

# 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.' In rural South India, where the villagers' priorities are water and jobs, a coalition of NGOs is working with their elected representatives to help make things happen.

ALTHOUGH DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED *gram panchayat* has existed in India since 1954, it was the passing of the 73rd Amendment for *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, which came into effect in April 1993, that really transformed the lives of rural communities.

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.

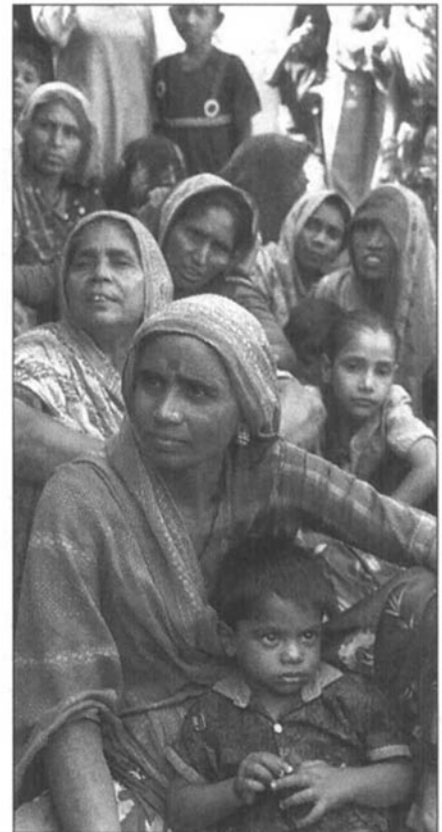
Power always comes with responsibility and, in another section of the Act, the *panchayats* are made responsible for 29 different areas of local government. In a nutshell, with adequate powers and finances, the will of the people can now be reflected clearly in the

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



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## 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 governments, 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

<i>Panchayat</i>	local self-government
<i>Mandal</i>	administrative area covering 30 to 35 communities
<i>Gram sabha</i>	village government
<i>Zila parishad</i>	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 Vishakapattinam 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



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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:

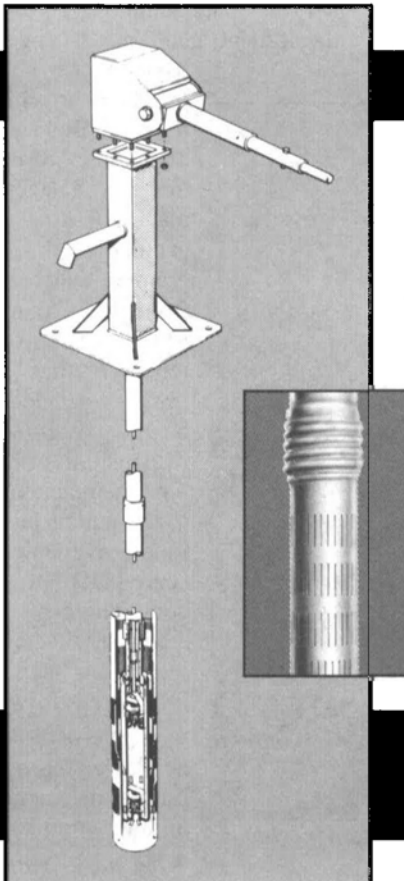
- equip villagers with the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the performance of the drinking-water sources;
- enhance the community's overall-management capacity; change

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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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 handpumps 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 1. Visvasamakya's project outline (1995-2000) in Vishakapattinam District, Andhra Pradesh**

Project activities	Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Train and motivate people to form village committees and generate funds.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Village committee will represent the community, and be responsible for the maintenance and management of the water and sanitation sources.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The community as a whole, and the committee in particular, will receive and stock spare-parts, mobilize funds and manage the budget; review the situation and assess needs, eg the need for a new source.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Transfer skills to community: jobs for local youth, providing supplementary income.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Select (through village committee) mechanics, and caretakers who are trained in the regular upkeep and preventive maintenance of sources, and in their repair and restoration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gradual transfer of responsibility for paying for work done: inculcate awareness within community of need to generate own funds to fulfil needs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide support to mechanics: this is reduced, gradually, and taken on by village committee.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Role of government mechanic becomes supervisory only: all duties performed by village mechanic. The mechanic — and through this post, the committee — gets access to government spare-parts. Local mechanic reduces delay in restoring pumps.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Co-ordinate close interaction between government mechanic and (trained) village mechanic. Government mechanic plays liaising role: he gets spare-parts from the department.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Budget provision for handpump and community is transferred to village committee which manages it through mechanic. Committee generates own funds to meet any other expenses.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide spare-part bank, and train mechanic and community to maintain and manage stock of (spare-parts).</li> </ul>	



Boys wash after working at the lime kilns, Dronachellam, Andhra Pradesh. Local, trained mechanics feel responsible for maintaining their community's pump (however vulnerable ...)

Heidur Netocny/Panos Pictures

the community have forged a much stronger relationship.

The programme is currently underway in five Andhra Pradesh *mandals*, each of which has received Rs10 000 (£180) from the *panchayati raj* department to improve handpump maintenance.

NGOs played a crucial role in what was, effectively, a transition period during which authority and responsibility was transferred from the central unit to the village committees; the *panchayati raj* plan to devolve all ownership, responsibility, and management of all resources.

The people elected to both the *panchayat* and the village committee, have a dual role — and responsibilities. As village committee members, they approve new schemes, control budgets, and circulate *panchayat* information, including their reasons for delays or problems in executing the programme. At the *panchayat* meetings, however, they are the voice of the village people; thus the participatory role of the community — and its responsibilities in the development — is ensured and encouraged.

The *panchayati raj* system exemplifies the true meaning of democratic government: 'Of the people, by the people, and for the people'. In Andhra



Neil Cooper and Jan Hammond/Panos Pictures

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;

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.

**Table 2. Existing situation, programme activities, and outlook**

<i>Pre-implementation</i>	<i>Transition (1-3 years)</i>	<i>Projected outcome</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Indian Government, state or district decides on programmes and executes them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGO trains community to organize village committees. Makes people aware of benefits of <i>panchayati raj</i> system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Village committees are strong representative groups of communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Plans originate at highest level, divorced from community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community educated about basic W&amp;S requirements. Villagers trained to participate in articulating needs and formulating plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Village-committee members are elected to <i>panchayats</i>. Community, therefore, is represented, and plays active part in deciding programmes.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Budget held by central government: people have no idea about future money available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>System of spares banks and support to mechanics established — made possible by tapping government sources, mobilizing donor funds, and community's contributions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government budget transferred completely to village committees.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● People have no technical or administrative knowledge about development activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trains mechanics and local community about resources and management.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Committees take decisions on requirements of sources.</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Village community takes over total management of system.</li> </ul>

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

□ 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 Vishakapattinam District of Andhra Pradesh is only an experimental attempt to demonstrate

## Reference

1. Brass, Paul R., *Politics of India since Independence*, second edition, CUP, Cambridge, 1994.

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