
VIDYA BHAWAN SOCIETY, INSTITUTE OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP, RAJASTHAN



Jagat Mehta in his study

Jagat S Mehta calls his generation, “midnight’s adults”. They grew up, schooled and went to university before Independence. Mehta was appointed an officer of the Indian Foreign Service in July 1947, at the age of 33; he waited until August 1947 to assume office in independent India. Jagat Mehta schooled at Vidya Bhawan, Udaipur for five years. Vidya Bhawan Society, an educational institution, was a pioneer in its time. Founded in 1931, it was the only institution that referred to the concept of citizenship in its aims. Founded by Mehta’s father, it was built on the tenet and the optimism, that India would be a democracy, and that its citizens must be equipped to participate in it. The Society was founded as a small, independent school on the belief that education must be aimed, not only for academic excellence, but for character building, preparation for citizenship, sensitivity towards natural surroundings and the tribal hinterland. The Society has now developed into an umbrella educational association with 10 institutions of various specializations, unified by its common original aim.

In the foreign service, Jagat Mehta gained an insider’s view of the bureaucracy. Through his tenure, he participated in a large number of international negotiations for peace-building, perhaps more than any other officer has till today. Yet, he continued to be concerned about how the ordinary citizen could participate in the democratic process. He infused this concern into the framework of Vidya Bhawan Society, when he assumed office as its president in 1993, and sought ways to strengthen action within it to realize the obligation towards education for citizenship.

Institute of Local Self-Government and Responsible Citizenship, or School of Citizenship, was set up, according to Jagat Mehta, with “a group of dreamers, a rented building, financial insecurity, and a commitment to democracy, good governance and responsible citizenship.” In the face of an overriding despondency about the country’s political system, too, Jagat Mehta believes that even without structural changes it is possible to reap the benefits of democratic government and ensure people’s effective participation in it, bringing them closer to the centres of power. The School of Citizenship was set up in 1997, standing up to the challenge of making the Panchayati Raj system a reality in effective grassroots democracy. Mehta argues for strengthening local democratic structures as an effective antidote to the larger political system. Corruption is intrinsic in a structure that is built on the foundation of an average Lok Sabha constituency of over a million people. In contrast, an average Panchayat constituency of a 300-strong electorate is closer to its elected representatives and can evaluate them better, giving them instant feedback.

The School of Citizenship aims to reinforce

confidence in democratic processes at the grassroots level in the tribal belt of Udaipur district through a capacity enhancement program for Panchayat representatives. This is the first comprehensive training program of its kind for all levels of representatives; the government organizes a program for sarpanches alone. Through 245 training programs since its inception, the School has trained 4,500 representatives. In all there are 6,000 representatives in the district, replaced twice through elections since the School was set up. Through its program, the School of Citizenship hopes to enhance the capacity of elected representatives, especially those from disadvantaged sections, to participate in Panchayat activities. It hopes to develop qualities of responsible citizenship and effective leadership in representatives, empowering them for action and motivating them towards the practice of human rights. The six-day residential orientation, including an exposure visit to a village Panchayat, encompasses rights and duties of representatives, concept of gender equity, empowerment of the marginalized and human rights. The training program goes beyond local self-governance and incorporates issues of health, nutrition, gender equity and livelihood issues among other practical concerns. Training is conducted in the local language, using games, group exercises, and films and is built around existent issues in village

development. Panchayat fairs, symposium for women in villages, newsletters on Panchayat issues, voter awareness seminar series help broad-base democratic concerns further with the electorate and ensures continuity in the orientation provided at training programs.

Participants who undergo training become ambassadors for spreading word about the program. Follow-up programs are conducted with participants a year after their first training. The best participants are selected for further association; they help broaden the scope of the program by taking it to new areas and representatives.

The integrated training curriculum and manuals created by the School of Citizenship has been utilized in different forms by other agencies, too, in their capacity building endeavours of Panchayat representatives. Significant among them is the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad which uses the School's *Handbook for People's Representatives* as training material for its program with pradhans and zilla pramukhs of the Hindi belt.

The School of Citizenship has been supported by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust with a grant of Rs. 8.40 million spread over three years, since 2004. The School works through a low-cost model and expects to utilize the fund for a longer period. Its in-house staff of five trainers consists primarily of retired personnel and those with a history of voluntary action. Guest faculty is invited for specialized sessions – among them are doctors, tehsildars and forest conservators.

In Jagat Mehta's words, the School of Citizenship looks forward to strengthening the contagion of good leadership at the grassroots in the future. It is working towards building into its curriculum a component of human rights, as an integral pursuit of democratic leadership.



Strengthening Panchayati Raj: learning through the 'snakes and ladder' game