

Detailed Guidelines on how to conduct mohalla sabhas

A silent revolution has just begun in Delhi. People in some parts of Delhi are directly taking decisions about governance of their area. Local officials and politicians simply obey these decisions. Sounds incredible?

Residents of Trilokpuri and Sundernagari were one day surprised to receive a letter from their ward councilor saying that the councilor had decided to do only those things which the people of his/her area direct him/her to do. "I feel that Indian democracy is a farce. People elect their leaders once every five years and then plead before them in the next five years. I have decided to change this. I will do only those things which you direct me to do," said the letter.

Initiated in Delhi by *Swaraj Abhiyan* along with the councilors of these two wards, each ward has been divided into 10 *mohallas*. All residents of a *mohalla* are members of *mohalla* sabha. Each *mohalla* sabha meets once in two months. The councilor and all local municipal officials are present at *mohalla* sabha meetings. People decide how the municipal funds should be used in that *mohalla*. Till now, some officials or politicians used to take those decisions. Now, you can just walk into these *mohalla sabhas* and demand that your road be repaired. Your demand would be taken down as minutes of meeting and funds would be sanctioned on the spot by the councilor. If the number of proposals received are more than the funds available, then voting takes place to decide priority i.e. which work should be done first.

These councilors have announced that the payment for any work would be done to a contractor only if *mohalla sabha* expresses satisfaction. This would deal a body blow to corruption. Roads, which used to come off within a few days of being made, would now hopefully last their life.

Lists of those who are poor and deserve government social security benefits like old age pension, handicapped pension, widow pension etc are now being made in these *mohalla sabhas*. People

collectively, transparently and openly decide who is the poorest and deserves pensions. Earlier, only party people or those close to the councilor used to benefit from these schemes.

The Lieutenant Governor of Delhi has not only congratulated these councilors but has also requested the Municipal Commissioner to explore the possibility of starting this in other parts of Delhi. LG has also directed the police commissioner to ensure that local police officials are present in mohalla sabha meetings.

How mohalla sabha meeting takes place?

- A municipal ward is divided into 10 parts. Each part is called a mohalla. Roughly, there are 40,000 voters in a ward. So, there would be about 4000 voters i.e. around 1500 families, in a mohalla.
- Each voter of a mohalla is a member of “mohalla sabha”.
- A mohalla sabha meets every two months.
- Every household of the mohalla is sent a written notice of the meeting in advance informing them about the date, time and venue of the meeting. The notice is in the form of a personal letter written by the councilor to each voter.
- The meeting is chaired by the councilor. It is an open meeting. Outsiders can also attend as observers. However, only the eligible voters have a right to participate.
- The councillor tries to ensure the presence of MCD officials in the meeting who are required to respond to citizens’ queries and complaints.

- To prevent several participants from speaking simultaneously, blank paper slips are distributed in the beginning of the meeting. A person has to write his/her name and subject on which he/she wishes to speak. On the basis of these slips, people are invited one by one on the stage to speak.
- Citizens narrate their problems. They collectively discuss and debate their problems, suggest solutions, and decide what facilities/public works they want. Wherever needed, the officials respond. If it concerns inefficiency of officials, they are required to commit time frame within which they would do the work. Wherever needed, the councillor sanctions funds on the spot.
- The citizens also decide who among them is most deserving of government aid or social security benefits.
- All decisions are taken either consensually or through voting.
- The citizens are able to directly question the councillor and local MCD officials present.
- The councillor and the officials, on their part, respond to complaints and questions; they also offer clarifications and solutions. The councillor also commits himself/herself to the things that he/she can do or will try to do and points out to the things that are outside his/her jurisdiction.
- The councillor also makes a commitment that contractors will be paid only after the local people have expressed satisfaction with the public work in question.
- The principle governing the Mohalla Sabha meeting is: citizens will decide what they want and their representative (i.e. the councillor) will merely carry out their will within the limits of his/her jurisdiction, the law, and the availability of funds.

- Copies of the minutes of the meeting, including the decisions taken, are sent to each household of the area.
- The participants also decide the time and place of the next Mohalla Sabha meeting in which the councilor will present a report of the progress on implementation of the decisions taken earlier.

Experiences so far

- Demands of the people are very small. The government spends crores of rupees. However, people still remain dissatisfied because the funds are spent on items which may not be the top priority of the people. But when the people decide, all their demands could be met with smaller amount of funds. Like, the funds needed to meet all the demands of first mohalla sabha in Trilokpuri were just Rs 14 lakhs. Whenever there is a big problem, which needs huge funds, the best way is to deal with it is to place all facts before the people and inform them of the total funds available. The people themselves, through discussions come to a conclusion on how best these available funds could be used. If needed, voting is done in mohalla sabhas to decide priorities.
- Earlier, only those works used to be done which were suggested by the councilor or the people around him. Now, even the most ordinary person can walk into a mohalla sabha meeting and demand implementation of a work. And everyone's demand is written down, responded to and acted upon, if it is within the jurisdiction of the councilor.
- With best of his intentions, a councilor cannot satisfy all his voters because of limited availability of funds. If he satisfies one group of people, the other group gets annoyed. The mohalla sabha meetings are providing an excellent opportunity to the councilor to ask the

people to directly decide how to use the available funds. If need be, voting takes place openly to decide priorities.

- Most councilors complain that the local officials do not listen to them. The officials keep making false assurances but never act upon them. This leads to a loss of face for the councilors, who make assurances to the public which are never fulfilled by the officials. This situation has changed in those wards where mohalla sabhas have started taking place. The officials now have to publicly inform about action taken on their assurances. It is seen that the officials have now started doing work. For instance, in one of the meetings, one woman informed that she had met the ASI and the councilor several times earlier and had been promised many times in the last one year. However, her drain was not cleared. The ASI again promised in mohalla sabha meeting that he would do the job in three days. The people questioned the ASI in mohalla sabha as to what should the people do to ASI if the promise were not kept this time. ASI said – I am willing to undergo whatever punishment you give me in the next meeting if I do not do my job. And the drain was actually cleared within three days.
- It is very interesting to observe the manner in which these mohalla sabhas are finalizing names for old age, widow and handicapped pensions. These are social security schemes of the government for poor people. Earlier, only those people which were either close to the councilor or to his cronies or belonged to the same party got benefits of these schemes. However, now the names of beneficiaries are discussed and decided openly. We thought that as soon as these schemes would be announced, almost everyone would raise their hands to claim benefits. However, that hasn't happened. For instance, the people of Badarpur Khadar village are very poor. They depend either on agriculture or do sundry labour work. In the mohalla sabha meeting at Badarpur Khadar, nearly 100 people participated. When the schemes were announced, the people consulted amongst themselves and suggested names of eight women, who according to them had lost their husbands, had no sources of income and were very poor. The councilor announced that there were more slots available and if more people wanted, they

could also get it. However, the people unanimously said that only these eight women deserved it. It really brought tears to the eyes of most people present on the honesty and truthfulness of poor people. It also shows that unless a person is really poor, he/she would not offer his/her name publicly for these benefits, else he/she gets publicly declared as a poor and this affects his/her dignity.

- These mohalla sabhas are keeping the politician constantly on his toes. Earlier, he/she could be questioned once in five years. Now, he/she can be questioned every month.
- There is no platform where the Indian bureaucracy can be directly questioned. They work in completely unaccountable fashion. These mohalla sabhas are offering those platforms where one can publicly question them. In fact, Mohalla Sabha meetings are bringing citizens and their elected representatives together. So the bureaucracy – i.e. unelected officials – have no choice but to join in too. They will be isolated if they don't.
- It is providing excellent opportunity to a councilor to be constantly in touch with each voter in his/her area. He writes two letters every month to each of his voters – the notice for the meeting and the minutes of meeting. So, even if everyone does not turn up for these meetings, each voter comes to know of what is happening through these letters. Besides the meetings are also widely discussed in the area. This makes the councilor immensely popular in the area and gives him/her huge political dividends.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is mohalla sabha?

General body of the residents of an area is mohalla sabha. It is not necessary for all residents to be present for a meeting. A notice of meeting is sent to all houses. Those present at a meeting form the mohalla sabha.

Pre requisites to start the process of mohalla sabhas in any area

There are just two pre-requisites:

- The councilor of that area should be ready to do it in that area. He should agree to the following:
 - What works should be done with municipal budget (including his own funds) of all departments in that mohalla would henceforth be decided by mohalla sabha only. If municipality wants to get any work done, they should present it before mohalla sabha and get it approved.
 - Payments would not be made to any contractor for any work done in that mohalla till mohalla sabha expresses satisfaction in a meeting.
 - List of beneficiaries for all govt schemes for poor people would henceforth be decided by MS
 - The councilor will bring all municipal officials and Delhi Govt officials (as many as possible) to mohalla sabha meetings every week
- There should be some NGO or one or two people in that ward who should take the ownership of doing MS in that ward. This means it will completely be their responsibility. It does not mean that they have to do everything. They could enlist volunteers. But it will finally be their responsibility to ensure that MS do take place.

Why will the councilor agree?

Councilors get two benefits:

- Elections to MCD are just two years away. Councilors need votes. MS brings a councilor close to each of his voters. A councilor, through MS process, interacts with each voter personally thrice every two months – first he invites each voter by sending a written invitation, secondly, he meets voters in MS and thirdly, he send written MOM to each voter after the meeting. We don't think he would need to campaign in next elections.
- Councilors also enjoy attending MS. They get a lot of respect from the people in these mohalla sabhas. Also, earlier, they used to be blamed for all the problems in that area. Now,

during mohalla sabha, the councilors are able to fix responsibility on officials for each work and hold them accountable for the same subsequently.

- Under law, councilors do not have any executive powers. People approach councilor for any problem. But councilor cannot do the work directly. He has to depend upon local officials. However, a councilor does not have any direct powers over officials. So, officials listen to the councilor very politely but would never follow their orders. However, the public would think that the councilor is either corrupt or ineffective. Now, when the officials are directly held accountable in public every week, they have started doing their work. Therefore, the councilors are no longer blamed. The officials have also started performing.

Why do the officials come for MS Meeting?

The Councilor asks them to come. Since the councilor is elected representative of people in MCD, the MCD officials have to agree to him. For Delhi Government officials, the councilor requests them. Some of them agree to come. Others do not. LG has issued orders that Delhi Police should attend all MS meetings. Therefore, local police officials do come.

Why do officials follow MS directions? They can make false promises.

Yes, they can make false promises. But that was possible if the MS meeting was a one off meeting. Since the meeting takes place every week and once every two months in a mohalla, the officials are sharply grilled by the people if they do not work. At times, their izzat is at stake. Therefore, it is not easy for them to ignore MS directions.

How to approach the councilor?

When you approach a councilor, please keep the following in mind:

- Do you already know him personally? If yes, you can go alone and discuss with him personally and ask him whether he would agree to start MS in his area.

- If you do not know him personally, try and find out some friend who knows him, who can take you with him.
- Even if you do not know anyone who knows him. Please do not worry. Take about ten people with you. First brief all these ten people about MS nicely so that they are convinced about this idea. Seek an appointment with the councilor. Tell him that ten of you wish to meet him to discuss some problems of the area. Then all ten of you should go and meet him and tell him that it is the desire of the people of that ward that such MS should start in that ward also. Tell him that some councilors in other areas are already doing this.
- Tell the political benefits to the councilor.
- Tell the benefits that would accrue to the people and that area.
- If he completely refuses, we will leave that area for the moment.
- But if he is a little hesitant, maybe, you can request for another meeting and take some swaraj abhiyan volunteer with you next time.

What is the follow up action required after mohalla sabha?

You should take neat minutes of meeting (MOM). Send one copy to the councilor. Ask the councilor to send copies of the same to the following:

- LG Office
- MCD Commissioner
- MCD Zonal DC
- Respective officials and Heads of those Departments for Delhi Government Departments
- Respective officials who have to implement those decisions
- Local SHO
- Police Commissioner
- Copies of MOM should be sent to each house in that area.

How much funds needed for organizing a MS and who will pay?

Funds are needed for the following:

1. Tent for the meeting. It is best to organize the meeting in some school building or some other such place which is available free of cost so that we can save the cost of tent
2. Sound system: We should have a very strong and good sound system. Either we need to hire it or if someone in that area can provide it every week, that would be the best.
3. Pamphlets: Two pamphlets will go to each house in each cycle of MS - letter of invitation for MS meeting and MOM of MS meeting. Normally, these costs are borne by the councilor because these pamphlets go in his name. So, he gets the benefits of these pamphlets. But if he is not willing to do it, we can start by collecting small amounts from friends locally for a few MS meetings. We are sure that after a few meetings, either the councilor will agree or the local people will chip in.

Steps to first MS

- Distribute invitation pamphlets to each house
- It would be best if some volunteers can go to each house, preferably in morning or evening, when most people are present at home, and tell people about the concept of MS and encourage them to participate. After the first few rounds, personally going to each house will not be required. Just distribution of pamphlets through someone will be sufficient.
- The councilor should write letters to DC and local officials that he is starting MS and requests their participation and cooperation. He should write that he will inform them about the dates of MS meetings on Phone in future and he requests them to participate.
- Councilor should also write letters to MCD Commissioner and LG informing them that he is starting MS meetings

How to mobilize people?

Each area would have its own ways to do that best. Some suggestions are:

- Distribute pamphlets
- Go house to house to inform people about MS
- Have a screening of MS film in some park in the evening
- Announcement through bhupu on the morning of MS meeting and also for a few days before that
- The way invitation letters and pamphlets are designed also have a huge impact on the turnout – provocative pamphlets are a hit.

How to draft a pamphlet?

The look and the content of the pamphlet have great impact on turnout. We should avoid big philosophies. Also, it should not be drab and boring. Mostly, it should be connected to local issues. Something like “Mayur Vihar summons MCD Junior Engineer” or “For the first time, people have a direct control over Muncipal funds and officials” are a big hit.

How to record MOM?

We should be careful in writing down each decision. Sometimes, decisions are not clear and sense has to be made out of what was said. It is best to read out all minute at the end of the meeting to ensure that nothing was left and that everything was correctly recorded.

Can people decide?

Most common refrain is that the people cannot decide in such assemblies. That people will fight on party lines etc. This has been proved wrong by the mohalla sabhs so far. When it comes to their immediate problems and necessities, people behave in a very sane manner. If a road is broken, all

people living on both sides of that road, irrespective of their party affiliations, will demand its repairs. Of course, people do shout and scream but finally, decisions are taken in most cases.

One practice that has helped prevent disruption of meetings is that right in the beginning, with everyone's approval, it is decided that whoever wishes to raise any issue, should write his/her name on a piece of paper and give it to the anchor. Names are called one by one and people come and speak on the mike. Even if some person from opposite party wishes to abuse the councilor, he comes on the mike, abuses him/her and goes back. It does not disrupt the meeting.

Who are behind this?

It is being run under the banner of Swaraj Abhiyan. Swaraj Abhiyan is not affiliated to any political party. It is not registered. It does not have any President or Secretary. It has a working committee, which takes all decisions. The people who take ownership of conducting MS in any ward are automatically members of that working committee. The working committee meets at least once a month. It can meet more often if needed.

Can we use our banners in MS?

MS is people's assembly. Whereas there is no problem, if an NGO puts up its banners in MS, however, there is a danger that the MS would be treated as a project of that NGO by the people and the councilor. It would be best if it were projected as councilors initiative so that he takes the debit and credit for the same. However, if there are many NGOs in an area, then there is no problem in all of them putting up their banners.

What do I do if councilor does not agree?

Right now, we wish to concentrate on those areas where councilors agree. We hope that when more than 50 councilors in Delhi agree, there would be a pressure on others also to join in. But if you can mobilize large number of people, say 100 or 200, then all of you can go together and try to politely and firmly request councilor to agree.

Where should MS take place – venue?

It should take place anywhere in that mohalla boundaries. It could be a park, or a dharamshala or any other public place where no one has any inhibitions of any kind. Sometimes, meetings take place in street itself.

What should we do if officers do not come?

It is the duty of the councilor to ensure presence of officials. If officials do not come, the councilor should be grilled in the meeting.

What should we do if some MOM is not implemented?

It is the duty of the officials of that department to ensure that minutes are implemented. And it is the duty of the councilor to pull them up for non-compliance. If minutes are not implemented, the officials and the councilor should be pulled up. Sometimes, people threaten those officials who do not perform, that their salaries will be stopped in next mohalla sabha meeting or that they would be suspended in next meeting. Obviously, the people do not have any such powers, but the officials do get threatened and humiliated and do the work.

Does MS have a legal sanction?

No. MS does not have a legal sanction. However, when large number of wards start having their mohalla sabhas, we hope that collectively all of us can put pressure on the government to enact a law to recognize these MS.

What has been the reaction of the Government so far?

LG has praised it a lot. LG has even issued orders that local police officials should attend MS. The MCD Commissioner has also appreciated MS. He has promised all support wherever they take place.

Are MS being supported or opposed by any particular political party?

No, on the contrary, councilors from both parties are joining in.

What comes under the purview of MS?

All departments of MCD would be covered. This includes roads, parks, sanitation, MCD hospitals and dispensaries, MCD schools, street lights, etc. Police also attends MS. Delhi Government departments like Ration, DJB etc are also requested to attend, but since they do not directly come under the control of municipal councilor, their presence is irregular.

What are the benefits of Mohalla Sabha?

- Government budget was earlier being squandered away on projects which were not the top need/priority of the people. Mohalla Sabha checks such waste of public money and ensures that it is spent on priorities decided by the people.
- Some check on corruption takes place as payment is made to a contractor only when mohalla sabha certifies satisfaction
- Benefits of government schemes start flowing to really needy as lists of beneficiaries are drawn up in open mohalla sabha meetings.
- People are able to get redress to their individual grievances against various government departments, as officials from all government departments are present at mohalla sabha meetings.
- Mohalla sabhas provide a platform, where all stakeholders are present – the politician, the officials, the public (both good and bad elements from public are present). Solutions to problems can be found on the spot. In future, when governments empower mohalla sabhas with more powers, they will be able to find solutions to bigger and perhaps more complex issues.
- The politicians, who were hitherto completely unaccountable in between two elections, are held accountable almost every week. The officials, who were completely unaccountable to the general public, are now publicly responding to their problems.

Draft of the letter to be sent by the councilor to LG, Mayor, MCD Commissioner, Zonal DC

To

Sub: To seek your support for *mohalla sabhas* in Delhi

Dear Sir,

People face so many problems while dealing with governments. The plight of Delhi's citizens is no different.

I have started an experiment in participatory democracy in my ward no _____. I have divided my ward in ___ mohallas. Mohalla sabha, of which all voters of a mohalla are members, meets every two months. The councilor chairs the meeting. All municipal officials of that area are invited. One by one, people come on the stage and narrate their problems. The municipal employees are required to respond. Wherever needed, funds are sanctioned on the spot by the councilor.

So far, the experience has been quite encouraging. In fact, after every meeting, we are strengthened in our belief that this is perhaps the only way in which we can make governance sensitive, transparent and directly accountable to the people. This is the only way to improve quality of governance.

I seek your support on the following:

1. Kindly direct all officials (at least of the rank of Junior Engineer and inspector), who provide any kind of services to this ward to be present in these meetings to respond to the public.

2. The officials should be prepared with various kinds of information that the public may seek in these meetings, like availability of funds under various heads, list of all works under construction, list of all works, whose estimates are being prepared, funds sanctioned under various heads, list of works which have been completed and are awaiting payment etc.
3. Kindly direct the officials that funds under all heads should be used as per minutes of these mohalla sabha meetings. If the department plans to initiate any work on its own, the department should present such plan in these meetings, seek people's suggestions and then implement it with necessary modifications.
4. I have announced in my ward that the payments would not be made to any contractor for any work done under any head in this ward till the mohalla sabha expresses satisfaction. May I request you to kindly direct the concerned officials to implement this strictly?

I seek your support and guidance in this noble endeavour.

Yours sincerely

Councilor, Ward No

Draft of a letter which you may like to write to your councilor

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are writing this letter to you to inform you of a very interesting experiment started by some of your fellow councilors in their wards in Delhi.

These councilors have implemented the concept of self governance or direct people's participation in their wards. They have divided their wards into 10 mohallas each. Each Mohalla sabha meets every two months. Local municipal officials are invited to these meetings. The following decisions are taken in these meetings:

1. The priority list of all works, which should be carried out with municipal and councilor funds in that mohalla, is drawn up by the public in these meetings.
2. List of beneficiaries for various Government schemes meant for poor people, is also drawn up in these meetings.
3. Councilors have also announced that payments will be made to contractors in these wards only after mohalla sabhas express satisfaction.

These meetings have had a great impact. Besides channeling scarce resources into those areas where they are needed most, they are also providing huge political benefits to these councilors. Because a councilor writes at least two letters to each voter every month under this exercise – to invite them for the meeting and to inform them of minutes of meeting. These letters and the open meetings keep the councilor in touch with his voters on regular basis.

The public of these wards have really appreciated this whole exercise. The LG of Delhi read about it in newspapers and has appreciated and congratulated these councilors.

Many councilors have already expressed a desire to implement this concept in their area. We would be happy to help you implement it in your ward also if you choose to do so.

With best wishes



Draft of the first letter/pamphlet that the councilor may write to each resident to invite them to Mohalla Sabha

Dear friends,

I have decided to place the direct control over all municipal funds and municipal officials of your area in your hands i.e. public's hands.

Now the people will directly decide how municipal funds should be used – what works should be done from them. The people will be able to directly hold municipal officials accountable every week.

I have divided the entire ward into ___ mohallas. All residents of that mohalla are automatically members of mohalla sabha. One Mohalla sabha meeting will take place every week. So, each mohalla sabha will get to meet once every two months.

The following decisions will be taken in a mohalla sabha:

1. Officials will be called upon to share all information about funds received, ongoing works and all other information that the citizens would ask for in these meetings.
2. Address resident complaints. The officials would give specific time frames within which they would solve each public grievance. Since these meetings would be regular affair, you can take them to task in the next meeting, if they did not meet their assurance.
3. Collectively take decisions on how MCD funds should be used in your mohalla. The priority list of works shall be prepared either through consensus or through voting. Funds would be sanctioned on the spot.
4. Prepare list of beneficiaries for various beneficiary schemes (widow, old age, and handicapped pensions).

5. Finally, payment would be made to a contractor only after Mohalla Sabha expresses satisfaction.

So, if you have any problem with MCD or with any other government department, or if you want any project to be taken up – be it related to street lights, parks, drains, roads, municipal schools, municipal hospitals, dispensaries, electricity, water etc – please attend your mohalla sabha. Efforts would be made to find solutions on the spot, issue directions to officials then and there and wherever needed, sanction funds then and there.

It is your money. I was elected to serve you. Without your directions and cooperation, we will not be able to work according to your wishes. So, please come out in large numbers.

Best wishes,

Councilor