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SAFE AND INCLUSIVE CITIES

POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE IN INDIAN CITIES: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PLANNING

The Bombay Hotel locality in the southern periphery of Ahmedabad has developed mainly since the early/mid 2000s. Small and medium-scale builders acquired agricultural land through a series of informal transactions, developed the land for residential societies without any development permissions and then sold the constructed tenements or plots of land in these societies through informal transactions to Muslims from poor and low-income backgrounds. Crime and violence have been rampant in the locality, leading to creation of unsafe spaces for its residents. There is a proliferation of alcohol, drug and gambling dens and many youth have been drawn towards these illicit activities. Thefts and burglaries are quite common. There are several gangs in and around the locality and conflicts between them erupt every now and then in public spaces.

Several factors have come together to create these unsafe conditions. The state has been largely absent in the locality in terms of planning the built environment and providing infrastructure and services. The rise of some individuals and groups that exert control and power over the other residents of the locality through coercion, threats and direct violence, and the fear that residents experience on a regular basis for their life, family and property are a consequence of this absence of the welfare state as well as the absence of responsive policing. The prevailing social and economic conditions in the locality create a particularly fertile ground for crime and violence to flourish.

One of the housing societies built by a builder in Bombay Hotel
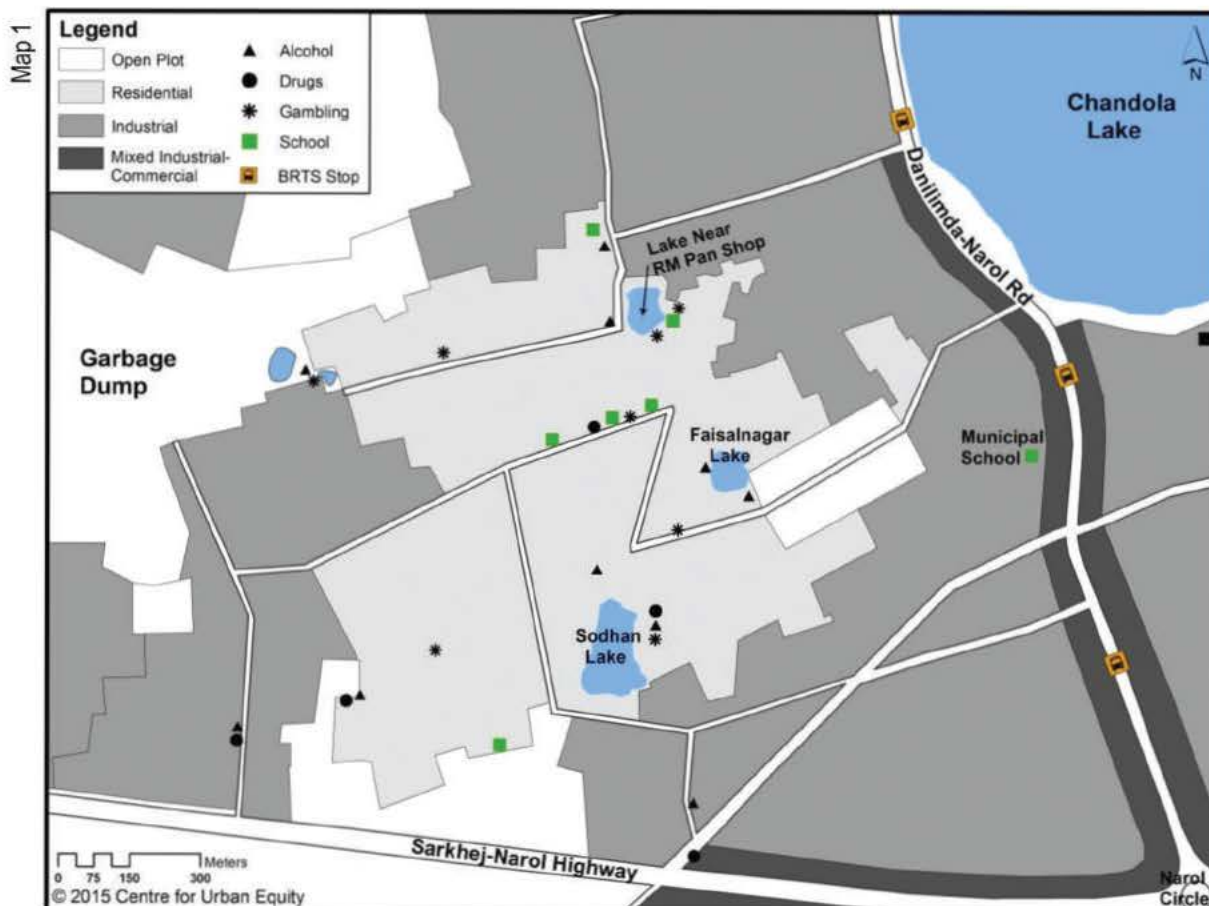

AHMEDABAD POLICY BRIEF 8

BOMBAY HOTEL
Crime, Violence and Unsafe Spaces in Informal Commercial Subdivisions

The CUE research takes an expansive approach to violence, examining structural or indirect violence (material deprivation, inequality, exclusion), direct violence (direct infliction of physical or psychological harm), overt conflict and its links to violence and different types of crime. We note that not all types of violence are considered as crime (for example, violence by the state), and not all types of crime are considered as violence (for example, theft).

In Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat state, the research focuses on two poor localities: Bombay Hotel, an informal commercial subdivision located on the city's southern periphery and inhabited by Muslims, and the public housing sites at Vatwa on the city's south-eastern periphery used for resettling slum dwellers displaced by urban projects.

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Map 1

Legend
- Open Plot
- Residential
- Industrial
- Mixed Industrial-Commercial
- ▲ Alcohol
- ● Drugs
- ✳ Gambling
- ■ School
- ▯ BRTS Stop

Chandola Lake

Danilimda-Narol Rd

Garbage Dump

Lake Near RM Pan Shop

Faisalnagar Lake

Municipal School

Sodhan Lake

Sarkhej-Narol Highway

Narol Circle

Meters
0 75 150 300

INFORMAL DEVELOPMENT AND AGENTS OF VIOLENCE IN BOMBAY HOTEL

The informal development in Bombay Hotel has contributed towards the production of violence and crime in the locality. This development was made possible through a nexus between builders, local politicians, goons as well as the covert complicity of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). In the absence of the state in planning or infrastructure provision in the locality, the builders and goons gained considerable power.

Several cases of spurious bookings of the land plots / tenements have taken place in the locality as builders have tried to make as much money as possible from people. Vacant plots of land have sometimes been usurped by goons who have then extorted money from the (informal) owners in return for vacating the property. Many builders and later other non-state actors got involved in informal provision of basic services such as water, raking in profits from the area, sometimes using threats and coercion to collect monthly charges from residents even though they do not provide adequate and potable water.

Some of the builders are also involved in illicit businesses such as gambling and liquor dens. These businesses and the occupation of public spaces to carry them out (see Map 1) impacts residents' lives. It has created unsafe environments for women and children.

Several instances of women who had faced harassment by men in an inebriated state were revealed in the focus group discussions. The path to the municipal school (see Map 1) goes through some open grounds which are often occupied by notorious men.

Several gangs have established themselves in Bombay Hotel and quarrel with each other. These quarrels usually take place in public spaces, creating fear and potentially endangering other residents. In one instance, two gangs fired at each other as a result of a conflict over a gambling joint. The gangs and goons are also sometimes hired by residents to intimidate other residents they have had a conflict with, turning these into violent and dangerous situations.

Youth also get impacted by the presence of these goons and illicit businesses, as they get attracted to join these activities. Youth also get impacted when such illicit activities are carried out in open grounds where they gather to play cricket and then fights occur when their playing disturbs the activities of the goons or a stray ball hits the inebriated men at the liquor joints.

The police often collude with the goons (the role of the police is discussed later). However, there are also instances when the police have raided alcohol joints. In one such incident, the goons forcibly hid themselves in the house of a nearby resident who acquiesced to this out of fear.

BUILT ENVIORNMENT CREATING NEGATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The built environment can have a direct impact on crime and violence. The absence of basic services has created a degraded built environment in Bombay Hotel. Its few open spaces and lakes (see Map 1) are strewn with garbage as a result of the apathy of the AMC with regard to solid waste management. Residents avoid going to such areas which then become gathering spaces for those who consume alcohol and drugs. Vacant, partly-constructed buildings and vacant plots have also become such gathering spaces. The Pirana garbage dump that skirts the locality at its western edge is also used to carry out illicit businesses (see Map 1).

Lack of streetlights creates opportunities for thefts and burglaries in the locality. While some of the main roads have had streetlights for a few years, the internal roads are pitch dark after sunset. In some societies, local politicians have provided streetlight poles but lights have not been installed as yet. In some societies, residents have light bulbs outside their home but it is not affordable to keep these bulbs on all night.

Partially constructed buildings (seen on the right) which are taken up for illicit activities

IMPACTS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRESSES ON SAFETY IN BOMBAY HOTEL

One reason for the prevalence of crime and violence in Bombay Hotel is the socio-economic stresses created by poverty and the low incomes and long working hours in the informal sector where the majority of residents are employed. There is only one municipal school in the locality while the private schools charge exorbitant fees, leading to a large number of school dropouts in Bombay Hotel. The socio-economic stresses and related lack of education have contributed to the youngsters being lured by alcohol and drug peddlers and local goons into working for them. The amount of money that youth can earn through these routes is higher than what employment in the informal sector can fetch. One young man mentioned that he earns Rs.10,000 per month working in a garment factory while working in illicit activities had the scope of making up to Rs.2,000 a day

Unemployed youth who hang out at certain spots in the locality also sexually harass and pass lewd comments at women passing by. As a result, women hesitate to venture out of their homes unless necessary. Focus group discussions revealed instances of families having pulled their daughters out of school because of concerns about their safety on their way to school. Women also hesitate in allowing young children to play away from their homes because of the possibility of them falling into bad company or picking up bad habits.

Poverty has also lured some men into theft and burglary which involves individuals as well as organized gangs. The gangs are always on the lookout for houses whose residents are away and then break into them at night. Jewellery, electronic appliances, money and livestock have been stolen in this manner. There are also armed robberies using knives.

IMPACTS OF FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY AND POOR EVERYDAY SOCIAL COHESION ON SAFETY IN BOOMBAY HOTEL

Bombay Hotel is inhabited by Muslims from different sects and regional backgrounds. This includes Sunni Muslims, Muslims affiliated to the Tabhliqi Jamaat, etc. There are Muslim migrants from various parts of Gujarat as well as other states in India. Many residents are not acquainted with each other as the locality is still relatively new and there are also many tenants who frequently move (often to other societies within Bombay Hotel). Residents are also constantly competing with each other over scare resources. This has led to a lack of trust and everyday social cohesion among residents. This prevents collective action, making it easier for goons to continue their activities and bully people.

Many single male migrants also inhabit the locality, working and living in garment workshops. There are tensions between them and families as women feel unsafe amidst this male population, especially since there have been some cases of sexual harassment of young girls and children by some workers. In some societies, residents tried to object to garment workshops being opened near their homes but were threatened by goons sent by the workshop owners.

There are also instances of a resident hiring a goon/gang to intimidate another resident with whom there was a conflict. These include conflicts around basic services which are inadequately provided in the locality.

"There was a quarrel between two households over an overflowing sewer. First the women fought, then the men. One of them got goons who came with weapons, so we protected [the other resident] in our house. Other residents started saying that I should not protect him because these goons will pick a fight with my family also. The goons came to our lane and threatened that whoever has helped this man, we will beat them also."

The residents are fearful of getting involved in other residents' conflicts as mediators as it can compromise their own security. In an incident in which a local leader was murdered, few residents came forth to stop the attackers or even give witness statements to the police.

ABSENT AND CORRUPT POLICE

The police have exacerbated the law and order situation in Bombay Hotel. Residents saw the absence of a police *chowky* (outpost) in the locality as one reason for anti-social elements being able to carry out illicit activities unabated. Furthermore, the police (at the nearest *chowky* near Chandola Lake and the nearest police station in Dani Limda) often refuse to register complaints unless a local leader known to them comes with the complainant. The police are also complicit with many goons and let them off after taking a bribe or keeping them in the lockup for a short while. One resident narrated an incident in which she went to register a complaint against a goon who had violently upturned her food vending cart and found that the policeman had the goon's phone number saved on his mobile phone. The goons who run gambling and alcohol joints in Bombay Hotel regularly pay bribes to the police to ensure minimum interference in their affairs. There is no regular patrolling in the locality by the police and they rarely appear at the crime spot quickly when there is a violent incident like a murder, shooting or rape.

Disenchantment with the police results in the residents turning to alternate modes of justice. In cases of thefts and sexual harassment, they may ask local leaders to mediate between the two parties. But sometimes they also take the law into their own hands. In one incident, a woman suspected of kidnapping children was caught and mercilessly beaten up by a mob of residents. This continued even after the police arrived, prompting them to disperse the crowd with tear gas and a laathi charge before taking the woman into custody.

In August 2015, Badruddin Sheikh, a councilor in the municipal ward of Behrampura, inaugurated the construction of a police *chowky* in Bombay Hotel. It remains to be seen whether the police continues its collusions with anti-social elements and the extent to which the *chowky* ensures the security of the residents..

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The social problems faced by the locality can be addressed through urban upgrading measures such as the sensitive implementation of the Town Planning Scheme in the locality. The provision of infrastructure such as street-lights, paved roads, planned open spaces as well as social amenities like public schools could help in reducing the opportunities for crime and violence in such informal settlements.
- The role of the police in such localities needs to be re-assessed. It is important that the police is more accessible and responsive to the residents along with being more visible in the locality. This could also help in changing the negative perception about the police among residents.
- Formation of peace committees and other associations with residents' active participation to address conflicts among residents as well as conflicts of the residents with coercive and threatening actors.
- Measures to improve tenure security as violence can be used as a powerful tool to dominate residents whose tenure is insecure.

Research Methods

- Locality mapping and community profiling
- Ethnography + ad-hoc conversations
- 16 Focus Group Discussions (men and women)
- 21 individual interviews (local leaders, etc)
- Interviews with political leaders & municipal officials
- Master's thesis: 8 Focus Group Discussions on transport and women's safety

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