looked different from what I remembered from my first visit. After the death of Davendra's father a few years ago, the house was divided among the brothers. As I entered the house, I was welcomed by a woman who turned out to be Davendra's sister-in-law. I was received warmly by the family. There was curiosity about why I had returned. I explained to them about my book. I was surrounded by Davendra; his wife, Gurvinder; daughters, Preeti and Mitu; and sister-in-law. After the initial excitement, we settled down, all of us squatting on two beds while Davendra, aided by Gurvinder every now and then, told his side of the story. In the early days after he recovered, while his younger brother ran his shop in Kanpur, Davendra went to Ludhiana to see if he could establish a business there. As he could not adjust

to life there, he returned to Kanpur after a few months. Those were difficult days of hardship and uncertainty. Despite the physical and mental ordeal they had gone through, they spoke without any bitterness and rancour.

When I asked Davendra if he blamed anyone or railed against his fate, he replied, 'How can I blame anyone for the 1984 riots? The madness was unleashed by the slogan of a politician. What I went through was perhaps the fruits of my own actions. Those who killed and maimed innocent Sikhs as well as those who killed Indira Gandhi belonged to inferior thinking. But they too were created by that same Almighty that has created me. We should hate wrongdoing but not the person who has committed it, for that can only generate more hatred. We can choose to hate the body but inside the body is a mind that has to be won. Hatred cannot help us find a way forward. No scriptures mention hatred. God allowed evil to bring me close to death but God showed his greater love by saving me and giving me a new lease of life. I often think of those policemen who sent us to hospital. But for them we would not be alive today. I have wanted to personally thank them but have not been able to trace either their names or their whereabouts.'

Davendra clearly had discarded hate as a philosophy of life. His life is a symbol of a supreme gesture of a victim forgiving his tormentors. This symbol is important in today's India and South Asia, where we witness so much violence and counter-violence as a way of life. A symbol that stands as a challenge to both the victims and the perpetrators. Will they, will we, have the courage to relinquish our right to hold on to injustices of the past and present, to accept and acknowledge our errors and wrongs, for the sake of a better tomorrow? Those men and women who decide to make hard choices on this score will change the face and history of South Asia.

That retribution need not be an answer to wrongs committed is indeed a powerful testimony. Bhupender Singh and Davendra Singh, who put their lives together after the 1984 riots, have tried to understand the ordeal they went through and find the reasons behind it. Victims of violence themselves, they have seen the cost and the futility of retribution as the way of life. Their life is a challenge to those who have taken upon themselves the self-proclaimed responsibility of avenging on behalf of the victims of violence.

Are Bhupender and Davendra aberrations or are they saints? They are neither. They are ordinary folk who have survived to tell their tale. It is a tale of courage, faith, grace and forgiveness. It is a tale of men who have consciously made a choice in favour of forgiveness, rejecting revenge. Through their lives they have released healing streams in people they come in contact with.

Sources

My account of the train journey from Mumbai to Barabanki is based on what I saw and what Bhupender Singh and Davendra Singh later told me.

My account of Bhagalpur too is based on what I saw and heard during the numerous visits I made there from January 1990 to May 1992.

I worked in Dharavi and other parts of Mumbai from June 1990 to 2001, with people right across the city. Most of what is written in the book is an eyewitness account and what people have told me. I have also referred to personal notes that I made during this period. I have drawn on my meetings and interviews with C. Subramanian and P.C. Alexander, Governors of Maharashtra; Sudhakarrao Naik and Sharad Pawar, chief ministers; Shrikant Bapat, commissioner of police; P.D. Jadhav and Sanjay Pande, deputy commissioners of police; Sharad Kale, commissioner of Mumbai Municipal Corporation; Ambaikar, additional commissioner; Satish Tripathi, relief and rehabilitation secretary; Bakul Patel and F.T. Khorakiwala, sheriffs of Mumbai; police commissioners who served in Mumbai after 1993, Satish Sahney, R.D. Tyagi, R.H. Mendonca and M.N. Singh; and other officers mainly O.P. Bali, V.N. Deshmukh, Y.C. Pawar, Sanjay Barve, D.D. Padsalgikar and Deepak Jog, to name a few. Without exception, I met and talked with people from all communities and all sides during the riots as well as afterwards. This also included local political leaders of the Congress, Shiv Sena, BJP, RPI as well as Tanzeem Allah-O-Akbar. Post-riots, whenever we attempted to solve disputes we met and listened to all groups

involved in the local disputes. During the riots I worked very closely with the members of the Dharavi peace committee as well as with the members of the Governor's peace committee, especially Dilip Kumar, Dr Usha Mehta, Shabana Azmi, Bakul Patel, Alyque Padamsee, Rahul Dev and Kekoo Gandhy, and post-riots with the mohalla committees.

Apart from personal accounts and interviews with people, I have also drawn on the Srikrishna Commission Report. Mumbai editions of newspapers like *Times of India, Indian Express, Mid-day, Loksatta* and *Maharashtra Times* also carried reports of the various incidents during the two rounds of riots.

When I started writing the book in 2000, the then police commissioner, R.H. Mendonca, gave his cooperation to ascertain and verify from the police records facts regarding the dates of peace committee meetings and other such gatherings when groups and communities were brought together to maintain peace and harmony.

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