

# VAVIHARSH GRAM SABHA

## First Town Meeting in an Indian Village

As written by Joseph Slicker, 1976

Below is a report of our first Town Meeting held in a village. We were worried by the images that it would be impossible to carry out a full-fledged eight-hour Town Meeting in a village where people couldn't speak English and as we found out, Hindi (although we knew they didn't particularly care for it). Also 80% were illiterate, and would they even sit in a structured situation for very long. In addition our workshop leaders were mostly Maliwada villagers who themselves were not too well trained. However, after seeing their performance, they surely have my admiration.

Vaviharsh is a village of 800 people with over 80% being tribal people and 80% being illiterate, but not the same 80%. As you drive from Igatpuri, the Tashil headquarters (which is 20 miles, from Nasik the District Headquarters) you drive up into the mountains for 25 km. Suddenly you come upon a huge lake surrounded by mountains of many, peculiar shapes giving an eerie effect. One is an old rock chiseled fortress that looks over the land. The clouds move slowly about hiding this mountain, swallowing up the valley causing many small waterfalls to run down the mountain sides.

Our staff arrived by bus the day before the Gram Sabha was scheduled so we could work with the villagers in setting up and finish preparing with them. There are two buses in and out of the village each day. They were anticipating our arrival and it seemed like the whole village descended on the bus. They were all grins and bubbling with welcome. They were so proud of their physical preparation of the village and excited about showing 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 the first miracle had happened before we arrived. A road was cut from the entrance of the village, which before had been a path, to the school house ground. At the entrance to the village there were two signs: "Gram Sabha, Vivaharsh" and "The Gram Panchayat Welcomes You". They had white washed rocks, graded land, and cut weeds to the ground. The central meeting area was in front of a one room school house with a porch. In the center of the meeting area was a 'May pole' with five other poles around it at 70 feet radius. Strings connected the poles and colored triangular banners were hung along each string. Palm leaves were wrapped around the poles and the porch eaves and posts. A banner entitled "Gram Sabha Viviharsh 22/9/76" was hung at the edge of the area.

That afternoon and evening, we finished preparing our butcher paper charts and emerging generation charts. We also selected workshop sites: 1. The one room school house; 2. An engine room shed for grain grinding; 3. A merchant's store porch; and 4. A work shed for wagons, which was cleaned up nicer, for us with shiny manure spread.

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

That evening the village held a big dance in the central yard in front of the school house. A drummer was in the center with a circle of first men and then women around him. The men's dancing reminded me of Latin America somewhat and the women's dancing reminded me of African dancing. Finally they quit. About 40 men came into the one room school house where we were doing our preparation and sat down on the floor and watched, talked, sang and listened to one of the Maliwada villagers play the harmonium.

Some of us left and went to one of the houses for the night. Three of us slept in one room about 7' by 14'. (The others slept in the school house.) The whole household came into our room put their mat beds on the floor and talked.

The next morning activity started before dawn. I was outside washing up and a little bit of grey began to replace the black of night. Suddenly I was grabbed from behind with a steel grip and upon turning I noticed a man frantically pointing toward the house. I rushed in through my bedroom which was the house's living room into a middle room which was completely dark except for a small fire heating water. A figure lay on the floor with a village woman bent over holding the figure with her fingers in the mouth of the person. It was one of our Maliwada village women who was in charge of the children. I surmised an epileptic fit, but hurried someone off to get one of our villagers who might know her history. After a while she began to become coherent and told us that this happened whenever she was under great physical and mental stress.

We had breakfast and time began to approach for the Gram Sabha. The villagers began 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 then began a procession into the village before us. There were eight village men dancing with sticks about 15" long with a slack chain attached to each end and 3" cymbals were hung off the chain. Behind them was a band with 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 in, I felt Ganeesh had never been honored like this.

Upon starting three of the government officials, two from the Tashil magistrate's office and one official from a neighboring village made opening speeches. The nearby man's speech was very short. I then gave the "New World" spin. By this time the nearby man had repented of his brevity and got up and begin to really let go. He picked up some of the new world themes for good measure. I thought he wouldn't wind down.

Then to the workshops. We had prepared for the workshops by getting the names of the literate people in the village. We figured if we had 20, we could do the workshops for 200 people

It turned out we had 40. This allowed us to have five teams of two literate people each for every workshop. We gathered the illiterate ones around the team leaders for 10 plus per team. Our workshops ran from about 55 to 60 people throughout the day. The literate people would write in the Gram Sabha book the individual reflections of all 10 plus although, all literate and illiterate were given books. The literate ones would also interpret writing on the butcher paper and triangles to the illiterate. This worked well and as the day continued the illiterate got more courage and became more vocal.

We had worked hard training our workshop leaders. We had six two-hour sessions of careful walk-throughs, explanations, practice teaching and evaluations. It paid off. Although like all new workshop leaders they took too long on the first two movements in the Challenge workshop, (At one point I thought we would never make it.) but they came through with flying colors with written challenge statements on butcher paper.

The attendance in the morning plenary held in the center area in front of the one room school house was over 400. The men and women sat in different groupings. All during the day we had over 200 in the workshops. The workshop held on the merchant's porch had a gallery of people 20' to 40' away who sat in the shade and watched the workshop. The group fluctuated in size as people from other villages would drop in during the day to see what was happening. The final plenary had over 300.

One snafu was the luncheon meal. They were to have lunch, prepared in the various homes and present it 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, and the men didn't get to eat all day, but they never let on at all.

The plenary at the end was a great happening. They read very soberly all the challenges 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 and sheer exhilaration on one old woman's face as they 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. Just before the story workshop was over, I went by and they were writing everything up. They showed me their symbol. They were proud of it but had no way to talk about it. So I began to spin meaning of their history and possibility into it. They really came alive. They then did their own spinning during the plenary.

We had great decor. We had prepared rich colorful large cloth banners: 1. Outline of the day in English and Hindi - a vertical banner. 2. Social process triangles to the 3rd

level in English and Hindi, and 3. An abstract grid of the State of Maharashtra with dots for the four villages in the four Divisions that are opening this phase of the Maharashtra Human Development Project.

I decided to use some of the interlude time and final plenary time to show the place of the Gram Sabha 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 "Les Grande Vision" of renewing on behalf of 3 million villages end participating in building the earth. 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 in response. After a while all I had to do was point to a dot and they would shout the name of that village.

We had children's structure also. This in itself - getting the women to separate from the young children to go to the workshops - was quite a happening. The Maliwada Teacher's Guild had prepared a construct for the Gram Sabha day and one for preparing the villagers on the day before. They started out with 50 small ones. I went by soon after the workshops were started. I think all 50 were crying. Our Maliwada village person was sitting in the center beating on a drum. I couldn't help thinking about her words: too much physical and mental stress. Later, when I came back all the crying had stopped.

Casualties known:

- One orchestrator had to turn back with kidney infection causing arms and legs to swell.
- Another orchestrator had a 2-day nose bleed.
- One staff for the children had an epileptic fit.

Casualties unspoken of: Moist undergarments.

Our staff: One western orchestrator who after much discussion gave the "New World" spin. It probably was the right choice, both for effect on the villagers and the government officials. One Indian staff orchestrator doubled as a workshop leader. Three Maliwada villagers were workshop leaders. One Indian staff was MC. One Indian order member came as an area representative. One Maliwada villager served as children's staff leader.

Language: English, of course, had to be translated into Marathi. The Indian orchestrator only knew English and Hindi and tried using Hindi in his spin and workshops. The Maliwada villagers can understand Hindi well enough for the staff to use that medium with them. This was not true with the Vaviharsh people. We had to translate Hindi into Marathi. The Vaviharsh Marathi is slightly different than our Villagers, but they had no trouble communicating with the Vaviharsh people. The Gram Sabha workbook is in English and Hindi. This worked out all right for the literate Vaviharsh people could read Hindi.

Role of the Gram Sabha: The Gram Sabha appears in the replication strategies after the site selection visit, a pilot trek where the Maliwada villagers send a delegation to the prospective village and explain about village renewal, and a demonstration visit where 10 to 15 of the villagers from the prospective village go to Maliwada for a 48 hour first hand visit. The major purpose is to assure that 10 people come from the village to the social methods school. Since this is apparently not necessary, they are really charged up to send people almost from the beginning. We used the Gram Sabha to begin gathering data of its relation to the Consult down the line for possible modification of each.

Travel: Travel starts by train two days before the Gram Sabha. We leave in the evening by train on 3rd class cars where no reservations for berths are possible and therefore most have to sit up. We travel all night with a two-hour layover at a function. We arrive the next day at Igatpuri wait and wait several hours for the bus to take a 1 1/2-hour trip the 25 km. to Vaviharsh. The return is a repeat performance of evening bus and all-night train ride. Total cost for the eight people including one meal each way is less than 40 dollars.

From: Maliwada Human Development Project