

WHOLENESS PRINCIPLE

Diversity in the margins

The Gram Panchayat¹ is a traditional Indian system that encourages everyone to contribute to village decision-making. Its objective is to ensure that everyone has a voice, leading to diverse and healthy dialogue. Unfortunately, those with higher social standing, such as the wealthy, often have a louder voice. This highlights the ongoing problem of social inequality in Indian villages, where those not in leadership roles are frequently overlooked in village meetings.

Gram Sabhas [village general assembly] are called as often as the law requires, but hardly anyone attends. What can they achieve by attending? They know that the sarpanch will do exactly as he pleases, regardless of who attends and who does not.²

Inequality in communities is not unique to India. In some regions, inherited status carries significant weight—much like that of a king—while in others, influence can be bought. In my town, success is what speaks the loudest. The prevailing belief is that success is a product of hard work, leading to the unfair stereotype that the poor are simply lazy and undeserving of a voice. Though the roots of inequality are complex, a common underlying factor across all forms is the ‘god-complex.’

A god-complex is an exaggerated need for admiration. The recognition we receive from others reinforces our sense of worth. The more accolades we receive from the community, the more we believe in our superiority. Social standing, wealth, and success are highly valued in society, which significantly contributes to the development of a god-complex.

The stronger the desire to be seen as god-like, the narrower our perspective becomes. This lack of perspective distances us from the fundamental truth that all individuals are equal reflections of a higher power. This deficit in perspective marginalizes community members who have not received recognition. In the long run, the community suffers as its greatest assets—the individuals who feel voiceless—remain hidden.

¹ Village council

² Interview with Adhyaksh, Janpad Panchayat Manasa, Madhya Pradesh, July 17, 1999 quoted in ARE GRAM PANCHAYATS INCLUSIVE? Report of a study conducted in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh Ruth J. Alsop Anirudh Krishna Disa Sjoblom South Asia - Social Development Unit Draft - March 2000

Ken Lyotier was homeless in Vancouver, trying to make a living by searching through garbage for bottles and cans. Frustrated with the obstacles he faced when cashing in his empties, he realized he could make a difference by engaging his community. He gathered his friends, and together they established their own makeshift exchange depot.

Ken's depot was more than just a place to cash in empty bottles; it became a source of pride for his marginalized community. They found a practical solution to their problem without relying on handouts. Additionally, the depot provided jobs for people unable to secure traditional employment or commit to regular schedules, helping restore dignity to those living on the fringes of society.

There's lots of different ways of looking at these things. And one of the things is if our minds keep open, maybe we can hear things that maybe are a little bit different than what my assumptions are about how things are. ... I [can] miss out on the opportunity to try and explore deeper, where do people get to the mindsets that they get to³.

The key point is that brilliant ideas often arise from the most unexpected places. When the marginalized members of a community feel excluded from contributing, the community as a whole suffers. Inclusivity fosters success. How can we ensure we don't overlook these hidden treasures? How can we combat the tendency to dismiss the voices of those on the margins?

Francis Galton, a renowned statistician, once attended a county fair contest in which participants guessed the weight of a slaughtered ox. He discovered that by averaging the guesses of all 800 participants, he achieved far greater accuracy than the experts. This demonstrated that including everyone's amateur opinions can lead to better solutions.

An African proverb encapsulates Galton's findings: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go further, go together." Success in any endeavour requires every team member to play their part. Effective production on a manufacturing assembly line depends on all elements working synergistically.

In Kinshasa, a group of young people grew frustrated with the frequent power outages in their neighbourhood. They collectively voiced their concerns to the company's head office. In response, the company improved its service to the community. This was a community effort, and the outcome was inspiring. The young people realized that the strength and skills of a group far exceed those of any individual, and they learned how to harness this collective power. They subsequently formed an

³ Ken Lyotier:How to handle garbage, Ideas CBC, June 25, 2019

organization and now volunteer their time to train others and plan workdays aimed at improving their community.

The Wholeness Principle states that when communities learn to work together for the greater good, they not only accomplish more in the short term but also build deeper bonds of trust, empathy, and mutual support throughout the community-building process. The result is a stronger and more resilient community.

If Foot said, “I’m not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don’t belong to this body,” would that make it so? If Ear said, “I’m not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don’t deserve a place on the head,” would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? ... For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn’t be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. ... If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.⁴

The Wholeness Principle emphasizes the importance of diversity, not only in the gene pool but also within communities. Diversity is evident when everyone is included in decision-making and action-planning processes. This level of inclusiveness requires an environment characterized by connectivity and mutual trust. If we are to function as one body, we must care for all its parts.

The concept of a god complex serves as a barrier. It leads individuals to undervalue the contributions of those around them, fostering a fear that diversity might diminish their own chances of standing out. In the long run, a god complex behaves like a disease that gradually deteriorates the collective body. The Wholeness Principle offers an antidote by promoting community interdependence.

The outcome of the Wholeness Principle is agency, where everyone has a role to play. Each individual is a valued member of the community, endowed with rights and privileges. While having agency comes with certain advantages, it also entails the responsibilities of true citizenship. A citizen is loyal to the community and dedicated to contributing to its restoration.

⁴ Excerpts from I Corinthians 12:15-17, 19-23, 26

Summary Statement

A diverse community where every member is equally valued and given agency is rich and has enormous potential.

Discussion

1. List the places in your community where you observe inequality. Can you explain the reasons for this inequality? What are the core causes of inequality in your examples?
2. In your circle of influence, do the projects and programs you participate in reflect diversity? What should diversity look like in those situations? Can you think of examples in your community where diversity has been an asset?
3. Mutual trust is an essential part of community restoration. Can you recall instances where mutual trust played a crucial role in a community project? How was that trust established? What are the barriers to building mutual trust?
4. Have you ever been surprised by the leadership and skills that emerged from unexpected corners of the community? Please list some examples.