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Even before the decentralisation of planning and 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments came into existence, endeavours had already been started in the direction of establishing the first village court in India - it was in Cheriyanad grama panchayat in Alappuzha.

It was none other than Mahatma Gandhi who exhorted in that the real power of India lies in her villages and the empowerment of India would be possible only by executing the policy of self-government (Grama Swaraj). A community fraternity gathered at Cheriyanad panchayat hall on January 30, 1988, the 40th death anniversary day of the Mahatma, elected a subcommittee to form the village court. The master brain behind this was V K Vasudevan the then panchayat president. (Still he is holding the post).

In the beginning, the panchayat president was the chairman of the village court. The vice-president and ward members are the members. Later it was developed and strengthened by including a retired superintendent of

police, who is also a legal expert, retired BDO, a college lecturer, a social worker and two standing committee members of the panchayat. The fact that more than 160 disputes were settled within two years was a striking proof of the ability of the leadership as well as the transparency in the functioning of the system. Thus, Cheriyanad became a glorious symbol of the concept of "court in to people" rather

than "people in to court". Disputes, which were supposed to be settled only through legal courts and those to be filed in courts, were successfully settled in village courts.

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Justice on the spot



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from co-operation to oneness of opinion with the whole-hearted agreement of the clients, resulting in an amicable settlement. On receipt of a petition, the parties concerned would be formally summoned before the village court. The clients can make argument before the court. Those who had remained as rivals for long could sit together and express their problems, discuss the remedies and accept the verdict of the village court. No one is defeated here. No one is humiliated here. And here is no appeal.

The procedure of the village court is found very simple. Absence of formalities that have to be observed in a law court is the salient feature. Friendly approach of the panchayat president and members of the village court as well as the co-operation rendered by the people form its backbone. There is no threatening or punishment. The clients are made to confess wrong doings and accept the common verdict of the court whole-heartedly. This is implemented through mutual

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discussions. For this, the court patiently listens hours together to the petitioner and at the same time, spends time to hear the other side. The court members make the clients understand the virtues and vices as well as the just and unjust on their part and arrive at an amicable settlement through consensus.

The panchayath president says that of the total 602 petitions received so far, 570 have been solved. Common cases like border issues, financial matters, issues connected with pathways, family problems, disputes regarding distribution of ancestral land etc. are settled here. The court members are ready to make on the spot assessment, if the situation demands. A case remained unsettled in the court for 27 years was recently settled here in two hours. The court meets twice in a month on Saturdays from 9am to 3 pm.

Petitions received at the panchayat office will be recorded in the register by the clerk. The next step is to send notices to the clients concerned. If a client fails to attend the village court, he will be informed again. Only in one case, the client decided to keep himself away, despite repeated notices.

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The president and his colleagues who effected a new revolution by uniting the people and lighting the lamp of virtue in their thoughts are, no doubt, the role model for the country.■
