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"HOW MANY COMMITTEES DO I BELONG TO?"

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Edinburgh/ICFRE JFM Research Project

INTRODUCTION

A major aspect of concern in Joint Forest Management in India has been the constitution of the forest protection committee, and its role. This committee is variously known as a forest protection committee (FPC), Van Samrakshana Samiti (VSS), Village Institution (VI), Local Institution (LI), or People's Institution (PI). In most cases, the organisation is village based. Existing studies have focused on the relation of this organisation to the Panchayat as the other main actor in village level development (Poffenberger and McGean, 1996; Kadekodi and Chopra; Chatrapati Singh, 1986). In the course of our research however, we have found that the Panchayat is often not the only parallel committee to contend with, and that its role in relation to the FPC is sometimes quite insignificant. Instead we find that there are a multiplicity of 'participatory' committees, such as watershed committees, health committees, education committees etc., which are set up under the auspices of different government departments, and all of which compete for the time and attention of villagers.

In this paper, we examine the notion of 'people's participation' as it is envisaged in government policies and reflected in the formation of committees at the village level. Some of the reasons advanced by government staff and non-governmental development practitioners for the plurality of committees include their efficiency in the management of particular resources, the diversification of the village leadership base, efficiency in targeting needy sections, and so on. Villagers, on the other hand, have their own views on the function of these multiple committees. We attempt to explore the extent to which these reasons hold good, and go on to examine the working of these committees vis-à-vis the Panchayats and other traditional committees of the village. This study is based on fieldwork done in the Dewas, Sambalpur, Paderu and Rajpipla divisions of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, AP and Gujarat states respectively.

We start by looking at the historical background to participation - the construction of the village community in the colonial period, relative neglect of village based development during the Nehruvian period, and finally, the return to 'participatory' village based organisation since the eighties. In the next section, we take up Dewas in Madhya Pradesh as a case study, listing the number of different committees formed by different departments. The paper then deals with the response of the bureaucracy and the villagers to the plurality of committees, and the relationships between these committees and the caste and other Panchayats. Finally, we consider the impact that extension of Panchayati raj is likely to have on current and future arrangements for the representation and involvement of villagers in forestry and development work.

RETURN TO THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY

The "Panchayat", or governing council of village elders is said to have been found in the villages of India, in some shape or form, since ancient times. King Prithu is said to have made use of Panchayats as a unit of administration when colonising the Doab between the Ganges and the Jamuna. In the Manusmriti and the Shantiprava of Mahabharat, there are references to the existence of *gram sangha* or rural communities (which implies a certain cohesion), and a description of these rural communities is also to be found in the Arthashastra of Kautilya who lived in 400 B.C. In the Ramayana of Valmiki there are references to the Ganapada, which was perhaps a kind of federation of village republic, and an account of the village commonwealths during the seventeenth century is to be found in Sukracharya's Neetisara. (Reddy, M.Venkat, Kurukshetra, April 1995, Pg:117). Although such accounts have been cautiously confirmed, as well as modified, by contemporary historians (see Thapar, R., 1984; Stein, B., 1980), it is the references to Panchayats and Ganapadas in ancient Vedic texts, translated into English for the first time by orientalist scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that probably more than anything persuaded British officials in the early nineteenth century that here was to be found an elemental unit of Indian society and politics upon which they could found their own administration.

One of the greatest enthusiasts was Sir Charles Metcalfe, a revenue official in north India during the nineteenth century, who in his memo to 1832 Select Parliamentary Committee on the East India Company's charter called the villages "little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts". This extreme impression was almost certainly the result of the unusual circumstances of the time, where warfare and political disorder, much of it provoked by the British themselves, had forced many north Indian villages to fortify themselves against bandits and Pindari raiders and, of necessity, to become as self-contained as possible. (Dewey, C., 1972). The writings of Metcalfe and others from this period helped persuade the government to adopt a *malguzari* or *mahalwari* or village-based system, as opposed to the *zamindari* and *ryotwari* systems adopted elsewhere, in the reorganisation of the system of revenue collection in the newly ceded and conquered territories of north India, but beyond this major innovation in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, the idea had but limited impact, or relevance to, other aspects of government policy. However, the writings of Metcalfe, Maine and others conjured up a powerful image of successful village self-government which influenced many later authors, officials and historians, and most of the western-educated leaders of the Indian nationalist movement as well. Thus, Jawaharlal Nehru confidently asserted in his *The Discovery of India* (a remarkable history written in prison, without access to archives or notes), that in olden days "the Village Panchayat or elected council had large powers both executive and judicial and its members treated with great respect by the Kings officers. Land was distributed by this Panchayat which also collected taxes out of the produce and paid the government's share on behalf of the village. Over a number of these village council there was a larger Panchayat or council to supervise and interfere if necessary."

Of course, although village committees could always be found, none ever quite matched up the image of the 'village republics' conjured up by nineteenth century authors. The consensus thus emerged, particularly among nationalists, by the early twentieth century that although they *had* once been powerful, they were progressively undermined by the introduction of the British legal system, by British methods of revenue collection and, outside of northern and parts of central India, by the introduction of *Zamindari* and *Ryotwari* Land tenure systems. This fits with common sense, although the truth of the damage done (if any) will never be known. What is clear however is that by the time the British left India the ideals of nation-hood and of state-power, along the lines that were fashionable in both the

socialist and capitalist west in the early twentieth century, were firmly imbedded in the minds of the Indian middle class who were the new leaders of independent India.

Whether or not one accepts this view of the history of the idea of Panchayati raj there does still clearly remain a disparity between the notion of statehood adopted by the elite and that enjoyed by the masses. At the very least it may be said that, villagers do not feel responsible for state property. India may be a democracy, but the interests of different stake-holders are clearly not given equal respect. Thus, following the modernisation of Indian society as envisaged by the architect of modern India Pandit Nehru, whilst there has been industrial progress, there has also been a progressive diminution of the people's ability to maintain control and responsibility over their own lives and a weakening rather than a strengthening of their influence over the affairs of the state.

It was Gandhi who, at the time of independence, talked about the importance of people's power in the making of the independent India. He wished to revive the village Panchayats, as he understood them (in terms not dissimilar to Metcalfe's) equip them with a democratic base of their own and give them adequate powers, so that in true sense "Swaraj" or self-rule could be attained. Gandhi's idea of village Swaraj was that the village would be "a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which interdependency is a necessity. The government of the village would be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there would be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, the Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. the individual is the architect of his own government". (Panchayati Raj in India, Pg. 55)

Not all agreed with these views of Gandhiji, however, and with his death the concept of people-based development lost its focus and momentum. Even though it was felt that state power and peoples' power should together be used for nation building, the preoccupation with state power and its responsibility for development and welfare of citizen meant that official attempts to support Panchayati Raj with community development, Khadi and village industries programmes all went on under the patronage and ultimate control of the state (Saint, Kishore, Pg.2). As the fruits of these programmes proved disappointing 'Panchayati Raj' was increasingly supplanted by ideas of 'Block' and 'Area' development.

In the decade of the seventies however criticisms began to be heard of the dominant developmental paradigms that were practised in the countries of the North after the second world war and adopted in the newly independent countries of the South in the fifties and the sixties. The experiences of the fifties and the sixties had shown the fundamental weakness of the top down, GNP focused, growth centred strategy of development based on professional expertise and modernising technologies. The government and the funding agencies were constantly under attack from academicians, development practitioners and others. This, together with the increasing cost of managing development, ultimately persuaded them to change the approach. This was reflected in a shift in policy towards a participatory approach to development, an approach which offered the prospect not only of fulfilling the ideals of equity and democracy in developmental work, but also offered the possibility of that work being carried on more effectively and more cheaply. As articulated by Guy Gran, this new approach assigns to the individual the role not of subject, but of actor "who defines the goals, controls the resources, and directs the processes affecting his or her life." Not only did this involve the empowerment of ordinary people, but also the devolving of managerial responsibilities onto villagers - an approach which made the strategy particularly appealing to

a cash-strapped government. This critique of the strategy of development was then applied to education, social welfare, health, agriculture, and almost every arm of government.

People's participation, in most of the government policies, is envisaged as having a committee in the village - on the basic understanding that the institutional set up at the village level would be able to achieve the objectives of participation in an easier way by ensuring that previously excluded groups or classes are involved, given a forum to speak and enjoy the benefits of social and economic development. The concept took some time to become accepted within the government, but due to the requirements of various funding agencies, and the increasing realisation of government policy makers that depleting natural resources can be saved only with the empowerment and involvement of the rural masses in all the stages of development, various departments of the government began using village based committees as the basis for all of their strategic developmental interventions in the village. This became (or at least it was hoped it would become) an effective wave of 'privatisations' of large areas of government developmental work. The approach adopted though was largely 'I manage, You Participate', with most of the judicial power and finances being controlled by the departments as they had a fear that they may be misused and that the department then would be held responsible.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES WHICH ENVISAGE GROUP FUNCTIONING AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL: A CASE STUDY OF DEWAS DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH

In Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, in the government departments that we contacted, the following schemes are under implementation which are group based. From this brief summary it will be apparent how complex are the range of institutions to which villagers have to relate.

a. Mahila and Bal Vikas Department:

1. *DWACRA* : Development of women and children in rural areas - formal, registered (with department of Mahila & Bal Vikas) encourages a group of 15 women, preferably Below Poverty line, for income generation and provides seed capital grants of up to Rs. 15,200.

2. *Mahila Mandal: under ICDS*. Envisaged as an informal body for discussing issues related to women: vaccination, cleanliness, family planning, etc. There are 116 Mahila Mandals in the 116 Anganwadis of the Sonkutch block. Registered under the ICDS [Integrated Child Development Scheme] worker. The Women and Child Development Department, Madhya Pradesh, in its letter dated 9/6/94, (ICDS/94-95/454) has given the objectives of formation of Mahila Mandals at the Anganwadi level. It argues that the formation should be at this level on the basis that one worker is not sufficient to reach out to the whole community for the purposes of health education and improved nutrition. Community co-operation is required for his/her assistance, and hence the creation of Mahila Mandals.

3. *Thrift groups of women: Rural women development and empowerment project*: under the newly introduced International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) scheme administered by the Madhya Pradesh Mahila Arthik Vikas Nigam. Its purpose is: "Building viable women's institutions for effective management of assets and control of sustainable income.... To ensure that the process of empowerment is self-sustaining, the project focuses on the building of institutions of poor women which will have the capacity to continue to further their own development on an on-going basis well beyond the project period. The

project would adopt the self help group as the appropriate people's institution which provides poor women with the space and support necessary to take effective steps towards greater control of their lives in private and in society. The emphasis would be on the development of self help leading to self reliance." (Madhya Pradesh Women's Economic Development Corporation: strategy of the rural women development and empowerment project). The National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD) has the concept of "Self Help Groups" for credit as well, but this is not so prevalent in the villages. The Rajiv Gandhi Jal Grahani Mission strategy paper also directs to promote thrifts groups of women in the villages.

b. Health Department

1. *Gramin Swasthya Samiti*: every tenth household, plus the leaders of the village are taken as members. Discusses the issues of village cleanliness, vaccination, family planning: like the Mahila Mandal of the Integrated Child Development scheme. The civil surgeon claimed that there are 1017 such samitis in the 1017 villages of Dewas District. The board shows the existence of the committee in the village, but not the knowledge of the villagers. They are supposed to hold meetings on every second Monday of the month.

2. *Mahila Swasthya Sanghas*: Guidelines for the constitution of such MSS available from the Health Department do not clarify the objectives of the formation of the MSS, but do mention that since women folk constitute about 48.1% population as per 1991 census, it is essential to involve women in the programme through constitution of MSS. Among the 10-15 women members to be selected by the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife she should ensure that "the members are drawn from all strata of the community specifically those belonging to SC/ST and backward classes". The guidelines also put emphasis on the fact that "It is pertinent to note that women's groups/Mahila Mandals/Mahila Samaj/Mahila clubs are functioning actively in various parts of the country. It would be better to activate these women's groups which are already existing and involved in welfare activities rather than creating a separate group in the community".

c. District Rural Development Agency

Watershed Committee: formed under the Rajiv Gandhi Jal Grahani Mission, which is supposed to participate in the planning, implementation, and post implementation activities, including taking care of the accounts of the committee. A formal committee, its equity focus is ensured by the rules by which it is incorporated.

d. The Saksharta Mission

Saksharta Samiti: Informal committee formed under the Literacy mission, the members being those who take an interest and can influence others. As the "Bhunsar", a wall paper magazine of Dewas district on literacy (Jan. 5, 1996) put it: "Due to the non participation of the people, the existing schemes are not running well. Hence, in order to give a momentum to the mission's work, who can formulate schemes to do so and who would implement these schemes". The literacy mission envisages the leaders of the village's newly literate men and women, along with elderly men/women and those linked with bhajan mandlis and cultural celebrations in the village.

e. Department of Education

Gram Shiksha committee: Committee of the leaders of the village, which meets on two occasions of the year: Jan. 26 and Aug. 15. (no documents available - information base: school teacher and the village leaders).

f. Forest Department

Gram Van Suraksha Samiti / Forest Protection committee: the MP state government orders of 1991 and 1995, based on JFM.

g. Police Department

Gram Raksha Samiti: formed under the order of Police chief Director, Madhya Pradesh police department, dated Jan. 5, and subsequently Jan. 23 1996, no. 1/9/96/6/96. These are informal committees registered under the Police department, the Gram Raksha Samiti who are suppose to be a link between the public and the Police as informants, and do the patrolling at night at least thrice a week, the objective being to help the Police in protection.

h. PACS

Primary Agricultural Co-operative Society: Political turned co-operative body, with elections on political lines. Presently the BJP runs the show.

i. Tendu Patta Co-operative

Primarily composed of those who collect NTFPs (Non Timber Forest Produce), the dominant class and caste is in the management committee.

j. Oil seeds Co-operatives

This group was formed by the oil-seed growers who wanted to get help financial or material during the harvesting season.

k. Sugar cane Co-operative

This group was formed by the sugarcane growers who wanted to get financial or material help and wished to sell their produce at a particular price together. As sugarcane is an important crop, politicians soon became involved, with the societies being dominated by one party member or another.

In addition, there are also the following **TRADITIONAL VILLAGE COMMITTEES:**

Navdurga Samiti

Informal traditional committee on the basis of Caste: Sendho Patels have a separate one and the Malvi-Chamar have another, basically of youth, for the celebration of "Garba" in the village.

Ram mandir

The Sendho caste group are constructing a Ram temple in the village with their own collection of money. The committee keeps an account of the grains collected at bigha-dhadi: two and a half kgs. for every bigha per household.

From the above description we can see the total number of committees formed by the Madhya Pradesh Government comes to twelve although a few may have been missed out. Besides the Government formed committees there are also two informal ones. This situation prevails in almost all every States where the programmes mentioned are being implemented. We have also come across informal committees in every State, which look after the religious and sometimes social and political affairs of the village. Some of the programmes mentioned

result from Central government directives, so all the State government has to do is implement them, like the formation of the Mahila Mandals under the Department of Women and Child, or the Forest Department's Forest Protection Committees, or the committees formed by the Education Department to increase the literacy rate of the country . Other schemes have been worked out by the State government itself to improve performance in particular areas, like the Tendu pata co-operative of Madhya Pradesh or the Dudh Mandali of Gujarat. In the table below we have tried to identify the committees which are common in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.

List of Government promoted local groups based schemes in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa

Sl.	Implementing Department	Group/Schemes	Madhya Pradesh	Orissa
1	Women and child development	DWACRA	Y	Y
2	--do-	ICDS-Mahila Mandal	Y	Y
3	--do--	Thrift Society	Y	Y
4	Health Department	Gramin Swasthya Samiti	Y	N
5	--do--	Mahila Swasthya Sangha	Y	Y
6	Mission: under Collector	Saksharta Mission	Y	Y
7	Education department	Gram Siksha Committees	Y	Y
8	Forest Department	VFC/ VSS	Y	Y
9	Police department	Gram Raksha Samiti	Y	N
10	Registrar of co-operatives /agriculture	PAC	Y	Y
11	--do-- / Forest department	Tendu Patta Co-operatives	Y	N
12	--do-- / Agriculture	Oil seeds Co-operatives	Y	N
13	-- do -	Sugar cane Co-operative	Y	N
14	National Bank for agriculture and rural development	Farmers club	N	Y
15	--do--	Non Formal Education Program	N	Y

MULTIPLICITY OF COMMITTEES IN A VILLAGE: FROM THE VIEW POINT OF THE BUREAUCRACY

Despite the efforts of the bureaucracy at the administrative level, and the best efforts of the program set up to integrate the functions and various programmes of the government which ultimately percolate down to the village level, each department works separately. The concept of a District Co-ordination committee does exist, but it is as good as non-functional. The meeting takes place but the objectives of each programme and the success achieved is discussed without any consideration being given to the efforts which should have been made to co-ordinate activities with other agencies. For example, in Orissa the District Rural Development Agency, Social Forestry and the Territorial Forest Department all had funds for plantation work but all worked in their own areas with no co-ordination over the employment of workers. So, when the planning is done for development programmes, it is done

department wise, based on their own targets and their policies which are obviously subject specific. In most of the cases, the different government functionaries are not aware of the existence of village-based committees if promoted by another department. However, in the case of Joint Forest Management, where the presence of Village Forest committee and the Forest Protection committee have been made felt, it is the Forest Department, which has taken the initiative to co-ordinate efforts with other group based and even individual schemes from other departments, albeit to a limited extent. Most of the district officers otherwise denied even the need for having an integrated approach at the village level. The NGO, MASS, in Orissa, has also felt the same regarding the government departments' inability to attend a single forum in order to discuss the village's issues. In Orissa in the context of Joint Forest Management even that stage has not started as the Forest Department refused to recognise the existing self initiating protection committee and tried to form their own committee which has led to discontent in the minds of the village communities.

On the other hand, one aspect which repeatedly came up was the scope for diversified leadership that the multiplicity of committees provides to the villagers. It is argued by a number of officials, *and* by some villagers themselves, that new leaders can emerge with a number of committees functioning in the village, and that a second line of leadership can get ready for involvement in the political scenario by serving on such committees, which is always beneficial in the long run.

It was never openly stated, but various departments felt the need to have their own "separate" committee in the village: 'why should we work through a group formed by another department?' was their implicit point of view. Even the funding agencies, in many cases, insisted on having a separate group of their own, which is reflected in the Government's efforts to promote plurality of groups at the village level.

Another argument put forward is that one committee any way can't carry out multiple functions, and just like the sub committees formed any where else, even in the village, the Government promotes separate committees for separate reasons. Some times however different areas are assigned to different wings even in the same department to implement their programmes. For example, different wings of Forest department were involved in plantation work in Orissa: the social forestry wing was concentrating on the revenue lands while the territorial wing was concentrating on the forest lands. Then in came the District Rural Development Agency, who gave money to the Youth clubs for plantation on the revenue lands, leaving three different bodies carrying on plantation work separately from one another in the same area.

MULTIPLICITY OF COMMITTEES : HOW VILLAGERS SEE IT

For the villagers, the multiplicity of committees is amazing, and sometimes, more often than not, confusing. In Mohada, in Madhya Pradesh, for example, the JFM committee - the FPC (Forest Protection Committee), has undertaken soil and moisture conservation work in the forest, and so has the watershed committee under the Rajiv Gandhi jal grahan mission. Every single villager in Mohada is familiar with the FPC's existence and partly its role too, since it is associated with a promise not to disturb the encroachments by cultivators into forest areas for the time being, whereas few are aware of the very existence of the watershed committee, and hence people think that the work done by the watershed committee in the forest land is done by the forest committee only. People thus become confused about the actual implementation of programmes. For them, the work matters, no matter who does it or which department it is. This is also linked with the manner in which the concept of committees has been thrust upon the people. Had the villagers been told the purpose, modalities and so on, it

might have been possible to achieve the purpose of the committee whilst avoiding confusion, but this has not happened..

In Khudamunda all the villagers are aware about the youth club, a self initiated organisation, now registered under the Societies' Registration act, since the recruitment base for the club is the whole village and this is the only forum therefore where all the matters of the village are discussed. Not recognising the forum already existing in the village, the government, guided by its own policies, started another school committee, but the villagers are not able to recall the names of the members of this committee as it tends to be a meeting of youth club members only, and it is they who ultimately who decide about school matters. Thus, the villagers don't care whether it is one committee or the other: they only care that the decisions arrived at are acceptable to all. The Government's non-recognition of their own village committee, thus only resulted in the non a acceptance of the external structure imposed by the Government.

Why have different committees for different programmes of the government? Nathu of Mohada, Madhya Pradesh, very aptly put it: "what 's wrong? the more the number of committees, the more is the benefits we would get!" Villagers in Lapanga, Orissa, feel that having different committees would help them get benefits from different departments. Whereas, Jasratbai of Pardikheda, M. P., very spontaneously said: "kutch nahi, vo sub to alag alag tarike se paise khane ka rasta hai" ['All these different committees are just different avenues for people (especially government officials) to make money.']. If that's the way people perceive the committees formed by the government departments, then how effectively do they enact and promote the ideals of community participation? At Pardikheda, the chairperson of the JFM committee, who is also on various other committees, very aptly put it: "The government departments don't have time for us on a single day: They have formed various committees so that different departments can come and hold meetings of those committees at their own convenient time".

Sometimes an NGO working in the village adds further to the complex of committees. Its area of operation is not very large, so when it gets money from the donor agencies, be it government or the non-government, it tries to fulfil its targets by forming a committee even if there already exists one. In many villages of Orissa we have come across villages where a mahila samiti has been formed by the NGO as well as by the government under its programme of Integrated Child Development Scheme .

It is true that leaders of the village would like to corner the benefits of the programmes, but at the same time, it also creates confusion or reduces the efficiency of management if the same leader is a member of more than one group, in which case he or she will have neither the time or energy to cope effectively with all of them. Saroj Nath of Khudamunda is typical: she is a member of the Bidi worker's health committee and is also in the block committee which looks after the feeding programme of the government (she herself did not know what government department created it) and she faces the problem of having to meet targets for family planning for both committees, failing which, her meagre salary and the benefits she gets are threatened to be stopped: the burden, in addition to all her domestic responsibilities, is considerable.

Another example from Khudamunda village, shows how the leadership is being concentrated in a single household, who are genuinely interested, but find it difficult to do justice to all of the work demanded by a committee. In this case the committee member is a government school teacher, who is the president of the youth club, member of the school committee, and is also involved with an NGO in forming a network of self initiated forest protection committees at the Grampanchayat level, while his wife is involved in the Mahila Samiti and Farmer's club as well as the DWCRA group. The work in these committees do not just involve attending the meetings but maintaining the records, collection of loan money and

also interacting with the outsiders and officials. Along with all that they act as money lenders in the village, heading an informal group which collects money every week and gives out the money to the two or three members who need it. They have landed property too, which all together makes them so busy that it is virtually impossible for them to devote sufficient time to all of the committees.

DO THE MULTIPLICITY OF COMMITTEES REALLY BROADEN THE BASE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE VILLAGE ?

On analysing the leadership pattern of the Pardikhada village, it can be seen that the leadership has basically emerged in two ways: either it has (a.) arisen out of the "Pateli" system, or (b.) has grown out of the workings of party political politics in the village. The "Pateli system of the Gwalior state was a system of inheritance, and the further it divides would be called " Aath aani or chavvanni Patel". The land tax is divided among all equally, and it continues to be inherited by all the members of the lineage in succession. Thus, the leadership in Pardikheda, is rotated around the "Pateli" and when compared with the family tree, most of the leaders are seen to be interrelated within one or two generations.

We can find examples in Orissa where the educated, economically rich families, some times the traditional headman's family, or families belonging to the upper castes, get elected or selected onto all of the committees. In Lapanga the upper caste families (the Sendhos) have been dominating all the committees formed by the government, the same elite also being found in the Mahila Mandal or the Forest Protection Committee or the Puja Committee, and in the meetings arranged with government officials.

One can easily see that apart from the Panchayat, where the leadership has broadened due to reservation, which has brought in a few persons of the deprived castes and classes, in no other committee has the membership gone beyond the Sendhos in the first instance, and the Pateli leadership of the village in the second. This situation was explained to us by one of the spearhead team members of the forest department, who said that the lower FD staff have felt their power and income threatened with JFM coming in, so they have co-opted leaders, choosing leaders who influential enough in the village to be able to work to their personal advantage. Thus there are instances, where the fuel wood collectors innocently said: "earlier we were bribing only the Nakedar, now we give money to the chairperson of the VFC (Village Forest Committee) also. "

The project strategy of the Rural Women Development and Empowerment Programme (under World Bank / IFAD), describes the situation as follows:

"In recent years working with groups has become the fashion of all government and non-government programmes and as a result the fundamental features required for sustainability of a group and the formation of a group which really has the capacity to develop into a viable institution have got lost. In most cases, groups formed under existing programs have been imposed, formed and controlled by outsiders for the purpose of achieving the promoter's rather than the people's objectives, for meeting targets, and for the purpose of delivering benefits to a group of passive recipients of benefits. Some of the factors which are destroying the group concept are the pressure to achieve targets and the focus on 'selecting eligible beneficiaries'. As a result, the social nexus which would have provided a basis for group viability does not exist or is very weak."

It should also be realised that although reservations in the Panchayats have given a chance to women and the backward castes to participate in the development planning of the village, the selection of the leaders even from these sections has depended upon the sympathy received from the dominant Sendho caste leadership, which has, again, effectively, only

reinforced the elite power structure of the village, although, on paper, the Sarpanch would be drawn from among the SC/STs. The confidence with which Netaji, as he is popularly known, the leader of the dominant caste in Pardikheda, says that Raman, the Sarpanch, would come back from wherever he is going, if I call him, proves it all. Had it been up to the Harijans only, there was another person in the village whom everybody had favoured for the office of Sarpanch, but he is opposed to the Sendhos, so the numerous Sendhos households supported Ramesh for the post, since "he would not disagree to what we say". Still, it is definitely a positive step forward, since, the leaders of the Sendho caste openly say, that the Harijans were not traditionally the leaders of the village but admit now that this is necessary: "Reservation has created space for them to come forward, otherwise we wouldn't have allowed them to come forward".

The Indian Law Institute's report on Panchayats, Forestry and the law by Chhatrapati Singh and Vijay Kumar gives as an example the Tamilnadu experience of SIDA aided forestry projects, wherein another committee called Forest Protection Committee was formed, which in fact, "turned out to be an extension of the Panchayats, because those who can get on to the Panchayats are also the ones usually available in the villages to become members of the committees". The village leaders of Pardikheda agree that the leaders of the various committees formed by the government are more or less the same. So when asked about why then, so many separate committees have been created, the school teacher of Pardikheda put the whole thing in a nutshell: "in all the committees, the leaders are the same, and they meet every night under the Neem tree of the village and discuss various issues. So, even if the committees are separate in the same village, the leaders being the same, the planning of the village is done in a holistic manner".

This fact is emphasised in the general notion about the members of any committee. Whenever we ask anyone about the membership of the committee for any purpose, since the samitis are more or less non functional except a few, people would generally reply: jaante nahi hai, pur Netaji aur Manoharsingji honge...". This boils down to the selection of the leaders of any committee from only a few. In Khudamunda also there are only a few persons who are involved in all the committees. These people have a number of things in common like being vocal, educated and belonging to relatively better economic status families. These members become the spokesmen for the whole of the village on each and every aspect, and this sidelines the problems of certain classes or categories which leads to resentment in the minds of other villagers. Sometimes these people also start favouring people of their own community, a problem highlighted by the women of Khudamunda who felt that the Mahila Samiti Secretary was being partial to the women of her community. She defended herself by saying that she did not decide who has to be given a loan since it was a collective decision in which even the NGO was involved. Usually it is the more vocal women in the village who are called to all the meetings and they are sometimes hard pressed for time as a consequence, as we saw in the case of the women leader Khudaamunda who attends to her household chores as well as attending meetings. She finds it difficult to delegate, as if she requests someone else to go they complain they feel helpless because of their inability to communicate properly. By the same measure, in Lapanga, the membership of various committees, even the womens' groups, all boiled down to a few upper caste families.

Thus, the general perception of the ordinary villager is that leadership is in the hands of a few. This raises the question as to whether the formation of multiple committee in a village really does broaden the leadership in the village - as is argued by the bureaucrats - or whether it merely tends to concentrate power in the village ever more strongly.

Another important and significant point which came to the forefront in Orissa was that in some cases all the hamlets adjoining a revenue village joined together to form a Forest Protection Committee, but when the department decided to form a VSS they either paid

attention to the revenue village only or spent most of the time in the hamlet or village in which they found they could most easily communicate with the villager, registering it then in the name of that hamlet or village. Inevitably this leads to discontent among the protecting groups. For example in Kinaloi, Orissa the Forest Department formed a VSS only involving the main Revenue village Kinaloi. Its other seven hamlets did not like this and felt that the revenue village was trying to get all of the benefits for itself even though over the years everyone had participated in protection work. For this reason the villagers of Khudamunda, a hamlet of Baradungari revenue village in Orissa, which is protecting about 100 acres of village forest, are trying to convince the government officials to declare their village a revenue village. Sometimes without understanding the politics of the village the forest departments wants to involve all of the hamlets: this may also lead to difficulties as the villagers may in some instances have divided up the forest into the portions to be managed by individual hamlets. Reuniting these groups can lead to failure of the VSS, as happened in the case of Jhankarpali, Orissa. From the above cited examples it is clear that the formation of committees solely according to the government's own criteria is not always beneficial or productive.

PLURALITY OF COMMITTEES : ADVANTAGES

This is not to say that there cannot be advantages in having a multiplicity of committees. The committees formed by the government can be broadly categorised into three types :

- a. general purpose: health, education, etc.
- b. target group: women, deprived sections, etc.
- c. user group: those who use the resource - generally the approach used for natural resources: watershed association, irrigation co-operative, etc.

When the concerned membership as well as the objectives are mutually exclusive, for example, there is definitely a need for the formation of separate committees in a village. Thus, for example, a group of DWACRA [Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas] is a target group by itself and needs therefore to have its own committee. Similarly, there are well established arguments about the size of functioning group. That is why the maximum size of the NABARD - promoted self-help groups is limited to 20-25. If the membership is any greater, there has to be two groups in the village, but the membership is then exclusive, the leaders are separate.

Another argument put forward in favour of a multiplicity of committees is that the management is more efficient if each has only one objective to achieve. The irrigation co-operatives of Tamilnadu have shown that when the society was accepted by the entire village for irrigation purposes, the society consciously decided not to enter into any other social disputes of the village, since, their involvement in such aspects could disrupt their acceptance by the villagers and the pursuit of their primary objective. Furthermore, in the case of the resource user committees promoted by the government, like those for forest or irrigation or watershed management, it should arguably be the user group which is involved, rather than the village as a whole, since not everyone from the village would be using the resource, and it could also be covering more than one village, as in the case of a watershed.

Relations of committees with Panchayats

It was mainly after the eighties that a great many government policies began to emphasise "people's participation". It was during this time also that the Panchayati Raj Institutions were given a constitutional status with the 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments. Under

this, the Panchayats are given a many more powers, apart from the setting up of reservations for the unprivileged sections of women and low castes.

In order to ensure local people's participation, the most readily available form of institution was the rural Gram Panchayat. Nonetheless, separate committees have been formed by the government departments in order to achieve their concept of "people's participation". This is despite the fact that the Panchayats are statutory bodies, whereas the other committees are informal, registered only with the respective departments, who have no legal standing. After the constitutional status was given to the Panchayati Raj institutions, all the government departments in their policies gave directions about involving the Panchayats at various stages. However, when actually seen from the field, the link is weak and in many cases, as good as non-existent.

PANCHAYATS AND OTHER COMMITTEES : ARE THERE ANY LINKAGES ? - VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

Many committees have a very poor relationship with the Panchayats. When we talked to the villagers in Madhya Pradesh, the answer which we got was: "In the Panchayats meeting, only we are there: the Sarpanch, upsarpanch and the panchs are all from our village only. Whereas in the jungle Samiti, it is the government's Samiti, where they come and hold the meeting." While in Orissa the response was "what work can they do when they have no knowledge about the village situation" . This response is found typically where four or five villages, who in turn may be having small hamlets, together form a Gram Panchayat. Where this happens, the chances of having the Sarpanch from the village where the committee has been formed something of a gamble. According to the JFM resolution issued in 1993 in Orissa, the Naib Sarpanch was made the chairperson, and then, after subsequent amendments in the resolution, the advisory member, but the villagers still feel that the inclusion of Naib Sarpanch is of no use as she may be from other villages, and in Orissa, as the law requires definitely be a woman, it could be she may not be able to come for all of the meetings and will have to depute someone else to take her place.

As far as the relations between the two are concerned, in Madhya Pradesh, due to World Bank funding, the VFCs (Forest Protection Committees) are seen as an option only when the Panchayats lack funds and the demands of the people have to be met, while in Orissa. due to the lack of funding except state funds and meagre World Food Programme funds,. there has been no interest generated at all. In Pardikheda, the Anganwadi was built up using the Forest department's funds, and in Mohada, the culverts were built by the Forest department. In Chainmena also the VFC contacts the Panchayats when they are told about the funds available with the FD for Chainmena. This indicates the frequency with which funds are diverted from their intended purpose in order to gain the support of the villagers.

The VFC in Pardikheda has lots of fund: thanks to the Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project of the World Bank. The village suffers from severe water shortages, since none of the hand pumps in the village are working, and people have to get water from the borewells, which operate only for twelve hours in twenty-four when there is electricity. The proposal for an overhead tank and a motor on the Panchayat borewell has already been sanctioned for the last six months, but work has not been initiated as yet. No-one knows the real reason. However, Jasratbai, who is a member of all the committees, being the daughter of the village, said that the reasons given to her by the Chairperson of the VFC is that they have come to know that a motor cannot be put on the bore of the Panchayat ownership. The agitated Saurambai asked us: "Sarkar ek hai, hum bhi ek hai, to fir Panchayat ke hole ke uper Van Vibhag ki motor

kyun nahi lag sakti ?" [The government is one, we are also one, then why can't an FD motor be put over a panchayat hole?].

Other committees have absolutely no link with the Panchayats. Under JFM, at least the idea is that they will have Panch members on the committee, but in many committees that is not even envisaged. Thus, there are lots of Samitis in the village, which are functioning exclusively from the Panchayats. This can be a disadvantage as the Panchayat can provide an overview of proceedings, which a single committee cannot do, can represent the interests of a larger number of villages, and has the power to raise issues at a higher level: say, Tehsil or District level. This linkage with a higher level can backfire occasionally, however, introducing party politics into the village in areas where it is not welcome.. This was proved to the people of Khudamunda, Orissa during the Panchayat election conducted whilst we were there. According to the reservation policy 30% of the seats are reserved for the women candidates, and the Tabadabahal Panchayat under which Khudamunda falls was to elect a women Sarpanch. Tulsi Oram of Khudamunda is a very vocal lady and decided to contest the election. She was approached by many political parties to become their candidate and they were willing to spend money on campaigning also, but she refused. The Lady who finally won belonged to the Janta Dal.

Sometimes the leaders of committees become more powerful than the existing sarpanch as more money is being poured into the individual village committee while when there is a distribution of money for development work it is for the whole of the panchayat which, as stated earlier, may be having more than one village. A very good example of this was found in Kilgada, by Prafulla Gorada, a member of our team based in Andhra Pradesh. Kilgada is a village of 700 households where after the formation of VSS, the VSS Chairperson became overnight more powerful than the Sarpanch, the main contributing factor being the money which is being given to fund development activities.

' "I asked him how he feels after taking the responsibilities of chairmanship of VSS. He answered with pride: " I know the business of the game. I have good contact with all the officers. What ever problems arise in the village I solve that immediately. You ask any one in the village, they will say that it is me who will come to their rescue at any time, day or night. No body cares to the sarpanch now" [He laughs]. What he will do for the people? "After the formation of our VSS. I took personal interest in getting our school upgraded. The roads repaired, drinking water supply and tiles for roofing were supplied. Within a short span our village is well organised." '

WHY A STRUCTURE PARALLEL TO PANCHAYATS ? : RESPONSE OF THE BUREAUCRACY AND THE NEW SITUATION CREATED BY PANCHAYATI RAJ

The view of the bureaucracy towards panchayats is very clear: Panchayats are elected bodies, and although supposed to be representative of the people, don't remain so in reality. Although the Panchayats are supposed to be non-political, they are all coloured by party politics, which does not allow for a fair representation of village interests. Hence, the need for the formation of separate committees at village level. A structure parallel to the Panchayats is also necessary, as it gives scope to the bureaucracy to have parameters of their own choice in the membership and the executive body, addressing issues of equity in particular..

The other important reason which has come from the bureaucracy for favouring separate committees is that in Panchayats the government departments do not have any control over the expenditure of funds. Not trusting the Panchayat system, the bureaucracy wants to have control over the disbursement and expenditure of money. Thus the watershed committee on

paper has been given all the rights for decision-making including even the finance related ones, yet the Secretary cannot actually withdraw money without the joint signature of the Project Implementation Agency leader. Hence, one of the top district officers said: although the financial rights are with them, the Panchayats are all politicised. If we hand it all to them "Sarpanch to pura kha jayega" ['the Sarpanch will "eat" it all.'].]

It is also said that one committee, such as a Panchayat "cannot do so many functions at the same time, and hence it is necessary to have specialised committees" (oral conversation with DFO, Dewas). Also that only those who are interested in a committee would remain in it, and that the proliferation of committees would give villagers the opportunity to work in an area in which they are interested and to avoid all others. Similarly, it is argued that the multiplicity of committees would create a broader leadership base and provide scope for a greater number of villagers to become members of committees.

According to the officials in certain spheres, specialised committees are a must because they are able to motivate their fellow villagers more effectively than outsiders. Members of such committees are also aware of the problems faced by the villagers at first hand, unlike those who come to the village only once in a while. But this again depends on the department who wants to form the committee. For example the formation of the Mahila Samiti is beneficial because the village women find a forum to come together where they are able to work for their benefit. Sometimes though this becomes a problem if the village is large and there is disagreement about the leader of the group. Likewise, in Orissa the formation of the Van Samrakshana Samiti (VSS) is seen by the Forest Department as non-beneficial, as they feel that the villagers will protect their own patch and destroy the neighbouring Reserved Forest under the pretext of protecting their village forest.

However, whether the new committees formed by the government departments are really themselves non-political is open to question. Our field work shows that whenever there is money involved things start becoming political, be it Panchayat, be it the PACS or be it even the JFM or watershed committees for that matter. In Andhra Pradesh the programme of JFM became fully political, with the Chandrababu Naidu Government using it as a publicity base. In Dewas in Madhya Pradesh, with a huge amount of Rs. 4000/hectare (with an average of 500 hectares in the village) available to be spent by the watershed committee and the local Secretary, political interference was seen in the Gram Sabha itself where the selection or election of the functionaries was to be done.

Whatever the government departments think is in any case becoming increasingly irrelevant as under the new policy of Panchayati Raj, of the activities of the various departments are slowly coming under the supervision of the Panchayats. The various administrative functions of the Collector are also being divided and the rural development authority has been handed over to the Director, DRDA, with he being the ex-officio CEO (chief executive officer) of the Jilla Panchayat. Already some seventeen departments, if we are not mistaken, have been handed over to the Jilla Panchayat. This will slowly reduce the various government departments to merely a technical/advisory role. Execution of their programmes will all take place at the Panchayat level. Given the trend of this handing over, which is quite legitimate in view of the 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments, what in future will be the role of the former departmental committees? Will they be disbanded? And what about the promises made to them that in 5 years or 10 years they will receive a like share in the harvest of forest produce, or the micro planning that has gone under these committees?

Micro planning became very much the fashion in the 1990s. In Dewas, micro planning is done for the Madhya Pradesh forestry project in villages under JFM, as also under the watershed villages of the Rajiv Gandhi Jal Grahana mission. Panchayats also have the duty to prepare their own micro plans. Is there and will there be any link between these three?

Village Muvada is coming under the watershed micro planning exercise as of 1997. From the range office, a proposal was sent to the Divisional office to take up the same village for the micro planning under the Madhya Pradesh forestry project also. Panchayat micro planning on the other hand has yet to be started. Quite where this all will lead is as yet unclear, but the various plans embarked upon seem likely to conflict.

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP AND COMMITTEES: DO WE HAVE ANYTHING TO LEARN FROM THE PAST ?

If the government really wants to form a committee to forward community participation and wishes it to be honest, it clearly has to take great care over the appointment of leaders. This is a problem in many government committees. Thus in Pardikheda, Netaji is seen as the foremost person and is regularly consulted by government officials, thus proving that the government either does not know the village properly, or has really is not interested in community participation. From the perspective of the villagers, Netaji has only become a leader by creating factions in the village. He rotates money and has thus accumulated wealth, he is not trusted at all. In the case of their own Ram mandir committee, where in every season, from every Sendho household, two and a half kilos of Juwar or wheat is collected per bigha, the keeping of accounts, a highly responsible and trustworthy position, is done by someone else entirely. However this person is not in the forefront of most of the government committees: the reason being, according to the villagers, he is too honest. So, when it came to handling their own money, the villagers have selected another leader, but when it comes to the government's money, it is the vocal political leader, who is sought after by the government officials.

This problem is illustrated in the case of the Forest protection committees being formed by the Orissa Forest Department. The Forest Department is trying to bypass the self initiated committees who have been protecting the forest since the seventies or even before that in some cases. They sometimes try to muscle on to these committees and convert them into VSS. They are also trying to sideline the small federations of protecting committees which have come up. Forest officials see them as a threat because they feel that these committees are trying to undermine their power. One DFO went so far as to state that these committee had started with good intentions but have now become arrogant and are demanding compensation and a share of the harvest if the forest department wants to be involved in their committee. In Kinaloi where the initial stage of committee formation was done one can feel there is a substantial change in the relationship between the members of the old and new committees. The old committee members are being sidelined as the new ones are solicited by the forest department. But in places, like Patrapali, where the traditional committee members join the new members in forming a new committee the relation is more cordial. Had it been the department's sole objective to protect the forest it should arguably have given recognition to the existing committees and regularised them, since they have long been accepted by the people themselves, but this is not generally happening. Thus in the case of Lapanga in Orissa, where 700 acres of forest area has been protected for nearly 100 years with no help from the forest department, the department even today refuses to recognise it as a legitimate committee.

Traditionally it is said that in M.P. many villages once had an informal committee - known as the "Panch" - which resolved disputes in the village, and also decided on development issues concerning the village. Nowadays though this is rare, even in tribal areas, where also they exist in a form that is far from ideal. We would thus differ here from the Bhuria Committee Recommendation, as we have seen that in tribal society, as elsewhere, there is not as much homogeneity as is commonly believed. In Dewas district, for example,

the Bhilalas are considered to be superior to the Barelals, the same group being higher than the Bhils. Internally, they have no relation of "roti-beti": intermarriage or commensal relations. The Panch system which exists today typically exists on the basis of caste alone: there is no doubt about this. Today Pardikheda has no Panch of the village, but the Panch system exists, as in other villages, in an intact form at the caste level. The Bhopas, who have no say in the Gram Panchayat, very aptly put it: "Our Panch is much higher than this Panch" - the reason being - "this Panchayat is corrupt, it is a Panchayat of those with money". The caste Panch systems are more impartial in nature and the fines are also so strict that the person would never commit the mistake again: the Gram Panchayats don't have any such provision. However, the tribal dominated villages, which are more homogenous in nature, still have a village Panch system functioning. This raises the question of what is the appropriate form of a Panch institution in the more homogenous or more heterogeneous village. The more homogeneous a village is, clearly the easier it is to have an equity based committee. The village Mohada clearly shows that. It is not only that a village Panch system still functions there, but they have gone into the Panchayat system very smoothly, the traditional Panch members becoming the Panchayat members. However, when it comes to the formation of other committees in the village by the different government departments, the same individuals and families come up also: be it a co-operative, be it a society formed by the NGO or by the government. Thus, unless one becomes conscious of the equity issues and unless what is all too often put last is put first, consciously, the committees will tend to be captured by the influential, affluent, vocal persons of the village, and the whole purpose of having the committees in the village is defeated.

In Orissa, it is said that the Gontia along with the village elders used traditionally always used to decide about the affairs of the village but today the influence of the gontia has decreased as the direct descendent has often left the village to live in Sambalpur or some other place. Thus in Khudamunda the younger brother of gontia is consulted but he is not an active member in any of the committees. However there are some villages like Lapanga where, even if the Gontia is no more, the other Panch members have formed a committee of their own consisting of village elders who look after the affairs of the village such as the resolution of disputes, pujas and even the forest protection which was originally started by the Gontia with the help of his Panch. This committee in Lapanga is not registered nor does it have equal participation from all castes or tribes of the village, but still its decisions are heeded by all the household of the village. But in Khudamunda the role has been taken up by the youth club (the name is a misnomer as the members, all males, are both young and old), which is functioning like an old Panch where all manner of subjects are decided by these people acting alone. All village males are members of the youth club but only a few are involved in the actual decision making. Besides the above Panch system the villagers also have self-help groups which help each other in work activities such as house building and field preparation. Even today in Khudamunda we find two groups of about 8 to 9 members (tribals) who work one day of the week in each others' houses during house building or field preparation in exchange for only 'Handia' or rice-beer.

While in other villages, where there never has been a Gontia, we find that the problems or conflicts of the village have for a long time been resolved by a group of elders who may belong to particular tribe or community or a mixture of the elite group of the communities or tribes of the village, the cases thus dealt with never reaching the police. We agree that these groups are often discriminatory in nature but they nonetheless play an important role in maintaining the peace of the society. As an example of this one can look at the way water is distributed to the fields from the ponds (Kanta) in the villages of Orissa during the dry months. The distribution is in such a way that irrespective of caste or the tribe every farmer gets a share. Likewise in the rice-growing areas of nineteenth century Chhattisgarh, village lands were regularly redistributed according to a system known as lakhabatta (see Bates, C.,

1987). Whether interpreted as the result of a desire for 'equal shares' or as a response to commercialisation, or population growth, the system persisted for many years and clearly required a high level of co-ordination and leadership in the village. However imperfect, such systems of village self-regulation have existed, still exist, and continue to perform useful functions..

SUMMARY

On the basis of the field study done in the four states it becomes clear that with the wind of people's participation blowing, the government has tried to accommodate it by the formation of committees at village level. To the villagers these multiple committees are a means of getting more and more benefits from the government. They see it as an opportunity to get more employment and village development, no matter who does the work : be it the forest department or the Rajiv Gandhi Jal Grahana Mission. Often there are genuine persons sitting on the committees, but they cannot always devote sufficient time to justify their membership. A lack of co-ordination and integration of objectives, has also resulted in confusion and an inefficient functioning of these committees at the village level. For government departments the formation of a committees as a separate entity in the village is a way of making its presence felt: hence the multiplicity of committees. Some of the committees are formed because they have to be formed according to equity-based regulations, but where this is the case the villages and even the staff are sometimes unaware of it. Thus on the basis of field work we have concluded that the argument made by government officials that the multiplicity of the committees gives scope for broadening the leadership base with the focus on equity rings hollow. On the contrary, it has led to a concentration of power in the hands of a few people. Since the groups are formed primarily to achieve the objectives of the programme, meeting targets and to deliver benefits, the equity focus has been much diluted. Reservation has helped to broaden the equity base, but there is a long way to go before it will actually be realised.

Some of the government's directives do mention the need for consultation with the Gram Sabha/Gram Panchayat concerning the formation of committees, but effectively the linkage between the two have been meagre. Panchayats select the beneficiaries for IRDP, TRYSEM schemes, which can provide alternative or additional income sources, but involvement with the JFM committee is usually absent, despite the fact that the forest department wants to give alternative sources of livelihood to those dependent on the forest. In most cases then the Panchayat and the committee become rivals and compete for funds for the purposes of village development, whenever that is an efficient and interested Ranger is able to motivate the Block Development officer to let the members of his Forest Protection committee have the funds for a particular development project.

Politicisation of the Panchayat according to the bureaucracy necessitates the setting up of a parallel structure, an argument that does not at the same time apparently hold true for other committees. Since the Panchayati Raj has been given a constitutional status and various rural development department are now slowly being handed over to the Jilla Panchayat, it is uncertain how these multiple committees will function in the future.

CONCLUSION

We are not opposed to the idea of their being a multiplicity of committees. A plurality of committees existed in the past, as is reflected in traditional systems, and it is there today among many castes, which have their own Panch system to help organise activities, including celebrations. Even within the same caste, they have committees for different objectives, for which they have more or less the same leaders of the village or caste. However, their objective is to carry out work efficiently, with honesty and proper management. It depends

therefore what is the objective of government interventions in the village, in terms of developmental programs and the formation of committees. If the purpose is merely to carry out work of the government departments, as outlined in the objectives of the guidelines for the formation of the committees, then there is no reason why there could not be just one committee in each village, ignoring the leadership pattern which emerges, and have work that needs to be done implemented through this one committee. But if the objective of the government is to ensure people's participation in real terms, and have an equity focus, then care should be taken in the formation and more so, in the implementation of these committees, and a proper co-ordination required between all of them.

However, before forming separate committees through different departments, possibilities of working through already existing groups, if any, should be explored. As discussed above, if at all there is a need for forming different committees, the purpose, the target groups and user groups should be carefully examined before a decision is made to proceed. Despite the fact that the Panchayati Raj system has its own limitations, we feel there is no reason why the co-ordination role should not be given to the Panchayats, which could assume the role of nodal agency for the implementation of all government programmes. One can't escape from reality nor can we live in the history of the past, arguing that villages never previously existed in the form in which they are now found, having only been established as such for reasons of convenience by the British. It is precisely because it was a unit of convenience that we have to accept it as a unit today, despite the fact that the government definition of a village is limited to its administrative boundaries, often not taking into account the social factors which constitute it. The Panchayat can act as a federating, co-ordinating body for the implementation of programmes: it does not necessarily need to have the implementation done by its own members. It can delegate the work to an already existing institution in the village, or it can create another committee according to need. However, the basic unit of co-ordination should be the Gram Panchayat alone, with Gram Sabhas acting as an internal mechanism cross checking the functioning of the Panchayat. Just like in the Scheduled areas (as in the Act based on the Bhuria committee report), it ought to be possible to modify the structure of Panchayats to suit local circumstances. To this end an in-depth study needs to be undertaken to ascertain the ways in which Panchayats can be made more effective as agents of change in all forms of village society.

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