Renters take over and transform an Indian slum settlement
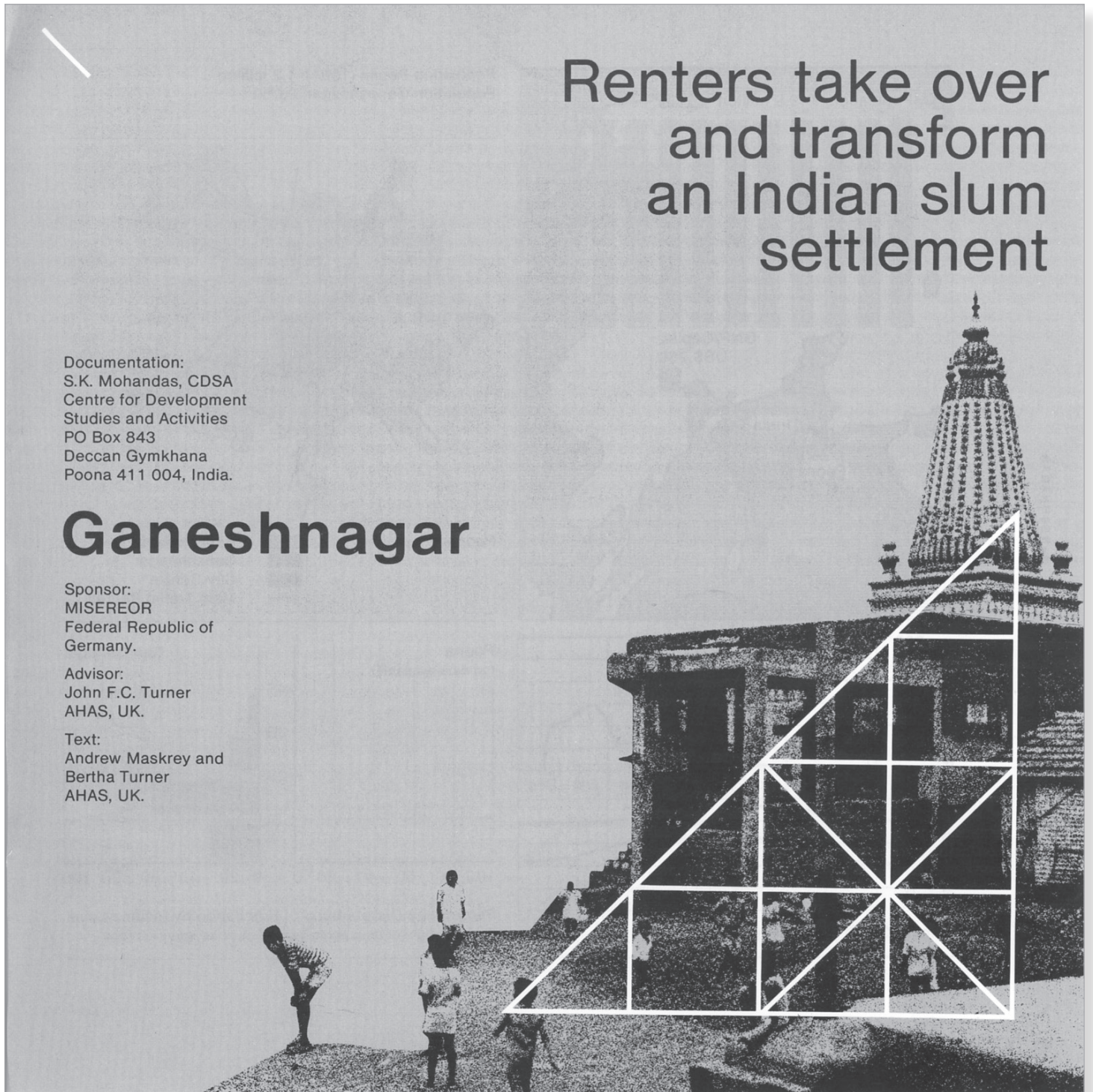
Documentation:
S.K. Mohandas, CDSA
Centre for Development
Studies and Activities
PO Box 843
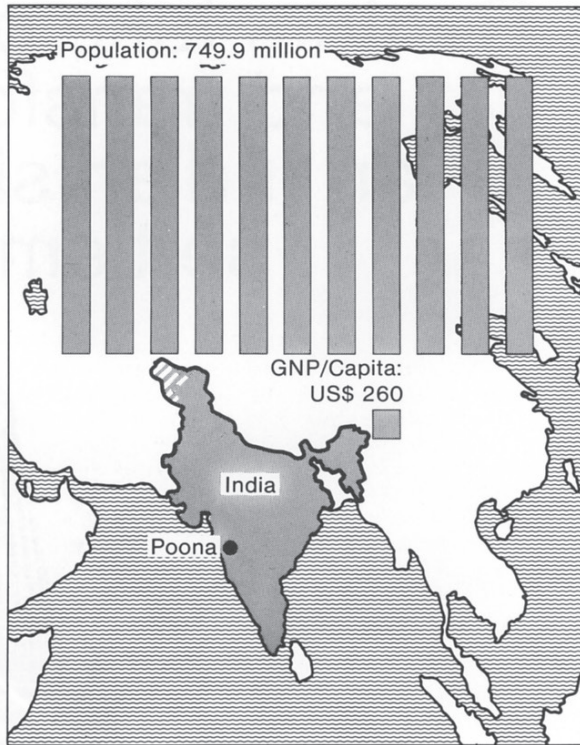Deccan Gymkhana
Poona 411 004, India.

Ganeshnagar

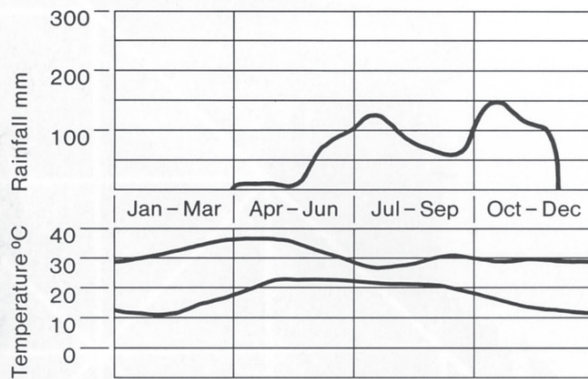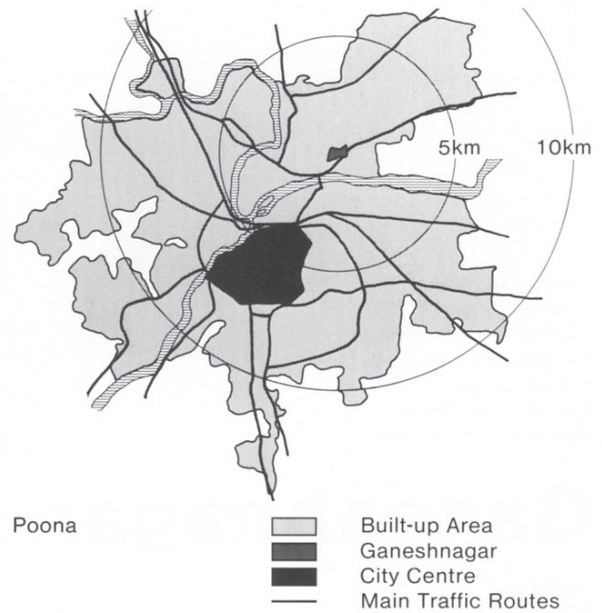Sponsor:
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The John Turner Archive:
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GANESHNAGAR

Population: 749.9 million

GNP/Capita:
US$ 260

India

Poona

Population Poona (1981): 1.2 million
Population Ganeshnagar: 8,000

5km   10km

Poona

	Built-up Area
	Ganeshnagar
	City Centre
—	Main Traffic Routes

Rainfall mm
300
200
100

| Jan – Mar | Apr – Jun | Jul – Sep | Oct – Dec |

Temperature °C
40
30
20
10
0

Climate Graph Ganeshnagar (560m)

Poona
(no data available)

Ganeshnagar

4S
3S
2S
S

100 80 60 40 20 0   0 20 40 60 80 100
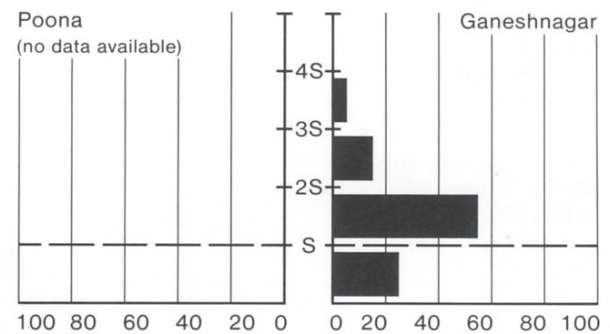
Percentage Distributions of Population by Income Level
S=when 85% of household income must be spent on food

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Ganeshnagar is a slum settlement of some 1,200 families located in the Yerawada area of Poona, a large industrial city in the Maharashtra State of western India. In 1968, slum landlords took over an area of government land and built shanty huts which they rented to migrants. Since 1970, residents have formed their own organization, taken the settlement over from the landlords and carried out an extensive improvement programme. Residents prepared and implemented a new layout plan on their own and then persuaded Poona Municipal Corporation to provide basic services such as water standpipes, latrines, drains, paving of streets and lanes and street lighting. The settlement was officially recognized by the Corporation in 1976, encouraging residents to improve their houses and to carry out additional community projects through their organization. Local participation was remarkably high: at one point over ninety residents were serving on different committees, and the local organization grew in strength.

Living on the subsistence line

The population of Ganeshnagar is typical of slum settlements in Poona. Nearly 60 per cent of the adults were born and had their previous place of residence in Poona City. Around three-quarters of the predominantly nuclear families are Hindus, the rest are a mixture of Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Bahais. Most working people are labourers and craftsmen, with smaller proportions of clerical workers and traders. Two-thirds of the families have incomes between two and six times the minimum wage (US$22), and only 3 per cent receive less than that amount. The median urban household of 5 members requires about two and a half minimum wages just to buy food. This means that few families have any savings margin for housing improvements.

The costs of not being organized

The 1976 Slum Areas Act allowed the Corporation to carry out a slum census, to recognize settlements officially and to carry out slum improvement schemes. Nonetheless, few slums have achieved such a high degree of improvement as Ganeshnagar.

A striking contrast can be seen in Laxminagar, a slum of some 5,000 households, also located in the Yerawada suburb. It was formed in 1974 on reclaimed marsh land which was not yet sufficiently solid for human habitation. In 1976, people formed an organization and demanded basic services from the Corporation. Drinking water standpipes, community latrines and open drains were installed. However, the community organization splintered into small groups with no co-ordination between them. Residents were unable to organize themselves to obtain additional services and no further improvements were made. Existing services are not maintained and the environment is deteriorating rapidly as houses gradually sink back into the marsh while quarry pits full of stagnant monsoon and waste water create health hazards.

Making the most of improvements

Ganeshnagar shows the key role autonomous community organization can play in improvement programmes and local development. Only through organizing themselves could Ganeshnagar's residents manage to free themselves from the clutches of the slum-lords, gain Corporation support and carry out a wide range of improvements. Because they were not organized, Laxminagar's residents have been unable to use the basic services which the Corporation provided as a catalyst for further community-based improvements. Ganeshnagar demonstrates the improvement in environmental and social quality which is possible when people are in charge of their own housing programmes, even in very low-income contexts such as India.

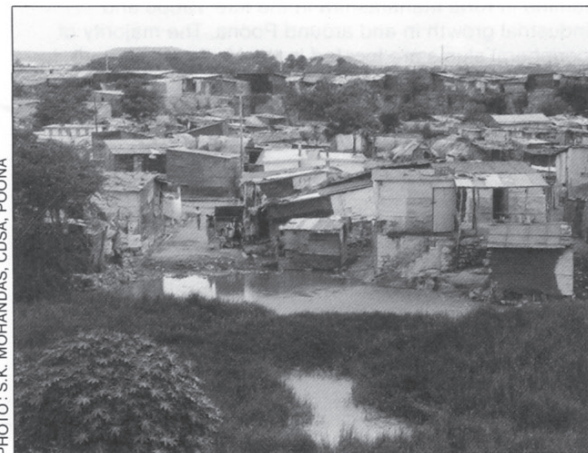*Deterioration after improvement – Laxminagar.*

PHOTO: S.K. MOHANDAS, CDSA, POONA

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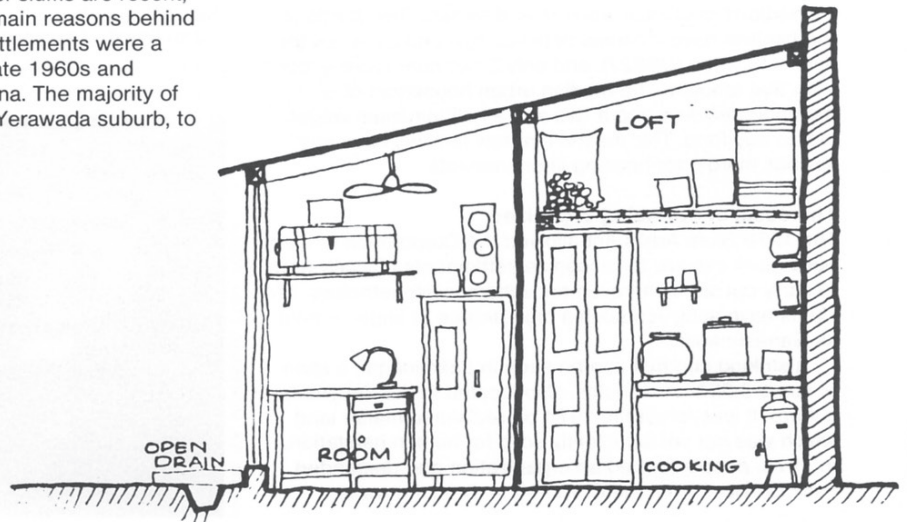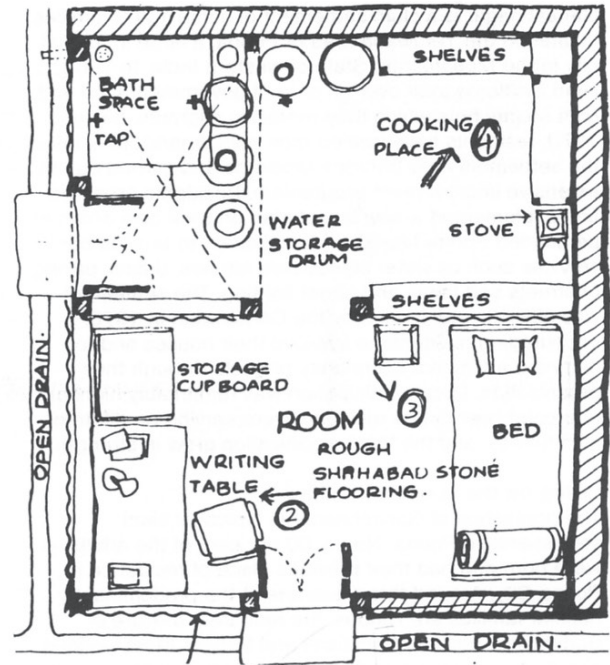
Poona: a major industrial centre

Poona is one of the ten metropolitan cities of India and is the third largest city in Maharashtra State. Poona's population has risen steadily from 597,562 in 1961 to 856,105 in 1972 to 1,203,351 by 1981. Nonetheless, the growth rate dropped from 43.27 per cent over the 1961-72 period to 40.56 per cent over the 1972-81 period. The population is expected to reach 1,530,000 people by 1991.

Slum population outnumbers overall urban growth

In 1976, Poona Municipal Corporation carried out a slum census identifying 327 slum settlements occupying about 16 per cent of the Corporation's residential land. About one third of the city's population presently live in these settlements, with an expected rise to about half the population by 1991. In the thirty year period, 1951-81, the slum population of Poona increased by 1,003 per cent, while the overall population of the city increased by only 139 per cent.

Rural famine swells the slums

Slum settlements are spread all over the city and can be classified into three groups. One group is located in the city centre; a second group is located out of the centre, but within the city limits and a third group is on the urban periphery. Most of this latter group of slums are recent, between 15 and 20 years old. The main reasons behind the formation of these peripheral settlements were a famine in rural Maharashtra in the late 1960s and industrial growth in and around Poona. The majority of peripheral slums are located in the Yerawada suburb, to the north-east of the city centre.

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The interior of a Ganeshnagar
home.

PHOTOS: S.K. MOHANDAS, CDSA, POONA

From rented slum to self-managed settlement

An explosion of migrants

In 1968, there was an explosion at a government ammunition factory located in Khadki Cantonment, on the north boundary of Poona. Many affected families moved to Yerawada to form a settlement on government land they called New Khadki. Neither government nor the Corporation took any action on the squatters. This encouraged slum landlords to build shanty huts on more government land nearby. These were rented out to migrants and others affected by the ammunition factory explosion. Ganeshnagar was one of the settlements formed in this way.

Protection racket

Slum landlords charged not only shanty rent but also protection money, supposedly to protect householders against any threat of eviction or demolition by the Corporation. Hired 'toughs' continually harassed residents. As prices increased and land on which to build additional shanties became scarce, landlords demanded higher rents from the residents. In some cases, residents were forced to leave the settlement and their huts were rented to other households who could pay more. If a family tried to protest against the landlords, their hut was demolished or their belongings destroyed. Housing and environmental conditions deteriorated rapidly as no maintenance and repairs were undertaken by the landlords. With no other alternative, residents had to pay both rent and protection money as well as carrying out repairs and maintenance.

Organizing against the landlords

In 1970, a few households formed a group to resist the landlords, and in a short period, managed to enlist widespread support from other families. They refused to pay rent and despite all efforts to the contrary, landlords lost control over the settlement and were forced to sell the shanties to the occupants. The community successfully pressed for a low price and some families refused to pay. By the end of 1970, Ganeshnagar had completely freed itself from the landlords' control.

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Recognition stimulates improvements

First steps toward improvement

In 1971, community leaders decided to consolidate and legitimize the organization by forming an elected committee. The settlement was divided into nine wards, the residents of each one electing a committee member to represent them. The first move of the new committee was to prepare a new layout plan for Ganeshnagar. There were no proper lanes or open spaces in the settlement, hut layout was congested and haphazard and service installation was impossible. The new plan incorporated straight streets and lanes and a large open space at the entrance to the settlement. It was decided that families should keep their existing space allocation and that the number of huts to be demolished should be kept to a minimum. More land was required along the periphery of the settlement to make the layout plan work. The plan was presented to the community for approval and in less than a year, 80 per cent had already been implemented by the residents. Community space was protected by the committee from encroachment.

Feeling the need for services

After implementing the layout plan, residents felt the need for basic services. Drinking water, drains and sewers were non-existent and garbage disposal was also a major problem. In 1973/4, they pressed the Corporation to install services. Meanwhile, the committtee registered itself in order to obtain legal status. In 1975, the Corporation installed water standpipes, street lights, latrine blocks and open lined drains as well as paving streets and lanes. However, although this brought temporary relief, the services problem was far from solved.

Maintenance is as important as installation

Shortly, services became unusable due to lack of maintenance and improper use by residents. The committee decided to collect voluntary contributions from households to pay ten women from the settlement who needed jobs to clean drains, latrines, streets and lanes, as well as dispose of the garbage. This also made residents aware of the problem, ensuring their co-operation in cleaning the settlement. This initiative stimulated the Corporation to provide additional latrine blocks and water standpipes.
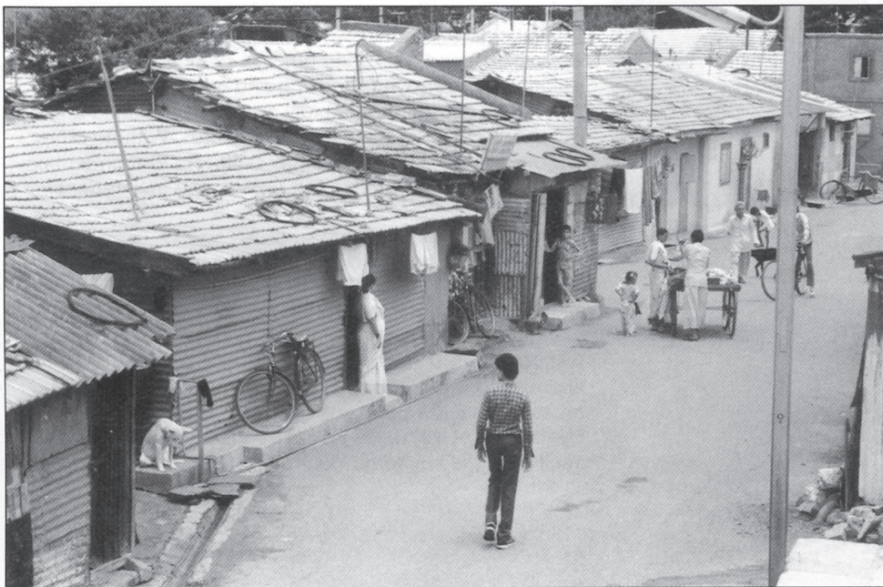

PHOTO: S.K. MOHANDAS, CDSA, POONA

Improvement through organization – Ganeshnagar.

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Settlement recognition stimulates housing improvement

In 1976, Ganeshnagar was declared a recognized slum settlement by the Corporation, following the city-wide slum census. The land was acquired by the Corporation from government and from the Golf Club. This increased residents' security of tenure and encouraged them to invest savings in house improvement. Households built plinths and foundations for their houses using rubble masonry from local quarries. Using brick or stone for the lower walls and a variety of second-hand building components for the rest of the dwelling, a full-scale housing improvement programme was carried out. In 1979-80, the Corporation took over the maintenance of services as part of a city-wide policy decision. The residents not only helped to maintain cleanliness in the settlement, but also supervised the work of Corporation staff.

Launching new community projects

With settlement recognition and service installation, the committee launched various new community projects. The open space was levelled and raised above ground level and plans were drawn up to build a nursery school, a community temple and a gymnasium. In 1979, the nursery school was built and with the help of the Corporation, put into operation. A women's organization was formed which ran a day-care centre for children of employed parents and also a food programme for malnourished children. Sewing machines were also obtained from the Social Welfare Department of the State Government, to enable women to improve their incomes by doing tailoring work. In 1980, construction of the community temple was started and it was completed in 1984, along with a kindergarten school and the gymnasium.

Improvements strengthen the organization

With the increase in community projects and activities, the committee of nine members became inadequate. It was decided to form ward-level committees, as well as sub-committees for specific projects. In the next elections, ten people were elected from each ward, one of whom would represent the ward on the central committee. In this way, ninety people became involved in carrying out community projects and looking after the community and its services. Sub-committees were formed to look after the temple project, the nursery school and festival celebrations. When it was decided to set up a library, a sub-committee was formed, which also organized educational tours for the residents to other parts of India.

Consolidating the settlement

In the last few years, residents continued to support the community organization and to improve their dwellings and surroundings. Nearly all houses are now of permanent materials. Many have converted their front rooms into shops or small businesses, while the better off have added a second storey to their dwellings. Many residents have paid for individual water and electricity connections and many others share with their neighbours. By August 1986, about 40 per cent of families had individual metered water connections, while there were 20 water standpipes with a total of 50 taps. There were 10 latrines each with 10 seats. There were 5 large garbage bins which are cleaned regularly by Corporation staff, along with the drains and latrines. Nearly all the major streets and lanes in the settlement have been paved.

Before and after improvements.

PHOTOS: S.K. MOHANDAS, CDSA, POONA

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Organization and community development

Improving through organizing
Through organizing themselves, even very low income people in a poor country like India have made substantial improvements in their housing and environment. In Ganeshnagar, organizing permitted the community to mobilize and use all their available resources, as well as obtaining support from the government. Locally appropriate solutions were found to local problems because people themselves were in control. In other settlements where people did not organize and were isolated from one another, they were prey to exploitation by landlords and no improvement could take place.

Security as a precondition for improvement
In Ganeshnagar, organizing gave people the confidence and security necessary to start improving their settlement. Obtaining recognition from the Corporation was another particularly important factor which increased people's security and the legitimacy of their organization and encouraged them to carry on investing and improving.

Ganeshnagar is no longer a slum
Eighteen years after its formation, Ganeshnagar is no longer a slum in the true sense of the word. Improvement has not been restricted to rebuilding houses. Through their own organization, people, with the support of the Corporation, have managed to provide a wide range of community services and facilities to satisfy their basic needs. More important still, Ganeshnagar has emerged from these experiences as a community. No one can quantify the improvement in the social quality made in Ganeshnagar, compared to the days when the hapless residents were continually harassed by gangs of hired 'toughs'. No government could have made that improvement unilaterally.