

VAVIHARSH GRAM SABHA
(Our first Town Meeting with a Village)

For the past two years Town Meetings have been held in hundreds of towns and cities across the United States. Similar meetings have been held at the same time in Canada (Community Forum: Canada), Australia (Community Meeting Australia) as well as in Europe and Asia. In India the Town Meeting is held under the name of Gram Sabha. This is an account of the first Gram Sabha to be held in a rural Indian Village.

Of the 800 residents of the village of Vaviharsh, 80% are tribal people and 80% are illiterate - but not the same 80%. From the Tashil Headquarters at IjatURI, we drove up into the mountains. Suddenly, we came upon a huge lake surrounded by mountains of many peculiar shapes which produce an eerie effect. One mountain is an old rock-chiseled fortress overlooking the land. The clouds move slowly about - hiding this mountain, swallowing up that valley.

Our staff arrived by bus the day before the Gram Sabha was scheduled so we could work with the villagers in setting up and finishing preparation. The villagers were anticipating our arrival and it seemed as if the whole village descended on the bus. They were all grinning and bubbling with welcome. Proud of their physical preparation of the village, they excitedly showed us everything. Then they took us to the Gram Panchayat's house for cups of tea.

It was obvious as we looked over the village that a miracle had happened before we arrived. Where there had been only a path, a road had been cut from the village entrance to the schoolhouse ground. At the entrance to the village were two signs: "Gram Sabha, Vaviharsh" and "The Gram Panchayat Welcomes You." The villagers had whitewashed rocks, graded land, and cut weeds.

The central meeting area was to be in front of the one-room schoolhouse with a porch. In the center of the area was a "Maypole" with five other poles around it at a 70 foot radius. From strings connecting the outside poles, colored triangular banners were hanging. That evening the village held a big dance here. A drummer was in the center with circles, first of men and then women, around him. The men's dancing reminded me of a Latin American style whereas the women's dancing was more African.

While we were doing our preparation, about 40 men came into the school and sat on the floor and watched, talked, sang and listened to one of the Maliwada villagers play the harmonium. We finished preparing our decor - rich colorful large cloth banners: the outline of the day in English and Hindi; the Social Process Triangle; and an abstract grid of the State of Maharashtra with dots of the four villages in the four Divisions that were opening the first phase of the Maharashtra Human Development Project. We selected our workshop sites; the one-room schoolhouse, an engine room shed for grain and grinding, a merchant's store porch, and a workshed for wagons - which was cleaned up nicely for us with shiny manure spread.

As our Maliwada villagers and staff prepared, their anxieties mounted and their limitations, points of ignorance, and lack of experience really began to show. I nearly died inside wondering if we would make it.

That night three of us slept in one 7 x 14 room. (The others slept in the schoolhouse.) The entire household came into our room, put their mat beds on the floor, and talked.

The next morning the activity started before dawn. I was outside washing up as a little bit of gray began to replace the black of night. Suddenly, I was grabbed with a steel grip by a man who was pointing frantically toward the house. I rushed in through my bedroom, the house's living room, into a middle room which was completely dark except for a small fire heating water. A woman was bending over a figure on the floor. I surmised an epileptic seizure. After the victim became coherent, she told us this happened whenever she was under great physical and mental stress. Fearfully, I realized that she was the Maliwada village woman in charge of child care.

We had breakfast. The time approached for the Gram Sabha. The villagers started to come an hour early. We began the registration. When asked about the women, we assured them they should be registered too. So, the men went through the registration line and then the women. We gave them a name tag with a colored dot on it to indicate

which workshop they should be in. They carried their name tags clutched in their hands all day long.

The government dignitaries arrived. We went out to meet them and they began a procession into the village before us. There were eight village men dancing with sticks which were about 15 inches long with a slack chain attached to each end on which cymbals were hung. Behind them was a band comprised of one man with two drums strapped on him, one with a monotone flute, and another with a flute that wailed typical Indian music. As we processed, I felt Ganeesh had never been honored like this.

Upon starting the Gram Sabha, three of the government officials--two from the Tashil magistrate's office and one from a neighboring village--made opening speeches. The latter's speech was very short until I gave the "New World" spin. He then repented of his brevity, got up, and began to really let go, picking up some of the new world themes for good measure. I thought he would never wind down.

We had prepared for the workshops by getting the names of the literate people in the village. We figured if we had twenty we could do the workshops for 200 people. It turned out we had forty. We divided them evenly among the teams. The literate people wrote in the Gram Sabha book the individual reflections of all. However, both literate and illiterate were given books. The literate ones interpreted the writing on the butcher paper used in the workshops and the triangles to the illiterate. This worked well and as the day continued the illiterate got more courage and became more vocal.

We worked hard training our workshop leaders. We had six two-hour sessions of careful walkthroughs, explanations, practice teaching, and evaluations. It paid off, although like all new workshop leaders they took too long on the first two sections of the Challenge workshop. Again, I thought we would never make it. But they came through with flying colors with Challenge statements written on butcher paper.

The attendance fluctuated throughout the day since people from other villages dropped in to see what was happening. In the morning plenary, held in the central area, there were over 400 men and women sitting in segregated groups. All during the day we had more than 200 in the workshops. One of the workshops, held on the merchant's porch, had a group of people who sat in the shade twenty to forty feet away and watched.

The luncheon was a snafu. It was to have been prepared in the various homes and presented at the proper time. When that hour came, the men said, "We have no food, for the women have been in the workshops." So they sent the women to hastily prepare something while the interlude went on. The women came back with food, sat down, and ate it. The men didn't get to eat all day, but they never let on at all.

Just before the story workshop was over and they were completing their work, I stopped by. With pride, they showed me their symbol. Since they had only a limited way to talk about it, I began to spin on the meaning of their history and the possibilities that I saw in it. They began to see what they had done.

I had decided to use some of the interlude and final plenary time to show the place of the Gram Sabha in the replication strategies as well as their role in replication. Also, it gave me a chance to point beyond their renewing Vaviharsh to Maharashtra to "Le Grande Vision" of renewing on behalf of three million villages and participating in building the earth. In doing this we had real fun with the abstract grid. I would point to a dot and say the village name and they would shout out the name of that village.

The final plenary which had over three hundred people in it was a great happening. Very soberly they read all the challenge and proposal statements. Then they read their story and sang their song which had a great beat to it. I never will forget the look of wonder on one old woman's face as she sang that song. Their slogan was an antiphonal yell that shook the houses of the whole village. They shouted it over and over with great glee. During the plenary they did their own spinning of their story. They really came alive.