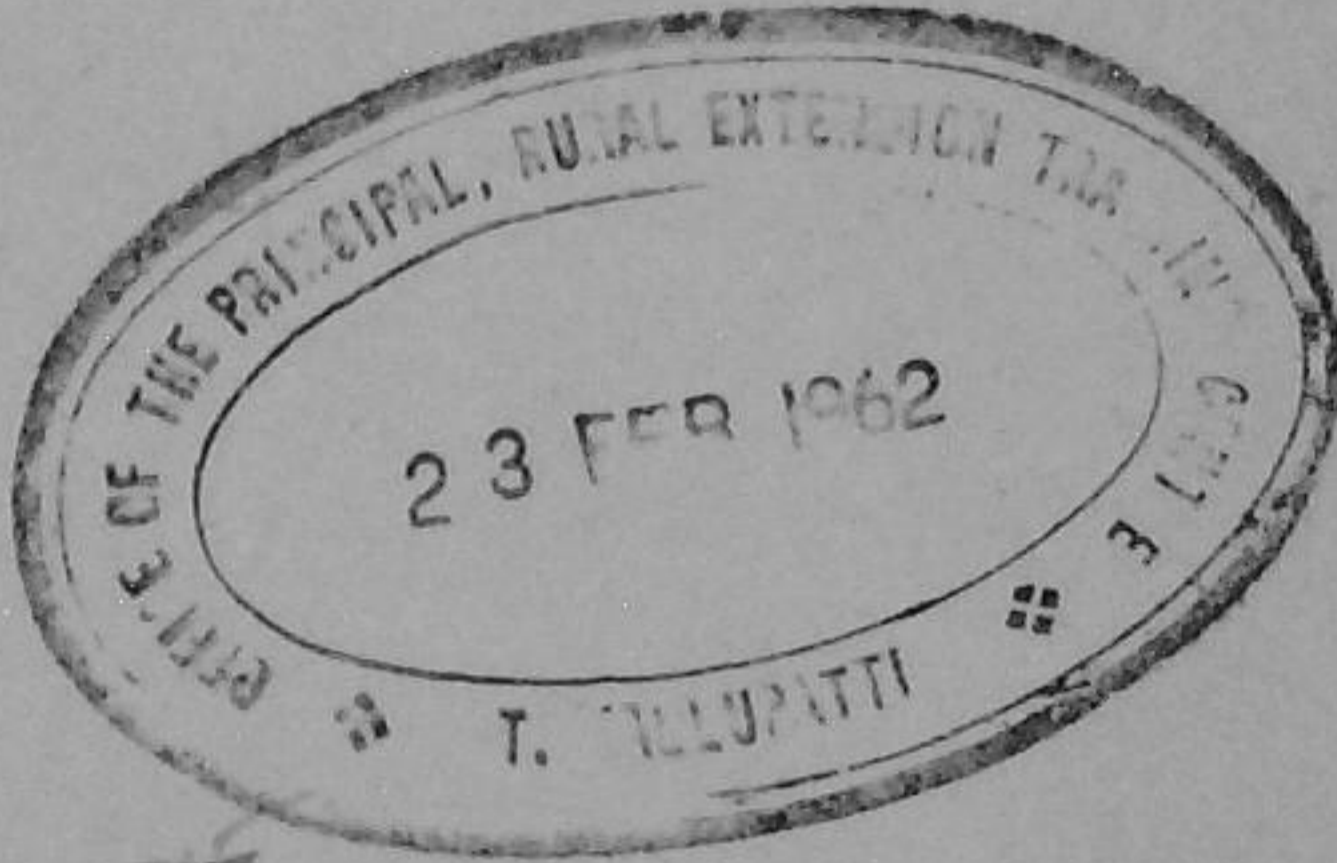


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I. INTRODUCTION

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Most village communities have a common meeting place in the form of a 'chabutra', a 'chaupal' or a Panchayat Ghar where villagers meet to relax and to discuss the affairs of the community. It is this traditional practice which is sought to be stimulated by providing facilities for a Community Centre.

Since October 1952, the Ministry of Community Development is engaged in the task of implementing a comprehensive programme of Community Development in the rural areas to enable the villagers to live a fuller and better life. One of the important items in this programme is Social Education, which is imparted to the villagers through different activities of youth organisations, women's organisations, literacy classes, libraries, reading rooms, village leaders' camps, etc. The Community Centre provides a common meeting place for all these and many other activities connected with village life. It provides facilities for children, youth and adults to meet, to express their views on various matters and to relax in an atmosphere of friendliness. This helps them to develop their latent abilities and creates a sense of partnership in the village community. Thus they develop a sense of social responsibility for the welfare of the community.

The usefulness of the Community Centre as an instrument for promoting local interests and for developing local leadership for implementing the development programme is recognised on all sides. The First and the Second Five Year Plans have emphasised this point. The Indian Adult Education Association devoted an

entire Seminar in 1957 to the study of the use of Community Centres in promoting Social Education activities. The use of Community Centres in the form of neighbourhood centres is being increasingly utilised in urban development programmes in recent years. In countries wedded to development through people's participation, the Community Centre is to be acknowledged as one of the most effective organisations for community welfare.

II. OBJECTIVE AND PURPOSE

The Community Centre, as the name signifies, is a centre for the recreational, cultural, educational, or social activities of a community. It is a place where people satisfy their urges through multifarious activities. As such, it should mirror the social and cultural life, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and aspirations, of the people belonging to the community. It should develop into an organisation to which the members of the community can turn for facilities of recreation, education, economic development and social service. To achieve this, it should cover activities for all age groups—children, youth, adults and the aged.

In the Community Centre, although people come together, in the initial stage, to find an outlet for their creative energy and for relaxation, their activities should be so organised as to foster social cohesiveness, oneness, harmony and a spirit of fellow feeling and co-operation. It should help in the development of a sense of belonging and a sense of service to the community.

Every local community has a system of inter-

relationship among families, social groups and organisations. The objective of the Community Centre is to give these communities a new sense of purpose and to promote development through them. The Community Centre is to be organised as one of the important instruments for promoting harmony and cohesiveness in the village.

The objectives of a Community Centre are identical with those of Social Education on the one hand, and of Community Development on the other. If Social Education is taken as education for life in society, the Community Centre offers facilities for organisation and participation in joint activities, thereby relating the individual to the social life in the community. Through such participation the villagers develop a sense of social values. In fact, the Community Centre is the most effective *modus operandi* of Social Education. Similarly, if the objective of Community Development is to promote the all-round development of the community, it is facilitated through the activities of the Community Centre.

III. IMPLANTING THE NEW CONCEPT

As mentioned earlier, every village has a common meeting place. This may be at the temple or under an old banyan tree or a 'chabutra' or a 'chaupal' constructed by the village community. In some villages 'dharamshalas' are used as a meeting place. At all or any of these places people meet for relaxation, for gossip or discussion on the problems of the community. A 'hukka' group may meet regularly to exchange notes on

affairs of daily life. The harvest to come might be discussed or a visitor received; the postman may distribute letters or the Gram Sevak may meet the villagers to discuss the question of improved variety of seeds, use of green manure or fertilizers. In most of the villages festivals are celebrated or a betrothal is performed at such a common meeting place. At times, in the absence of regular accommodation, the school teacher holds his classes there or a 'bhajan mandali' entertains villagers with a recital of devotional songs. These and other informal and formal activities find a convenient venue at such a traditional meeting place. It is not the name or the form that matters. What matters is the tradition of meeting, the system of relationship that is built up and a sense of oneness that is created in sharing the problems of the village.

It was against this background of traditional meeting places already in use in the villages that the concept of the Community Centre was introduced in the programme of Community Development.

The concept of the Community Centre can be traced to practices prevalent in other countries, such as the activities of Toynbee Hall in Britain or Hull House in the U.S.A. With the growth of slums in industrial cities like London and Chicago, it was found necessary to relate the interests of individuals to the development of their own neighbourhood around a Community Centre. Children were brought together in a nursery, youth around recreational and cultural activities and adults around activities of their interest. Through joint activities, individual interests were related to the common interest of life in the neighbourhood. A sense of pride and a sense of belonging were developed among children, youth and adults residing in the neighbourhood. By joint effort slum areas were converted into areas worthy of decent living. This opened up the prospect of breaking up cities with large populations into smaller neighbourhoods and suburbs where personal, face to face, contact and community life became possible.

This experience, although it originated in an industrial context, is sought to be utilised in India's rural areas along with the introduction of technological changes. A re-emphasis on the preservation of the good aspects of small homogeneous communities is called for today. In fact, the Community Development movement is a happy blending of the importance of community life in rural areas along with the introduction of technological changes through the extension programme. The scheme of Community Centres, therefore, is an integral part of the programme of Community Development. Through the organisation of common activities, it promotes a sense of belonging to the community and strengthens the bonds of relationship. It is for the worker to plant the new concept on the soil of traditional practices and nurture the programme in such a way that the organisation finds roots in the life of the villagers. It is likely that at times the worker, in his eagerness to achieve physical targets, emphasises the physical structure of the Community Centre rather than the need to develop the organisation in such a way that it becomes an integral part of life in the village. Wherever such tendencies have occurred, they need to be corrected.

IV. ORGANISATION OF A COMMUNITY CENTRE

The organisation of a Community Centre requires care and attention of workers as well as of local leaders in (i) Formation of a nucleus group; (ii) Determination of a location; (iii) Provision of equipment; (iv) Expansion of activities; (v) Securing of finances; and (vi) Administration of the programme.

Formation of a Nucleus Group

It is not necessary to begin with the physical structure of the Community Centre. In fact, it is a wrong way to begin. The first step is to find local people interested in the promotion of the welfare of the village community. There are always a few individuals interested in the betterment of their village; these individuals may or may not be literate people. Some youngmen may be eager to promote the welfare of the village. Some experienced villagers may feel an urge to see that something more is done for the younger generation. At times, the Sarpanch may want to do something. It is these people who should be spotted out and brought together in the form of a nucleus group or organisation for the promotion of community activities. The greater the care with which the group is formed, the better is the result; the greater the compactness of their interest and inter-relationship, the greater the promise of development.

Once such a nucleus is formed, individual members of the nucleus organisation may be encouraged to assume responsibilities for promoting different activities as required by the villagers. It may be recreational programmes for children, adventurous activities for youth, 'bhajans' for adults or an adult literacy class, a library and a reading room for those interested in such pursuits. Activities will have to reflect what are called felt needs and gradually relate the villagers' interest to other needs through inducement and persuasion.

Choice of a Location

Normally, a Community Centre should be located at the site of the traditional meeting place in the village. If a community meeting place does not exist in a village, the school building or the Panchayat Ghar may be utilised as a Community Centre. It is not necessary to have a pucca building for the Community Centre. In the past emphasis was placed on the construction of new buildings for the Community Centre, presumably to serve

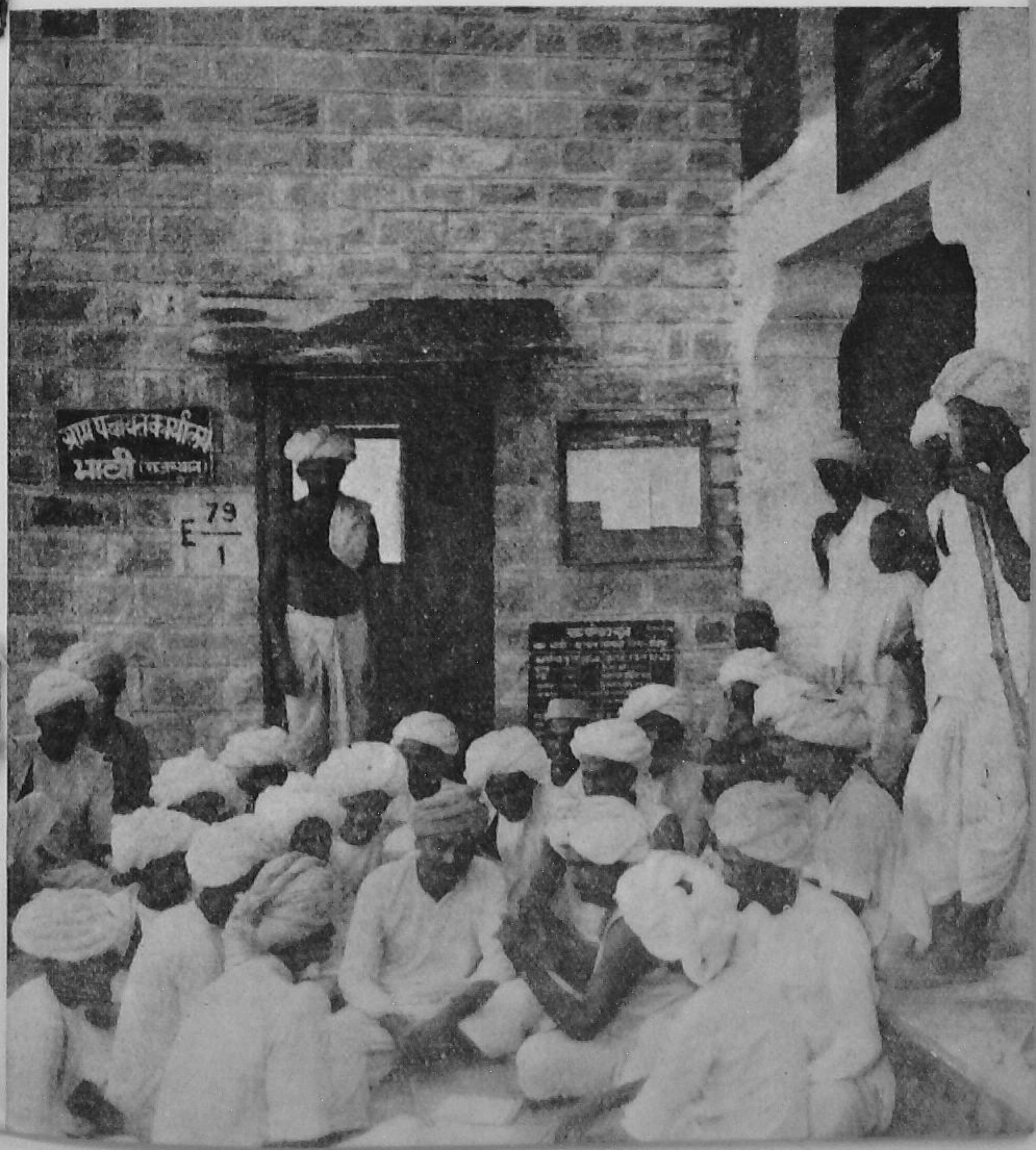


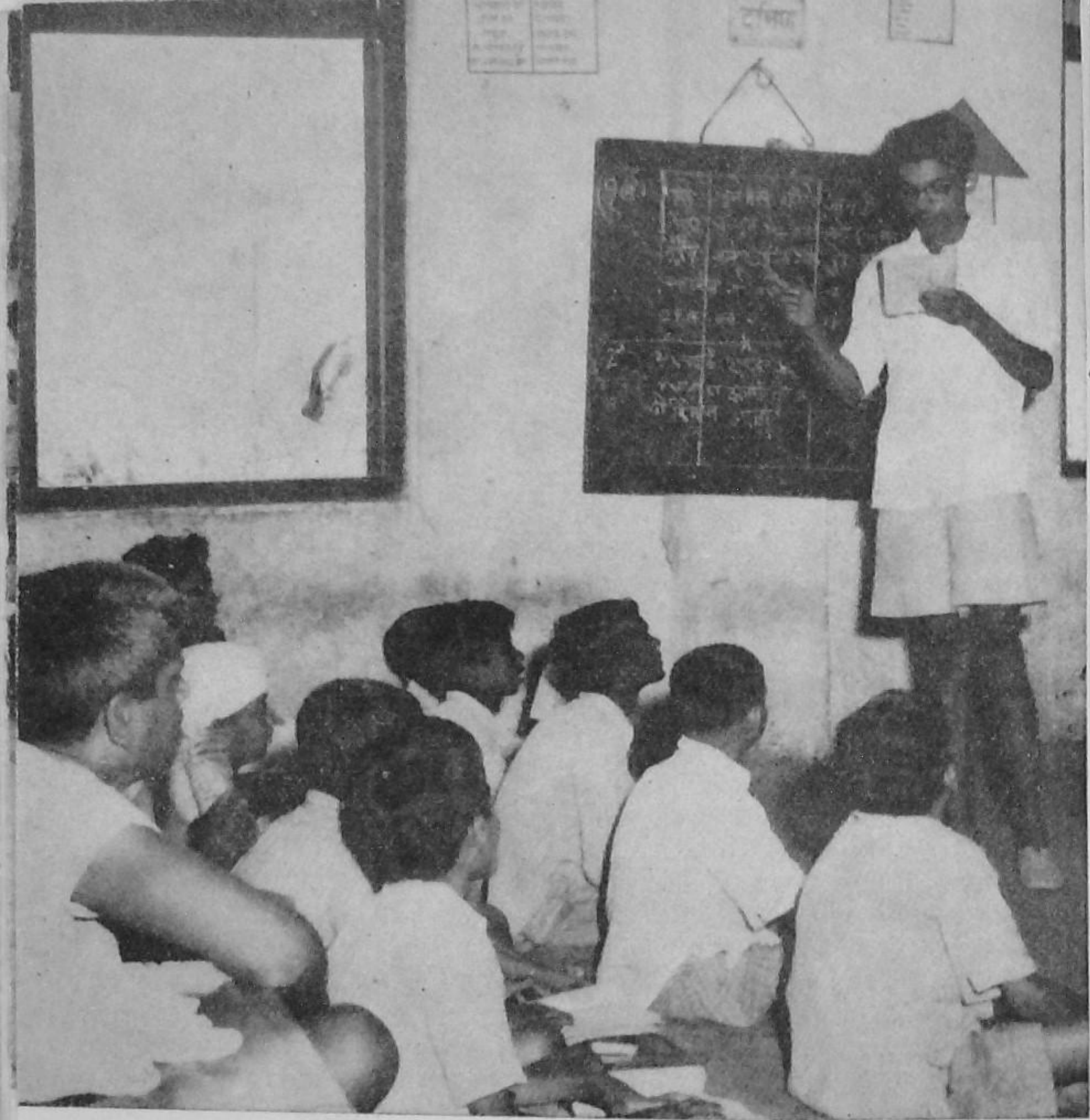
A view of the Community Centre in village Mukhmelpur



Villagers learn how to read and write

A meeting of a village panchayat in progress





A student volunteer conducting a literacy class for villagers

as visible proof of the effort and achievement of the community. This should not be so. In fact, merely putting up a physical structure is far less useful than organising social, cultural and educational activities in harmony with the traditional pattern of rural life. Indeed, a school building, if situated in the heart of the village, is an ideal place for a Community Centre. No separate building for a Community Centre should be constructed in the village where a common meeting place is already in existence.

Provision of Equipment

The equipment required for the Community Centre will depend upon the activities initiated. All activities should begin with the prevailing interest and equipment should facilitate the promotion of these activities. Effort must be made to give local colour to the Centre through the use of locally made equipment. In order that a Community Centre may be able to organise community programmes, it should have the necessary equipment which should increase with the expansion of the programmes. For instance, improved agricultural implements and tools, better seeds, etc., may be needed if the local community needs demonstration of their use. If the villagers are interested in learning certain arts and crafts, the necessary instruments may also form part of the Centre's equipment. The provision of a carom-board, a radio set, a few books for neo-literates, a 'dholak', a lantern, etc., should be treated only as an initial step in equipping the Centre. Gradually more equipment should be provided as required. Some specific provision is made in the budget of social education in each Block for organising Community Centres.

The care of equipment is another aspect of organisation. If the villagers have taken the initiative in developing the Community Centre and providing equipment, they are bound to take their care. If equipment is given as a mere gift or provided through grants from the Block budget, it is likely that its care will be left to the paid

workers. This nullifies the objective of self-help and self-reliance.

Activities

The programme of the Community Centre consists of a wide variety of activities depending on the requirements of the people residing in the village. These may be divided in six major categories, namely, (a) recreational, (b) cultural, (c) social, (d) educational, (e) economic and (f) social service. The recreational programme may include indoor and outdoor games, sports, hiking, swimming, etc. The cultural programme may include music, folk songs, folk dances, bhajans, kathas, dramas, radio listening, etc. The cultural programme is meant both for recreational and for cultural development. The educational programme may include talks and lectures, discussions, symposia and debates, etc. The object is to provide opportunities to the villagers to develop their capacity for self-expression and for independent thinking and judgment. The change that may develop as a result of the introduction of the democratic way of life can be promoted effectively through the organisation of formal and informal programmes of education. The social programme should permeate the activities mentioned above, namely, recreational, cultural and educational. The economic programme can be taken up only at a later stage. A beginning, however, can be made with craft classes organised by the Mahila Samaj. In fact, the activities of the Mahila Samaj should become an integral part of the Community Centre. The educational programme should support the programme of economic development. If the Community Centre is to be a centre for Community Development, it has to adopt various measures of social service. In some of the villages, youth groups have adopted a programme of sanitation, organisation of libraries and reading rooms, and writing of wall news-sheets for the benefit of neo-literates.

It is not necessary to enlarge on the activities of the programme. Each Community Centre must develop

activities to meet its local requirements. No effort at promoting a stereotyped programme is desirable. The prevailing trend of merely providing a carom-board, a few books for neo-literates and a radio set does not make a Community Centre. It should reflect the interests of all age-groups of the village population and act as a focus of the life in the village.

Finance

The way the activities are financed and the method of collecting funds indicate the correctness of the approach in establishing the Community Centre. It is expected that every participant in the activities of the Community Centre will contribute to their promotion either through donation or labour. In fact, the amount of labour put in by the members of the Community Centre should be valued equally with the amount of funds contributed. It would also be desirable to see that no single activity is exclusively financed by one or two individuals or families lest these individuals begin to have more say in the activities of the Centre than others. In fact, the more wide-spread is the contribution, the healthier is the development.

Since the Community Centre is a reflection of the interests of the community, the major portion of finance for running it should be forthcoming from the people themselves. Funds provided for social education and other such activities in the Block budget should only supplement the funds collected through donation. The Education and Social Education Sub-committee of the Gram Panchayat should be entrusted with the organisation and promotion of the Centre. It should be the responsibility of the Panchayat to collect finances for the promotion of the Centre's activities and for the effective utilisation of the provision made in the Block budget for the purpose. The Panchayat should be encouraged to collect further funds from the village community to organise the activities. In the initial stage, however, the Government might subsidise the effort of the village commu-

nity. But later the people themselves should assume responsibilities for meeting the expenditure of the Centre.

Administration

This is another area for developing joint responsibility among villagers as an integral part of the promotion of self-help and self-organisation. As suggested earlier, a nucleus should be formed to promote the activities of the Community Centre, while gradually widening the base both of participation and management. Various procedures can be adopted for providing an administrative set-up. The Panchayat can itself take up responsibility for the administration of the Centre or it may appoint a committee to look after the day-to-day activities or entrust the work either to a Social Service Sub-committee or an Education and Social Education Sub-committee, as the case may be. Each group in the Community Centre may have its own standing committee to carry on its activities. A representative from each of these groups may form the Central Council. It will all depend upon the interest and the ability of the people to assume responsibilities for promoting the activities of the Centre. This interest and ability are, however, to be harnessed by the worker. Since the Community Centre is meant to be the core of community life, it must grow from within the community and be administered by it.

V. ROLE OF DIFFERENT FUNCTIONARIES

As suggested earlier, it is important to have a nucleus of local workers selected from among the villagers themselves who are interested in promoting recreational, cul-

tural, educational and economic activities in the villages. It is such individuals who will be interested in the promotion of the programme of the Community Centre. In fact they will be both promoters and executors of the programme of the Community Centre.

The role of the functionaries working on behalf of the Development Department is to stimulate activity and help the local workers to promote the programme. In the initial stage, they have (a) to introduce the idea and the concept of the Community Centre, (b) to create interest in some of the villagers to talk about it and to propagate the idea among the villagers, (c) to spot some of the active and interested persons of proved ability to form a nucleus group to assume responsibility, (d) to bring this group together and to develop a relationship among them so that their experience of working together is satisfying to themselves and useful to the community, (e) to guide in determining the activities of the Community Centre to meet the needs of different age groups of the village and the combined needs of the village community, and (f) to give guidance in organising these activities, in purchasing equipment and in maintaining the accounts of the Community Centre. This is not to say that some of the villagers would not have the knowledge of these activities. All it means is that the worker must make himself available for guidance as and when required without forcing himself on others.

With regard to the specific role of different functionaries, the S.E.O. (Social Education Organiser), who is the promoter of Social Education programme in the Block, has to initiate the plan for promoting Community Centres and to take a lead in getting together people who are interested in promoting its activities. He can take help, in this connection, from workers like the V.L.W. (Village Level Worker) and the school teacher who are nearer to the people and who know them more intimately. He has to provide opportunities for promoting this programme and get in touch with the Panchayat and its various functional sub-committees to see how

best traditional meeting places can be utilised to develop the programme of a Community Centre. He has to know the channel of communication prevalent in the village and utilise the same effectively. He has, however, to guard against the tendency of merely putting up the structure of a Community Centre. He should see that all the essentials of the Community Centre stated above are fulfilled before a full-fledged Community Centre is instituted in the village. This is a difficult task and must not be taken lightly. The importance of organisation should not be lost sight of in the desire to increase the numbers of such centres.

The V.L.W. although required to devote most of his time to promoting agricultural production, can do a lot in promoting the activities of the Community Centre. In fact, the Community Centre, as a focus of community interest, can be effectively used in promoting agricultural production. The farmers can come together to meet, to discuss and to exchange experience to know how best agricultural production can be enhanced in the village with the help of both extension technique and equipment that is required for its promotion. The activities of the Community Centre in addition can help in creating the necessary atmosphere of enthusiasm for better agricultural production and improved economic life. It is the joint effort of every farmer that contributes to a balanced economic life in the village. It is this effort that eventually contributes to the total development of the rural community. The V.L.W. can play an important role in this area. What is required is an understanding of the problems of joint effort in the village. The Community Centre provides a substratum for sowing the seeds of community effort for community action.

The school teacher, by his very position of being a moulder of the future generation of the village community, has an important part to play in promoting the activities of the Community Centre in the educational field. He can provide inspiration, help and intelligent guidance. This role, if effectively fulfilled, will help the

school teacher in promoting primary education which is his main responsibility. Villagers will come to know him more closely if he is intimately associated with the activities of the community, and they will begin to take greater interest in the education of their children and in sending them regularly to school. The children will feel happy of the association of adults with the school. Eventually the school can become a centre of community life.

In some places the school building, if situated in the village, can provide accommodation for organising the Community Centre; literacy classes for youth and adults and libraries and reading rooms can also be provided in it. The teacher can take interest in promoting these activities.

This is not just an account of what can be done. It is a statement of what is being done where a teacher stays in the village and where he identifies himself with the life of the village community. What is required is to stimulate this process of giving to the school teacher his rightful place as an educational leader of the village community. His association with the Community Centre and the assumption of responsibilities by him for its promotion provides one such stimulus.

VI. ROLE OF THE PANCHAYAT

With the introduction of Panchayati Raj the Panchayat becomes a development agency at the village level. It has a vital role to play in promoting community life and in making the Community Centre the focal point of

the village community. The Panchayat can have its meetings in the Community Centre, or if there is a Panchayat Ghar it can itself become a Community Centre. Various functional sub-committees can carry out economic, educational and social activities in and through the Community Centre. The associate organisations of the Panchayat, such as the youth organisation, the women's organisation, the farmers' organisation and other occupational organisations, can carry out their activities at the centre.

The Panchayat should also take an active interest in the administration of the Community Centre. As stated earlier, the Panchayat, or its functional sub-committees, can hold itself responsible for the organisation of the centre of each associate group active in the Community Centre may send its representative to the council which co-ordinates the activities of the centre. This council may be recognised by the Panchayat as its organisation. The organisation and administration of the Community Centre, however, has to be developed according to local requirements, capacity and interest of the local members. It should remain as simple as possible so that the villagers may have direct access to its activities. In short, the Panchayat is both a promoter and a stimulator of the activities of the Community Centre.

VII. THE PROGRAMME OF SOCIAL EDUCATION

The programme of Social Education as developed at the Community Centre differs from State to State and from Block to Block depending upon the understanding

of the concept of the Community Centre as well as the availability of resources in men and material. At places the term 'Community Centre' has been taken as synonymous with that of Recreation Centre or of Cultural Centre. Under the circumstances, the figures available from different States indicate different implications in terms of the nature and organisation of activities. It is not, therefore, possible to state exactly how many Community Centres have been developed in each State. The figures for various activities which can be promoted as a part of Community Centre are available. These are :

	Started up to March 1958 (figures in '00)	Started up to March 1959 (figures in '00)
Youth Clubs and Farmers' Unions	923	1,269
Reading Rooms and Libraries	300	446
Mahila Samitis/Mandals	134	221

Figures based on the Annual Return from the States with regard to the activities of recreation centres indicate an interesting trend in terms of their location in the school buildings. It is observed that up to March 1959, 12 States and Union Territories had reported development of 4,974 recreation centres located in schools as against 14,458 recreation centres located outside schools. The corresponding figures for the year 1958 indicate 3,111 recreation centres located in schools as against 9,518 located outside. This indicates the trend of gradual change. Efforts need, however, to be made to utilise school buildings increasingly for the organisation of Community Centres in rural areas.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Community Centres are an important means of imparting Social Education to the villagers, reducing illiteracy and transforming the rural society into a healthy social unit free from caste and class prejudices. The extent to which these aims are fulfilled will depend upon the manner in which the programme of Community Centres is promoted and the response it receives from the villagers. It is, therefore, necessary for the success of the programme to see that the Community Centre functions properly and the rural population participates in this programme in larger numbers. Only thus will they get the benefit of Social Education. Then alone the objective of inculcating a sense of belonging and cohesiveness among the village community that the Community Centre tries to promote can be fulfilled.

The village Panchat, the school teacher and Community Development personnel, particularly the Gram Sevak, the Gram Sevika, the Mukhya Sevika and the Social Education Organiser working in the village, can help greatly in organising and running the Community Centre and in popularising its objectives. What is important is the development of the tradition of community living—each for all and all for each—through the programme of the Community Centre. The success of the programme should be measured in terms of the development of a sense of belonging that the Community Centre succeeds in creating among the members of the village community.

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