The people's machinery — local democracy and development in Andhra Pradesh by S. Paramasivan

In May 1996, the Leader of India's Janata Dal Party told the Financial Times: 'The people who have energy but no land ... have become victims of the machinery of democracy. But this machinery should be the servant of the people.'

Now, panchayats must be constituted in every state, at the village, intermediate (block), and district level. The village gram sabha exercises some powers. In addition to the large amount of funds held by the panchayats, each state's powers to levy and collect local taxes have also been decentralized. The 1993 Act offers protection too: the state government cannot dissolve the gram sabha without a valid reason, and elections must be held within six months of the end of the administration's five-year term.

The Act has also revolutionized the role of women, who must make up at least 33 per cent of the elected council and, in alternate terms, a woman must be elected village panchayat President. In certain areas, where women are in the majority, this is a foregone conclusion.

Power always comes with responsibility and, in another section of the Act, the panchayats are made responsible for 29 different areas of local government. In a nutshell, with adequate powers and finances, the will of the people can now be reflected clearly in the implementation of appropriate development programmes.

For the purposes of this article, the most important are: minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, drinking-water, health, and sanitation — including hospitals, primary health centres, and dispensaries.

Teething problems

But the legacy of the absence of any democratic self-government at the village level for more than 20 years is

Self-government in India — Post-Independence to present day

Following Independence, Gandhian desires for the creation of a decentralized form of government based on the revival and reorganization of traditional forms of local self-government (the panchayats) down to the village level were not taken seriously by the Constituent Assembly of India. Moreover, the entire system of British district administration, which both concentrated authority at the district level and provided for very little participation by representatives of the people, was retained virtually intact.

- The Community Development Programme introduced a new type of administrative system based on the community development 'block' comprising approximately 100 villages each, and a network of village-level workers (VLWs). Planning was from the top down, with targets sent down the hierarchy from the Planning Commission to the state government, to be implemented at the local level.
- A 1957 report recommended democratic decentralization of power to the sub-district level to encourage popular participation in decision-making at the panchayat level; and to 'put the bureaucracy under local popular control'. In effect, it proposed a system of popular participation parallel to the block administrative system and, in principle, having powers of supervision and control over it.
- But, by the mid-1960s, support for panchayati raj had declined, with states fearing that if local institutions acquired real powers they would become alternative sources of political influence and patronage.
- In 1977, the Janata Government appointed a new commission on panchayati raj institutions which proposed that the zila parishads should be given control over all the development activities in the district. Panchayati raj bodies were to have two tiers (mandal and district) and, unlike most previously established ones, considerable powers of taxation.

Glossary

Panchayat Mandal local self-government administrative area covering 30 to 35 communities
Gram sabha village government
Zila parishad district board

Panchayati raj institutions in Andhra Pradesh have been revived or recast along lines of the Mehta recommendations; elections to the zila parishads and mandal panchayats were held in 1987.
still being felt; the sudden changes have caused a lot of confusion. To overcome this and, at the same time, to educate the community about the benefits of the new panchayat system, many NGOs run awareness programmes about the implications of the act. NGO staff explain to villagers how they can now effect real changes at the micro level and how, at the higher levels, bureaucracy slows down reform.

**Visvasamakya**

In partnership with many other NGOs, WaterAid's South India Office (WASIO) launched a programme which, by taking full advantage of the local government reforms, could work towards improving both local water availability and source maintenance. In Andhra Pradesh's Vishakapatnam District, 17 NGOs formed 'Visvasamakya' — Federation of Voluntary Agencies — with the objective of enabling people to become the genuine managers of their drinking-water sources. The Hyderabad-based Training and Development Centre (TDC), with the support of Oxfam, Save the Children Fund (SCF), and WaterAid, organized handpump-maintenance and management training.

The organizers of the course, which was launched in April 1995, envisage that the training programme will cover 14 mandals — so, within three years, they hope to reach out to 654,000 people. Their broad aims are to:

- equip villagers with the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the performance of the drinking-water sources;
- enhance the community's overall management capacity; change people's attitudes; and
- raise morale at both the community and the panchayat level.

**Logistics of representation**

The NGOs' first step was to arrange a series of meetings so that the villagers could organize themselves into a group. At the same time, meetings were held with panchayat officials at

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**THE LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM**

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*WHATEVER YOUR NEEDS CONTACT US TO MEET THEM*
which the NGOs promoted and clarified the new role of the community.

As its next step towards effective community organization, men and women, irrespective of caste and creed, were elected by their neighbours and assigned responsibility for planning and implementing a diverse range of developmental activities locally. So that the community groups’ activities can be streamlined further, these official representatives have individual responsibilities for particular areas such as street-lighting, and sit on Water, Roads and Drainage, and Irrigation Committees.

At the panchayat elections, most of these village-committee members were successfully voted in — a big advantage for making plans and decisions about future development.

**‘Hand-over’**

Once a satisfactory, dynamic organizational basis for change had been created, the NGOs worked at convincing the villagers of the logic of setting up their own funds, both for minor repairs, and so that people could bypass money-lenders; and talked about the importance of gaining the necessary skills to carry them out. Those with the right aptitudes were then selected to receive full technical training. While this was happening, community representatives and NGO staff discussed with panchayat officials the logistics of handing over the reins of management.

For their part, the officials laid down some conditions: the hand-pumps were to have a minimum idle time of 24 hours, the mechanics (as paid employees of the department) could not accept extra payments; and proper records had to be kept. But — and as a direct result of the new management make-up — after evaluating the programme and hearing from users that the hand-pumps worked reliably, the panchayat decided to hand over full responsibility for both the maintenance of the pumps and the funds available for spare-parts to the communities. The result of this agreement has been two major steps forward:

- spare-parts are available to the trained mechanics at all times; and
- the panchayat and...
Table 2. Existing situation, programme activities, and outlook

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<tr>
<th>Pre-implementation</th>
<th>Transition (1-3 years)</th>
<th>Projected outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Indian Government, state or district decides on programmes and executes them.</td>
<td>NGO trains community to organize village committees. Makes people aware of benefits of panchayati raj system.</td>
<td>Village committees are strong representative groups of communities.</td>
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<td>• Plans originate at highest level, divorced from community.</td>
<td>Community educated about basic W&amp;S requirements. Villagers trained to participate in articulating needs and formulating plans.</td>
<td>Village-committee members are elected to panchayats. Community, therefore, is represented, and plays active part in deciding programmes.</td>
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<td>• Budget held by central government: people have no idea about future money available.</td>
<td>System of spares banks and support to mechanics established — made possible by tapping government sources, mobilizing donor funds, and community’s contributions.</td>
<td>Government budget transferred completely to village committees. Committees take decisions on requirements of sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• People have no technical or administrative knowledge about development activities.</td>
<td>Trains mechanics and local community about resources and management.</td>
<td>Village community takes over total management of system.</td>
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Pradesh, the goal is community management of activities at the village level. The salient features are:

- programmes which emanate from the people;
- democratic assessment and approval of all programmes on a priority basis;
- the phased transfer of, firstly, the entire budget, then management of individual programmes, to the community;
- restricting the central authority’s role to monitoring and evaluating programme implementation and maintenance;
- providing jobs for the local, young unemployed; creating income and increasing villagers’ involvement in the initiative;
- as community participation gains momentum, people realize that they will have to pay for new facilities. They become stakeholders and owners of their village’s assets.

The project being implemented in the 14 mandals of the Vishakapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh is only an experimental attempt to demonstrate how authority and responsibility for improving people’s lives can be devolved to the people. The stages and goals are shown in Table 2 (left).

India has set in motion the process of decentralizing power and responsibility to the people through the panchayati raj system. NGOs are important actors in the country’s development scenario; with their lack of bureaucracy and close ties with the community, they can serve as the crucial link in the chain between the people and their government.

Visvasamakya is only one of many NGO community-management initiatives, but it is a good indicator of the changes that will take place in the near future. A mid-term re-view has confirmed that progress is being made according to plan. The 17 participating NGOs are confident that Visvasamakya will achieve its goals — not only community management of water supplies, but people taking control of their lives — and that it can be replicated successfully elsewhere.