

## **Report on the trip to India to visit local village councils and to gauge the extent of public participation at local government level**

### Itinerary

11- 14 January; Visit to Andrapradesh, which is one of the most successful states in the implementation of the Panchayat Raj system. Visited Bangalore Anantapur, Chilkipur and Puttaparthi

14-16 January – Visit to Rural district of Haryana to meet with traditional Panchayat leaders, attend a meeting of the local Panchayat and get the opportunity to talk to villagers and council members.

17-19 January –attended the ISS conference launch of the IBSA Local Governance Forum where I had the opportunity to meet senior members of Government and Panchayats from other parts of India

### Interviews

Dr.George Matthew - Director-institute of Social Sciences-new Delhi

Dr.Nelly Rodrigues - Zilla Panchayat membermColva District, Goa

Ms.Ajitha Mano Thangaraj - Chairperson,Dostrict Pancayat,Kanyakumari

Prof.Sivaramakrisnan - Former Secretary to the Government of India

Dr.Sanjay Agrawal - Research Fellow –Panchayat Raj –ISS

Dr.Jashphool Singh - Haryana Nav Vuyak Sangam (NGO)

Rothak Village Panchayat

Members of the Zilla pancayat of Delhi

Ms Suneetha Reddy, Chairman of Village Pancayat Anantapur, Andrahrapradesh

### 1. Introduction

India is a country of over one billion people, 70% on whom still reside in the villages of India. It was Gandhi's idea to devolve power to the village level so that powers granted upward would be completely accountable to the majority of people in India. This idea

was lost after the assassination of Gandhi and resuscitated in the era of Rajiv Gandhi whose Government passed legislation (the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment) to enable these village structures to become a legal part of the system of governance in India. The main purpose of these amendments was to significantly widen the funnel of representation for the people. The village Panchayat, which is an elected body with one representative for a population of 500 to 1000 was to be the building block of the whole system.

## 2. The Panchayat Raj System

The three tier Panchayat system of village Panchayats, panchayat samitis and zilla panchayats was devised with proximity to citizens and democratic structures as its organising principles. In the urban sphere local bodies are broadly categorised as nagar Panchayats, municipal councils and municipal corporations corresponding to the first tier at the town or city level.

At the moment there are 232278 village Panchayats with an average population of 10 000 to 15000. This works out to about twelve representatives per village Panchayat.

In the case of municipalities the municipal ward would be the counterpart of a village Panchayat. There are presently 3641 local municipalities in India.

Panchayat Raj has become the third tier of governance within the Indian constitution and has far reaching consequences for decentralised government in India. In this system it was envisaged that each village would have such a local council that would be elected from residents of a particular village. Political parties were constitutionally not involved at this level though this is seldom the case. From this first level there would be higher level Panchayats consisting of representatives of a number of villages and this would increase in size until a representative would be elected to the State level. This system was meant to ensure that leaders at State and National level were accountable to their main constituency in the villages of India.

## 3. Representation of women

The representation of women in the Panchayat is guaranteed by the constitution to be a minimum of 30% of elected representatives. This has had far reaching consequences for the emancipation of women in the villages of India. Today many women leaders have

emerged that have risen through the ranks and earned the respect of their male counterparts. This does not mean that this was easily accepted as there are still many cases of intimidation.

#### 4. Governance

There are some features of the Panchayat system that are worth noting:

- Up to 2007 all members were voluntary. This year a basic stipend has been introduced.
- Every family living below the Poverty datum line (BPL) was entitled to 100 days of work from the Government at a minimum wage (about Rs 180) that would be sufficient for the family to at least feed itself.
- Each council had a secretary (municipal official) and a Chairperson (elected by the villagers). All payments were to be sanctioned by the Chairperson and were open to inspection by any member of the village.
- A minimum of two public meetings of the Panchayat had to be held in each village where the development plan was reviewed and people would have the opportunity to question both the government officials and members of the council. Records are kept of all meetings.
- The response time of the politicians to the system has improved tenfold over the last five years as the councils become stronger and begin to align themselves for the State and National elections.

#### 5. Traditional leaders versus elected representatives

In India it is clear that the old system of Panchayat Raj which basically consisted of village elders had no place in a modern democracy. However this informal system still exists in many villages and still has substantial power when it comes to social and cultural issues. Issues such as marriages for example were often a matter for the traditional councils. If the village council disapproved of a marriage a person could be considered outcaste and although this could not be legally enforced the social stigma often brought people into line.

I met with members of the traditional Panchayat as well as with elected representatives and there seemed to be little or no conflict between these two institutions.

## 6. Challenges

- Whilst the constitution guarantees the rights of citizens in the constitution this has not necessarily translated to movement on the ground. There has been uneven success of the system across the country. States like Karnataka, Haryana, Andhrapadesh and Rajasthan have shown how effective the system could be when properly implemented. In other states there have been numerous problems with the implementation through a lack of willingness to engage seriously with the provisions of the amendments as well as corruption.
- Although Women are now coming to the forefront in many of the Village Panchayats this has not been an easy battle and there have been many cases of victimisation of women leaders and sometimes even murder in extreme cases.
- Political parties have recognised the possible influence of these structures on citizens and have been trying to align representatives to their respective parties.
- Corruption and bribery remains a serious problem in some states and although there have been cases that have gone to court there are many others which continue unabated
- The caste system in India is still alive and well in the villages and because the constitution guarantees representation of scheduled castes and ‘backward’ tribes this has led to serious conflict when these groups try to exercise these rights.

## 7. Conclusion

India remains the largest democracy in the world with the largest number of elected representatives. The system of Panchayat Raj is not unlike our envisaged ward committee system in South Africa. However in India the asymmetrical federal system has allowed for a great degree of variety in approaches to how this system has been implemented. As a result the system has had varying degrees of success across the various states and provides good opportunities to learn from both successes and failures. This has been

coupled with a strong ministry dedicated to the empowerment of the Panchayat Raj both for the urban and rural sectors.

Active support for the system both from Government and Institutes such as the Institute for Social Sciences in New Delhi has translated into more and more active citizenry participating in these structures thus leading to greater governance and accountability from leaders at all levels.

#### 8. Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the GGLN for the opportunity to go out into the villages of India to see firsthand how this local government system operates. This has been an invaluable experience that holds important lessons for us in South Africa.

Dr.Rama Naidu

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