

# Panchayats Won't Do!

*Panchayats, structures for local government at the base in India, though most welcome, are not yet the solution, and they cannot bring people's health into peoples' hands, says this article.*

*If we want to ensure participation, and dignity and self-worth of the people, we need to go beyond panchayats, it argues.*

*We need networks of much-smaller-than-panchayat-participatory structures, if panchayats themselves are to deliver the goods, it suggests.*

Animator : Well, friends, our motto is, "People's health in people's hands".

People : Fine!

Animator : To understand its implications in full, we must keep in mind that health, for us, is more than healing or preventing diseases.

People : How is that?

## Fundamental right

Animator : Well, we abide by the definition of health given by the World Health Organization. It says: "Health is not merely the absence of disease, but a state of physical, mental and social well-being..."

It also adds a tag at the end : "which is a fundamental human right".

People : That's grand.

Animator : Health then is ...

Person 1 : Our happiness.

Person 2 : Our welfare.

Person 3 : A matter of justice. A fundamental right!

Person 4 : Life in its fullness.

Animator : Can we say now that our health is in our hands?

People : How can you say that?

## To those who pay most

- Animator : Let me put it this way. What all do we need to be healthy?  
I mean, to be well?
- People : We need food.
- Animator : And, to have food?
- People : We need jobs.
- Animator : And to have jobs?
- People : We need to bribe.
- Animator : Bribe whom?
- People : Politicians, bureaucrats and others.
- Animator : Then our health is not in our hands.
- People : Definitely not.
- Animator : Can we leave it with them?
- People : No!
- Animator : Why not?
- Person I : Benefits and chances go to those who can pay most and not  
to those who need most
- Person II : That would mean the rich will get richer and the poor will  
become poorer.
- Person III : It is against justice. Against fair dealing.

## When wronged?

- Animator : Suppose some ordinary man or a poor man - let us call him  
Ramu - is wronged this way. He is bypassed and denied his  
due. What does he do?
- Person I : He will grumble.
- Person II : He will fume.
- Person III : He will break pots at home in anger.
- Person IV : He will groan among his friends.
- Animator : And then?
- People : He can't do anything. He will keep mum.
- Animator : And what happens if the anger is constantly in him?
- Person I : He will be unhappy.
- Person II : He will beat others.
- Person III : He will get sick.
- Animator : But, why does he behave like this? Why can't he do something  
to get his rights respected.

Person I : He doesn't know where to go.  
 Person II : Nor will they give attention if he goes.  
 Person III : Where will he go and speak?  
 Person IV : And who will listen to a small man like him?  
 Animator : You mean small man because he is small in money, power and status?  
 People : Sure!  
 Animator : And suppose he is a member of an association or union?

## **Our Associations**

Persom I : Even that doesn't help. They may carry black flags, go for a demonstration or a fast. But after a few days run out of steam.  
 Person II : They may not have enough people to go on fighting. To go on fasting without going to earn something to feed their families.  
 Animator : Is there any way out?  
 People : What?  
 Animator : We are supposed to be the largest democracy in the world. Supposed to be ruled by a government of the people, by the people and for the people? And our plight is this. What has gone wrong?  
 People : That is a point.  
 Animator : Well, we do have forums. But they have two main problems. One, that they are active just once in five years. During the election time. The rest of the time they are dead. They don't exist at all. People have nowhere to go in the mean time. Second, they are too big for our "small men" to handle.  
 People : Could you explain?  
 Animator : Sure! Let me begin with a simple principle: You need to have a big voice to be heard in a big forum. The bigger the forum the bigger the voice you need. Bigger either by itself or through an artificial help like a microphone.  
 Now, here we are a small forum. Everybody can talk and be listened to.  
 But, the moment this becomes bigger, you need bigger voices to get across.  
 And when the 'big people' with big voices get elected and form parliaments and legislative assemblies, we have a government of "the big" by "the big" and for "the big".

People : And small people have nowhere to go.  
Animator : What could be the solutions?  
People : What? ? ?

## Smaller forums

Animator : Suppose we have smaller forums?  
Person I : Makes sense. But how?  
Person II : Not merely smaller. But active. That is not once in five years. But thought out.  
Animator : And it must have some kind of permanency and conduciveness about it for people to easily come and gather and have their discussions and decisions.  
Person I : All that sounds well. But how?  
Person II : So you mean to promote panchayats?  
Animator : Not exactly. Now that you have mentioned panchayat, let us discuss its viability in this context.  
Person III : They fit in with whatever you mentioned. Criteria like being small, being active, being permanent, and being naturally conducive units.

## How small

Animator : But the question is how small is small enough and how active is active enough, etc.  
Now let us take the question of smallness. How small should a basic forum be? Thousand families? Five hundred families? Hundred families? Or just about thirty families?  
The criteria to answer:  
☞ Should be small enough for the small man to communicate, to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to give enough time to the details of his problems;\

- ☞ Should be manageable by the small person. In the sense he should be able to get himself, his problems and views across and get responded to with ease;
- ☞ Should give each one a sense of belonging and dignity and equal worth. In such a way that no one feels isolated or alienated; and
- ☞ Should give full scope for a wide gamut of life's activities and celebrations.

Person IV : A panchayat still fits the bill.

## Not exactly Panchayats

- Animator : Let us take an ordinary village. It has some 750 families. Do you think people could sit together and talk?  
Panchayats have easily some 2000 families on an average. That is nearly 10,000 persons. Will they all be able to sit at discussion and attend to various “small issues” of “small persons?”
- Person V : No!
- Animator : What happens then?
- People : It will be like our big villages where, too, the big rule and the others become secondary people.
- Animator : Who will be the “big people” in panchayats?
- People : Those who get elected.
- Animator : This again leads to representative democracy, where for the intervening period between the two elections to choose representatives, people don’t matter. And their voice doesn’t count.  
We need to provide at least at some level, provisions for on-going participation. We need to ensure direct democracy where people talk not only once in five years, but throughout.

## Feasible?

- People : In that case, the number of families that make the basic forum has to be much smaller.
- Person VI : But, is that practical? Wouldn’t it be unwieldy?
- Animator : Actually, there are efforts made throughout the world where in units of about 30 families people share in decision-making. They call it by various names like Basic Communities, Grassroots Development Communities, Grassroots Economic Communities, Neighbourhood Groups, Neighbourhood sabhas. Holistic Health communities, etc...  
It is a fast-growing movement. Begun first in Latin American countries, there are already hundreds of thousands of such communities throughout the world  
Here, people meet together frequently, often once a week, sing together, celebrate together, learn together, discuss the problems together, decide together, implement together, do

the follow-up together, etc.

They are natural neighbourhood communities where every family in the neighbourhood is automatically made a member though all may not be equally active and involved.

They elect their representatives in terms of office-bearers or persons-in-charge for various concerns. And these people are networked through representative structures at various levels like those of the village, panchayat, panchayat union, district etc.. The representative networks could go up to state, national, continental and global levels.

People : That would be wonderful!

### **Benefits Galore!**

Animator : What could be the advantages of such a system?

Person I : It brings the world straight into the hands of the people.

Person II : Nobody will feel left out, marginalised or alienated.

Person III : At the same time, the network of representative structures could mean wider impact for the poor man's voice.

Animator : Let me explain it like this. If anyone is wronged, as we mentioned earlier, now he has his basic community to go and talk about it.

Since the community is small and often within calling distance, they gather in no time and give him a listening.

And mind you, being listened to is already being empowered. The poor are rarely listened to. While they are listened to they feel that they too are of worth, people of dignity and so on.

And if the basic community itself is able to solve the problem they solve it then and there.

And if they are not able to do so, their representatives take the problem to the village representative council. And, when it goes there, it doesn't go as the problem of one person but that of the entire basic community. Similarly, if it has to go further, on account of the village committee not being able to do anything about it, to panchayat committee, it goes as the problem of the entire village and not as that of the particular basic community alone.

And, if it reaches the district committee, it goes with the entire backing of the district which no official would dare to slight. Thus, we will have a responsive and responsible world.

### **Subsidiarity**

- Person I : But wouldn't there be too much of passing-the-buck, and shirking of responsibilities, on the shoulders of higher structures, thus leaving the top bodies overloaded and hence ineffective?
- Animator : Well, one principle here is that of subsidiarity. This means whatever can be tackled at a lower level is not referred to a higher level. Responsibility and action will be more at the bottom of the network.
- People : Will this come to India soon?

### **UBSP & CBCS**

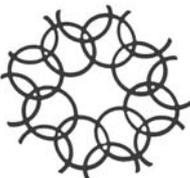
- Animator : It has already come. Already there are thousands of such communities sponsored both by the government and voluntary agencies.
- People : Government?
- Animator : Yes, the Urban Basic Services Programme, promoted in the areas of the cities has just this framework of neighbourhood groups and their network.  
So, too, programme like Community-Based Nutrition programme (CBNP) and Community-Based Convergence Services (CBCS) which are experimentally pioneered by the governments in some districts in collaboration with UNICEF.
- People : Tell us more.
- Animator : Underscore the word 'Convergence'. It means all the decisions regarding the various benefit schemes of the government will be made by the people at these basic communities and their network at various levels.  
Say, for example, there are some IRDP loans to be sanctioned. It will not be a bureaucrat or politician who would be pressurizing to give it to certain people, but the basic communities themselves would choose the beneficiaries. The same way with regard to other income-generation programmes.

## Distracton

- People : Then, isn't the panchayat arrangement a distraction.
- Animator : We could also be positive about it. From a situation where it is too much centralized at the top now, in the panchayat bill, a growing decentralization process is there. This is something to be welcomed. We will accept this joyfully and work towards making it a success.
- But, we do say this decentralization is not decentralization enough. And it will not be a total success unless it is linked to the above neighbourhood small communities programmes.
- People : Can't they be linked together?
- Animator : That would be the best thing to do. That would call for further imaginative legislation.
- One possibility is to turn the present "wards" of panchayats into sets of ongoing active participatory communities at the base and make the panchayat a representative network of such ward communities.
- Well, we need not wait for the government to do. We ourselves can start forming our own networks of neighbourhood communities and get them linked at wider levels. Even at global level. And then...?
- People : People's health will be in the hands of the people.

\* *First published in Health Action, October 1995, this "chat-session" has been translated into various languages and discussed in various seminars.*

*For further details and literature*



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