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Women Revitalise Tamil Nadu Panchayats

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Kozhi Kuviya Pozhudhu Veedeeya Povudhu” – the hen’s cry does not heralds the dawn is a traditional Tamil proverb. But today in Tamil Nadu’s 12,618 village panchayats, 4,329 women presidents are changing the face of grassroots governance to make a difference to the villages they head.

No longer passive onlookers, women are devising their own strategies to stand up and be counted as leaders. Silently, women have crossed individual milestones of being mere daughters, wives or mothers to walk the path of leadership that in today’s polity is different.

However, much of their work remains unsung and unknown, save for the village that they tough with their work and nurturing. In Tamil Nadu, while the 73rd Amendment brought reservations for women for a term of five years, it was extended for 10 years through a state government order. By the end of the five years term, elections are held again and the women presidents have to contend with other women leaders to win or lose. Winning means they are Panchayat presidents for five years more.

There are many capable women who can make strong assertive leaders, but are not chosen by the community. In this “transfer of power” from men to women, those who are relinquishing power want to hold on to some strings. Against this backdrop

women have to swim against all odds to achieve leadership. Take the case of slim, tall, grey haired Jesumary. Her unhurried way of talking draws people to her. Resident of Michalepattinam Gram Panchayat in Mudukulathoor Block, Ramnathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, Jesumary married her hard working farmer husband after her Class X. She then went to work as a teacher in an Adult Education Centre taking on the role of councilor in her village.

In the 1996 Panchayat elections, her popularity ensured a sweeping victory as the President of her Christain Udaiyar farming community. Five years later her good work guaranteed her reelection.

Michalepttinam belongs to an arid belt. For the past 30 years since her marriage, Jesumary and the women of the village had to constantly contend with water scarcity. Farmers depended on the rain for their crop. A good harvest meant beating poverty and hunger. Jesumary decided bringing water to her village would be her biggest priority.

She decided to desilt water tanks and waterways only to meet with a fierce opposition from neighboring panchayats who considered all waterways as part of their panchayats, and even threatened her with a Court Order to stay away from involving herself with the issue of water.

The war for water in these parts of Tamil Nadu is fierce and many times ends with death of one party. Leelavathi, Councillor of Maduria Corporation, was killed because of water distribution problem in her village. Jesumary also faced death threats.

Undeterred, she called a meeting of her village and spoke about the necessity to desilt waterways and check dams to ensure water storage. Mobilising the entire village, the community worked overnight and cleaned out the water tank.

The village records proved that the waterways belonged to Michalepattinam, resulting in water being shared between panchayats. It was a turning point. Determined to reduce poverty by increasing agricultural production, Jesumary turned to rainwater harvesting.

Getting water to the village had created immense good will for Jesumary. Her suggestion for rainwater harvesting structures was met with equal enthusiasm. The Panchayat purchased PVC pipes for the entire village and distributed them, providing each household with sand, stones and cement for putting up the structures. The community built it together.

The method used was innovative and ensured no wastage. Rainwater from roofs flowed into PVC pipes that in turn emptied onto PVC pipes installed on both sides of the streets, and merged with large PVC pipes sunk in the middle of the street. All street pipes were connected to larger pipes that directed water into the public tank.

Michalepattinam became the first village in Tamil Nadu to achieve a hundred percent rainwater harvesting. The method has brought up the water table of the village. "The water we drink is so much sweeter," says a smiling Jesumary.

Tamil Nadu Gram Panchayat Leaders Association conferred her with Seva Ratna as the best performing Panchayat president. The Rotary Club of Ramnad conferred her with the title of

Mangaiyar Thilagam in the year 2003. She won the World Bank Award in the Development Market Place category.

She also won a cash award of Rs. Five Lakhs for 100 percent rainwater harvesting, which she says resulted in poverty reduction in her creased, and farmers got a better price for their crop.

Now 49, Jesumary's second term in office comes to an end as soon as fresh Panchayat elections take place in 2006. She adds, "I would like to get another woman ready to take my place, so that more women get opportunities to be leaders."

A dark blue plaque with the "In" sign informs you that N Jamrud Beevi BA, the President of Devipattinam village Panchayat, is home. A smiling woman, Jamrud is a graduate of Lady Doak College, Madurai, she speaks fluent English and rapid fire Tamil using her henna painted hands expressively. Her husband Noorul Amen watches her with pride. His two daughters watch over the grandchildren, and listen attentively as she talks.

Devipattinam is roughly an hour's drive from Rameswaram, the place where Lord Rama built the bridge for his army. When Lord Rama returned from his battle, victorious with his wife Sita, he offered prayers to the Navabashanam (nine deities submerged in the sea) to do penance for killing Ravana, on the banks of the Devipattinam.

Roughly ten years ago when Jamrud was elected as President of her village, pilgrims had to wade through three to five feet of water. Seeing their difficulty, Jamrud called a meeting and spoke about the urgent need to build a bridge to the temple so people could offer their prayers in peace.

Mobilizing popular support she put up a petition to the District Collector, who sanctioned Rs. 9.75 lakhs for the bridge. Jamrud built the concrete bridge with a cemented platform all around the submerged temple.

Today the gentle lapping waves carry the marigold petals offered in prayers far and wide. Her second term as President led her to add more facilities for pilgrims. Toilets, bathing ghats and a pilgrim rest hall have all made it very easy and comfortable for visiting devotees.

The buses that come to the Panchayat now pay a toll, which has become a part of the Panchayat's fund. Jamrud also levies house tax on the 3000 household of her village. The money is used effectively in recruiting sweepers who collect garbage from each home, clean streets and public toilets.

The State Tourism Department has recently sanctioned Rs. 75 lakhs to build a park and shopping complex close to the temple. On the outskirts of the village, Jamrud has also established a common cremation ground for Hindus, Muslims and Christians, complete with a shed, water tank and cremation platform.

Now nearing the end of her second term in office, Jamrud says her greatest inspiration has come from Mahatma Gandhi, "My ambition has become a reality. Political parties have approached me to give me ticket but I am not interested in politics. Many people ask me you are a Muslim woman how come you work for another community. What others, we are all one, everyone worships God with the same feeling and same hope. I am doing nothing new."

On 26 December 2004, when 50-year old Selvi Manimegalai was watching television, she recoiled in horror to see huge devastating waves lash a far off island of Indonesia, wreaking havoc and destruction. Instinctively she ran towards the village pond, and was surprised to see that the water level had risen by over two feet and the whole water surface was bubbling. Alarmed she ran towards the sea and saw that the sea had risen and strong currents were lashing the shores. Children playing by the shore were suddenly trapped. Screams echoed as people watched the sea puzzled. Men ran into the waves, trying to pull back their

children. Some survived, many were swept away. As President of Cauverypoompattinam village panchayat of Kollidam Panchayat Union, Selvi Manimegalai watched in fear as the Tsunami raged, houses collapsed, and the sea swept away everything. People ran helter skelter in panic.

Just three days earlier, Manimegalai has removed large number of families living in six community huts close to the sea, and made a passage by removing thorny bushes that abound in the Nagapattinam area. People could approach the sea easily. It was through this very passage that people fled towards higher ground, trying to escape the raging waves. She recalls with tears that most of the victims were women and children who could not run fast enough to beat the waves.

Chinna Cauvery Pattinam, located on the northern side of Cauverypoompattinam, housed 300 houses. It was here that the Tsunami left 87 people dead. Manimegalai took up the reins on behalf of her community, informed government officials, the district collector and began facilitating relief work.

The Panchayat, galvanized into action, made food for the entire community. Selvi Manimegalai called on every able-bodied person to remove bodies from collapsed buildings, and gave them a decent and dignified burial. Manimegalai was untiring in her effort to provide her shattered community support, food and relief, working round the clock. She became the leading figure whom NGOs and relief workers contacted for instructions, and understanding the situation. Unmarried by choice, Manimegalai, has made serving the community her mission.

She admits that life was not easy for her fishing community. The sea determined their life and their livelihood. In the wake of the Tsunami, the community has come together and suggestions have poured out as lessons from the natural disaster. One of them was the necessity of having natural barriers, which act as protection from fierce waves. On advice of experts, the community is now planting

mangrove saplings. Manimegalai has already thought up plans to combat future natural disasters. She intends putting up a cemented community hall which will at all times house utensils, beddings and other livelihood facilities, so that the community will not have to depend on outside help during disasters.

She praised the role of the NGOs who rushed in for relief work, but felt that instead of discussing and identifying the needs of the community, they just provided what they chose. Most came, distributed bags of supplies they thought would be needed by the survivors, took photographs and left. “We were provided with relief materials but there is little psychological relief for the community where every house has lost loved ones. There is a great need for

disaster management committees to be set up in each panchayat and taluk of the coastal area, so the community can mobilize itself for quicker relief.”

Rita Sarin, the Country Director of The Hunger Project (THP), and her team work across 14 states strengthening leadership of elected women representatives. “Our experiences, in the past five years have been that when women are empowered, they challenge the status quo and address the most basic issues of water, food security, livelihood and work for the poorest and the most disadvantaged. But often the cynicism regarding women leadership blinds people to the change. Women plod on despite all obstacles to make a real difference.”

(Courtesy: Grassroots, Vol. 7, No. 2, February 2006)

Bihar Makes it 50:50

The Bihar government has taken a radical step towards empowerment of women. Against the constitutional requirement of a minimum of one-third seats, 50 per cent seats in all three tiers of panchayats have been reserved for women. This will apply to all categories of seats.

In fact, a demand for 50:50 in local governments has been made from time to time. One of the key demands in the 20-point Charter of Demands, adopted by more than 1,500 elected women representatives on 25 April 2004 during the Women’s Political Empowerment Day Celebrations, organised by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, said: “Raise reservation for women in panchayats to 50 per cent and provide reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures”. Bihar is the first state in the country

to give 50 per cent reservation to women in panchayats.

Interestingly, the representation of women in panchayats has been rising in almost all states including Bihar as a result of the social and political dynamics. In 2004, there were at least nine states where panchayats had more than 33 per cent women members: Andhra Pradesh (33.04 per cent), Assam (50.38), Chhattisgarh (33.75), Gujarat (49.30), Kerala (57.24), Karnataka (43.6), Tamil Nadu (36.73), Uttar Pradesh (37.85) and West Bengal (35.15). With 50 per cent reservation for women after the forthcoming elections in May may well exceed the 50 per cent mark as many women contest from general (unreserved) seats and win.

(Courtesy: Panchayati Raj Update, January 2006)

Tamil Nadu Governor Calls Upon Panchayat to Assist Rescue Efforts

Inaugurating a day-long conference on ‘Panchayats in Tsunami Rehabilitation’, organised by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi in Chennai

on 29 January, Tamil Nadu Governor Surjit Singh Barnala asked panchayat members to form volunteer groups to carry out rescue and relief operations at

the time of natural calamities. Since panchayats have thorough knowledge about ground realities and work in close association with local people, they can be the first party to rescue people, he said. He also called for decentralization of governance and revamping of panchayati raj institutions in the state.

More than 200 panchayat representatives from Tsunami affected areas, including Andaman and Nicobar islands, attended the conference. Six studies carried out in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Andaman and Nicobar islands on the role of panchayats during the tsunami and in the rehabilitation process were presented.

Valarmathi Murgaiyyan, president of Vellankanni special village panchayat, lamented that government authorities did not consult local representatives for any kind of relief work. Era Sezhian, former member of Parliament, said that villages were not getting due recognition as well as representation. George Mathew, director, Institute of Social Sciences, M.L. Das, director, People's Governance Council, Fatima Vasanth, principal, Madras School of Social Work and noted journalist Maalan were among those who participated in the conference.

(Courtesy: Panchayati Raj Update, January 2006)

Union Government Initiatives for Stronger Panchayats

Although panchayats are a state subject, the union government has a decisive role in advancing the cause of panchayati raj. During the short span of 20 months, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MOPR), created for the first time by Manmohan Singh government, has taken a number of steps to ensure that panchayats play their full role as envisaged in the Constitution. A major achievement was holding seven round tables around the country to evolve a time-bound action plan for achieving full devolution of functions, functionaries and finances to PRIs. There was a consensus in the round tables over 150 action points pertaining to 18 dimensions of panchayati raj, on which effective devolution of power hinges. Further, the MOPR has tried to ensure that union government programmes and initiatives are compatible with the letter and spirit of the Constitutional provisions relating to panchayats. Although the focus is on the policies that govern the transfer of funds to states through centrally sponsored schemes (CSSs), other dimensions have also been taken care of. A look at the union government initiatives for strengthening the panchayati raj:

Re-examination of existing CSSs: All ministries have been requested to review their existing CSSs with reference to the constitutionally envisaged role for panchayats. The MOPR has also informed all ministries that they ought to clearly articulate the responsibility and accountability of panchayats in the modalities of their CSSs. Union ministries have been requested to refer to the Task Force report of August 2001 on Activity Mapping to define the role of different tiers of panchayats in their schemes. The MOPR has also evolved do's and don'ts with respect to CSS design and suggested them to all union ministries. The process of examination of existing schemes is being pursued with each ministry by the MOPR.

Designing of new CSSs: All secretaries to the Government of India have been requested to undertake examination of fresh Centrally Sponsored Scheme proposals with reference to constitutional provisions relating to panchayati raj and to get all new CSSs vetted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj from the viewpoint of whether they are in conformity with the letter and spirit of the Constitution. In furtherance of this initiative, schemes of various ministers have already been

examined and comments forwarded to the ministry concerned.

Rationalising the process of transfer of scheme funds: In order to come up with specific modalities for operationalising the objective of the National Common Minimum Programme that funds that are to go to panchayats are neither delayed nor diverted, a committee was set up to specifically look into the modalities of transfer of funds through the banking channel, so that in case this is an option that is considered at a later stage, the processes are worked out in advance. The committee submitted its report in May 2005 and elements of the report are now being put into operation to streamline the transfer of Twelfth Finance Commission funds to states.

Initiatives on planning by panchayats: The remit of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj was enlarged to include District Planning Committees (DPCs). However, if DPCs are to function meaningfully, several policy changes, mainly relating to the untying of specific purpose transfers, would need to be taken at the central level. The extent and type of available resources to each panchayat and municipality would also need to be indicated as per Article 243ZD. The MOPR's focus has been in this regard to work closely with the Planning Commission. An expert group, chaired by Ramachandran, former deputy chairperson of the Kerala State Planning Board, has been set up to make suggestions on the modalities for ensuring that the Eleventh Plan is founded on District Plans prepared in accordance with Article 243 (ZD) of the Constitution. The Planning Commission has already requested all concerned state ministries to work out appropriate arrangements for incorporating a panchayat sector in their budgets as per the discussions on the Annual Plan for 2006-07. The MOPR will offer consultative support on the

process, and also channelise feedback from the states on the options that are possible in this regard.

Panchayati Raj Jurisprudence: The MOPR has commenced action on several issues that together constitute building a body of jurisprudence relating to panchayati raj. These include compiling and evolving a database on the legal implications of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, examination of state laws to identify good legislative practices as also flaws and provide a forum for clarifications on legal issues concerning panchayats. Harmonisation of other laws with panchayat legislation in accordance with Article 243N of the Constitution would be another initiative. This would include crystallization of the legal issues that arise in this regard, which would be sent to the lay ministry for their formal views before clarifications are sent to states.

Consultative Mechanism for Follow-up on Round Table Resolutions: A council of Panchayati Raj Ministers of States has been set up under the chairpersonship of Union Minister of Panchayati Raj. Similarly, a Council of Chief Secretaries and Panchayati Raj Secretaries of States has been set up under the chairpersonship of the Secretary, Panchayati Raj to discuss issues relating to panchayati raj matters. The Council of Chief Secretaries and Panchayati Raj Secretaries is to coordinate and lead efforts in capacity building, commence consultation on proposed direct transfer of funds to panchayats, take steps to improve financial accountability of panchayats, work on creating databases on panchayats and develop the State of the Panchayats reports of states. The council will also periodically review the progress in states on the recommendations of the round tables.

(Courtesy: Panchayati Raj Update, January 2006)

Khaph Panchayats: Out of Tune with the Times

D. R. Chaudhry

The decision of a khaph panchayat in Bhiwani district, to expel two families from their respective villages which were recently tied together through a matrimonial alliance, should make all right thinking people sit up and take serious note of a phenomenon which is increasingly posing a threat to civilized existence.

The incidence of khaph panchayats issuing fatwas to ostracize families, dissolving marriages, declaring a legally wedded couple brother and sister, doling out punishment (including death in some cases) to those who are perceived to have deviated from some khaph norm in a matrimonial alliance, are becoming quite common in the khaph belt around Delhi.

Khaph is an endogamous unit covering a cluster of villages dominated by a particular gotra of Jats in the Jat heart-land around Delhi. Members of particular khaph units are governed by blood ties and are supposed to observe certain norms in marital alliances. Any deviance is frowned upon.

The institution of khaph came into being in medieval times as an outgrowth of clannish formations in the tribal era. It played an important role in fostering a sense of brotherhood among members of a khaph, thus creating an instrument of social security in an age when the modern concept of law and order was unheard of, and might as right largely prevailed.

There was no institutionalized system of law enforcement and the khaph panchayat was an organ to settle disputes among khaph members. Sometimes it played a larger social role as well. For instance, some khaphs played an important role in organizing resistance against the British rule in the 1857 uprising in Haryana.

Society can exist as a healthy organism only if it regularly and consistently makes a bid for a creative fusion of tradition and modernity. Tradition untouched by modernity becomes hidebound and

moribund, while modernity unhinged from tradition is shallow and superficial.

There is no evidence of the operation of this principle in the evolution of the khaph as an institution. Thus it has become obsolete in its structure, and regressive and reactionary in its ideological baggage.

The exposure of the rural youth to the wide world through improved means of transport and communications and the mass media, both print and electronic, coupled with the spread of education, has led to a radical change in the sexual mores in rural society.

The concept of bhaichara members of a khaph being brothers and sisters is a myth now, giving rise to increased interaction and intimacy between the two sexes. When this leads to matrimonial alliance, it is treated as an unpardonable sin inviting barbarous punishment. Various norms governing matrimonial alliance have lost their relevance with the proliferation of gotras in villages of a particular khaph. Thus the Khaph panchayat has lost its relevance in modern times.

The elected village panchayats, more representative in its composition with 33 per cent reservation for SCs, BCs, and women (there is no elective principle in the khaph panchayat), have been deprived of its rationale. In an age when institutions of law enforcement, justice, punishment and settling of disputes – the police, judiciary, the executive etc – have come into being and function, despite lapses, quite regularly, the khaph panchayat has outlived its utility; yet the age old institution fights back with all tenacity for survival. It is historically dead but physically alive.

Since a dominant community in the rural hinterland that controls land and muscle power, and is highly patriarchal in its worldview, dominates the khaph

panchayat, it is anti-woman and anti-weaker sections. In Talao village of Jhajjar district a high caste girl eloped with a scheduled caste boy and her younger sister went with her for moral support. The girls were caught and brought back. Both were declared dead the next morning and furtively cremated. It is commonly believed that they were done to death. There was no inquest or enquiry into this ghastly incident by the administration.

In Chachhoroli village of the same district, a Lohar boy eloped with a high caste girl. The khap panchayat expelled the Lohar family from the village but did not touch the girl's family.

The khap panchayat has become a law unto itself. Kangaroo courts are held and fatwas issued. Unemployed youth is in the forefront in such panchayats, and goad the elders to take decisions that are often outlandish, bizarre and abominable. They seek thrills to enliven their drab existence.

Strangely enough, these khap panchayats take no notice of numerous social evils like the rising crime graph in the state, corruption in the administration, the adverse sex ratio and growing incidence of

foeticide, increasing use of alcohol and drugs by the rural youth, and many such other things. Who marries whom is the only issue that agitates them.

However, Rajasthan has provided a silver lining in this dark scenario. The Rajasthan High Court and the State Human Rights Commission took a suo moto notice of the barbaric practice of the caste panchayats in the state and issued instructions to the state to apply a curb on them. The Home Ministry of Rajasthan vide its letter No. P-10 (26) Home 13/98 dated 14.2.2001 issued instructions to the police and other law enforcing agencies to curb the unlawful functioning of the caste panchayats in the state.

The major problem with Haryana society is that civil society is virtually non-existent in the state. There are no social institutions, organized groups, civil liberty and human rights organization and NGOs to take up the issues of rights and liberties of an individual guaranteed in the Constitution. This leaves the field free to outdated social formations to operate without any check.

(Courtesy: The Tribune, January 28, 2006)

Four Panchayats Win Nirmal Gram Award

PATNA: Bihar has joined the league of select Indian states that have won the Nirmal Gram Award for sanitation and hygiene. For the first time, four panchayats of Bihar have been selected for the award instituted by the Centre for successfully implementing the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). The campaign which runs throughout the country is an effort to get everybody to use a toilet and reduce the disease burden associated with open defecation.

The Bihar panchayats selected for the award are Goitha in Banake Bazaar block and Baraki Chilami in Amas in Gaya district, Bhaganpur in Mushahsri block in Muzaffarpur district and Maile in Biddupur block in Vaishali districts. Although this year 10

panchayats applied for the award, four were finally selected.

The public health and engineering department (PHED) is obviously happy with the news. Officials expressed the hope that the four panchayat would go on to become models for other panchayats to follow. PHED secretary Arun Kumar Singh said the award was given only if a panchayat met cent per cent sanitary toilet coverage and use in households, schools and anganwadi centres. He said, "There is no open defecation in the four Bihar panchayat. Besides, general cleanliness and hygiene are strictly maintained there." He said each of these panchayats would receive a cash reward of Rs four lakh for development work. President A P J Abdul Kalam

will give away the awards at a function in New Delhi on March 23.

With the state recording toilet-use of 14 per cent in 2001, it was not easy to get entire villages to not only opt for household toilet but also use it. Five years on, the toilet coverage in the state has gone up to 19 per cent. Bihar education project's Mahila Samakhya programme played a vital role in these villages.

Women from the programme took up installation of sanitary toilets as women's issue to protect their

dignity and pride. Open defecation have led to several cases of sexual harassment and assault of women, particularly those from Dalit communities.

The Nirmal Gram Awards were instituted in 2003 and are given to panchayats only if there is no open defecation and each household has a toilet. There is a rigorous selection process too. A team from the Centre lives in each nominated village for 15 days before certifying that every resident used toilets.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, March 13, 2006)

Women Panchayat Presidents Gear up for Local Body Polls

CHENNAI: While political parties are gearing up for the Assembly elections, a group of women have already begun preparations for the local body polls scheduled in October. While many may consider it too early to begin the preparations, members of the Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government (TNFWPPG) do not think so. At their third State-level convention here on Friday, over 300 members, led by their executive committee members, pledged to work till the run-up to the elections to improve their panchayats and protect the rights of women and children, Dalits and Adivasis. They resolved to contest and win the elections.

Healthcare

The women reiterated their commitment to improve healthcare services, education, public distribution system and balwadis; stop conversion of agricultural land, coastal land and forest areas for commercial and industrial purposes; help Dalits take possession of panchami land, and function as centres of information and knowledge.

At the inaugural session, V.Vasanthi Devi, former chairperson, Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women, said the growth of women, over the years, as panchayat presidents, was tremendous. Initially

dominated by their husbands and forced to remain figureheads, they eventually assumed the reins of power and did a lot for the people.

Devolution of powers

However, devolution of powers and resources to the lower tiers of governance was not satisfactory in Tamil Nadu as it had been in Punjab and Kerala. Nearly all powers were still vested in the bureaucracy. This had to change.

P. Sivagami, Commissioner for Disciplinary Proceedings, Chennai, said Tamil Nadu had excelled in legally ensuring the rights of women. She was confident that a time would soon come when women would occupy the seats of power in large numbers and be in a position to allocate reservation for men. To achieve this, women had to remain united.

Effect of globalisation

Gandhimathy, researcher and activist, spoke about the effects globalisation on panchayats.

Twelve essential services, including health, transport and water distribution would be privatised, thus eroding the authority of the panchayat. Natural

resources, agriculture, handlooms and fisheries should be protected at any cost, she said.

Three books on women panchayati raj, including the annual report of the federation, were released on the

occasion. The women also formed a human chain, reiterating their demands to the government at Valluvar Kottam later in the evening.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, March 28, 2006)

Need to Empower Gram Sabhas

THENI: Gram sabhas should be vested with more powers. They should have powers to reprimand panchayat presidents and even dismiss erring panchayat presidents, if necessary. This was highlighted at an advocacy programme for Panchayat Raj institutions held here on Saturday.

In his address, former Vice-Chancellor of Gandhigram Rural Institute N. Markandan said that panchayats should have adequate power to execute useful programmes to people and satisfy specific needs of villages. On present education system, he said that it was not useful for development of villages and growth of rural industries. The gap between urban and rural areas have been widening day by day. Despite development in standard of education, it failed to improve rural economy. So, education should be modified to give suggestion for development of village industries and rural economy.

Development of agro-based industries would certainly help farmers get better price for their

produce and help industrialists reduce procurement cost of raw materials. He also suggested decentralisation of power and proper share of funds.

Many representatives of village panchayats insisted that resolutions passed by gram sabhas should be passed at panchayats also. However the villagers should propose the resolutions of gram sabha. Transparency in panchayat administration should be ensured. Gram sabhas should have adequate powers to select beneficiaries of various schemes. Planning should be done at block levels. To avoid intervention of bureaucracy, they demanded relevant amendments in Panchayat Act.

Panchayat presidents should be empowered adequately to monitor all departments under panchayat control for smooth functioning of village administration and effective implementation of development schemes.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, February, 6, 2006)

Toxic Assault Continues

Bharati Chaturvedi

Why is it so hard to live in India without being deliberately poisoned? First, there was the French ship Clemenceau, the asbestos-coated skeleton headed for India. Now, there is a loud protest against a hazardous landfill being constructed by the Tamil Nadu Waste Management Ltd (TNWML), in Gummidipoondi panchayat of the state.

There is an eerie similarity between the two. Neither is legal. In fact, the TN Panchayats Act, 1994, makes it clear that no construction can take place without the permission from the panchayat union council. The panchayat has already passed a resolution against the landfill. The panchayat has served notices and registered a case with the local police. But the construction has hardly stopped.

They are being ignored. The law of the land is being blatantly abused.

It is hard to gloss over the irony. The residents expected that the SC Monitoring Committee for Hazardous Wastes would realise what a poor site this one is for any landfill. It is located on a porous land, with the ground water flowing under it directly to villages. It hasn't responded so far. The committee itself is a result of a PIL that hoped to stop such community poisoning. Why do communities like this one still have to struggle for their constitutional Right to Life and a Clean Environment? Why are workers still being poisoned? Maybe it is that same thing again: the price of life if you're poor.

An US example

The TN case reminds me of a recent study conducted by the US Centre for Health, Environment and Justice. The focus of the study was to show how schools were being built on contaminated land, including landfills. The problem with this is the impact it has on children who will study and play in a highly contaminated area. One of the findings was that poorer districts were found to use toxic lands for constructing schools. Poorer communities also received less decontamination of poisoned lands in their area. Regulation was also found to be absent in all but five states. The poor seem to globalise in their inequity.

(Courtesy: The Hindustan Times, January 6, 2006)

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Women make difference in fighting disasters

Ranjan Panda, Cuttack, Orissa

Orissa is infamous for repeated natural disasters. Major ones have hit in 95 out of the last 105 years. India's poorest state meanwhile has little to show in terms of development. Though disasters are nothing new for the state, the alarming regularity with which they are striking especially after 1965 worries common people and experts alike. Experts now see 'climate change' as the culprit, and thought processes are undergoing a change both officially and at the grassroots level.

The 1999 super cyclone that struck the 483 km coastline of Orissa was the watershed. The mother of all recent disasters, this cyclone shook the state economically and ecologically, with serious implications for the poorest of the poor. The official 'Relief Code' approach to mitigating disasters started to be re-looked at. In the coastal villages, communities started to rethink their own strategies to cope with disasters as well, even as they researched options to rebuild their homes and livelihood. "We have lived with floods and cyclones for centuries, but were never so shattered," rued Benudhar Mishra of village Telisahi in Cuttack district. Cuttack was one of the worst affected districts in the 1999 super cyclone with 14 blocks and four urban habitations badly hit. About 2.4 million people in 1977 villages were devastated.

The damage reached such high levels because the people were not prepared, said Dr. Kamal Lochan Mishra of the Orissa State Disaster Mitigation Authority (OSDMA), established after the Super Cyclone. Disaster is so much part of their lives that they did not believe it would turn so violent. It requires a systematic approach to look into 'Emergency Preparedness' argued Matthews Pickard, Country Director of Concern Worldwide India (CWI), one of the first international aid agencies to respond to the 1999 Cyclone. This is happening.

Manjulata Senapati 35 of Telisahi village, Cuttack district is now part of a new awakening process that tries to fight disasters. She, along with hundreds of other poor women, has made a difference to a programme that tries to make disaster-prone villages along Orissa's coastline more prepared. With CWI support, Manjulata's village is now hoping to build a strategic coping mechanism. "Women make the home and hence their understanding on preparedness is better," argued Pramod Ojha, Programme Officer with the Utkal Sevak Samaj (USS), an NGO facilitating these activities with CWI support. When they are motivated and trained, they realized how important it was to be strategically prepared. Gomathi, Programme Officer of CWI, said, "We are asking people to plan so that the after-effects of floods and cyclones can be largely minimized". "As soon as a disaster strikes,

the men rescue their family members, but women have to see beyond the present”, added Manjulata.

The first valuable that needs to be secured is the Land Patta - the legal document establishing ownership over the land. The women in Telisahi have got the message. Environment unfriendly polythene bags have been utilized. Manjulata shows her bag with pride and confidence. “Each year during Raja Parba (a coastal Orissa festival), the people buy new clothes, and the shop keepers give away good polythene bags,” she explained. “We thought of using them as a tool to save precious documents, because they are water- proof. We keep our land records, pass books, certificates and all other documents in these bags, and place them in a convenient place. At the slightest hint of a disaster we can quickly gather them and rush to a rescue center. If you lose a land patta, then you have to bribe officials, run from pillar to post and spend a lot of money and time,” added Kalpana Swain, another woman who is also part of the movement.

The women's concept of 'preparedness' does not end here. Several other things are being tried. Manjulata is also a member of the Maa Sarala Women Self Help Group, and along with 11 others now has twelve thousand rupees as savings. Widowhood had crippled her. Her educational qualification as a Matriculate did nothing to better her life. "USS recognized my talent, and I have received training including 'first-aid' training," she remarked with confidence.

"Through this project we are trying to build powerful community institutions including Self Help Groups and Disaster Mitigation Task Forces so that people can better live with disasters and feel less dispossessed," added Gomathi. "We however had one condition - involvement of women at all levels of this programme." Pramod explained, "Unlike the tribal and forested belts of Orissa, women here do not come out of their homes and never attended meetings. It's the males

who decided everything. Hence all strategies failed."

The village women have organized three Self Help Groups with a total savings of about forty-five thousand rupees. Realising that grain and seed become the most precious commodities in the aftermath of a disaster, they formed seed banks. They now preserve about 80 bags of paddy plus several bags of seeds both for use as food in emergencies and for sowing if a disaster washes away their seed stock. They are also identifying the poorest of the poor in the village, and with the support of CWI are helping them with alternative livelihood options. Ganulata Bhoi, for example, has received one thousand rupees that she used to buy a goat. "This goat will help me a lot in normal times but also during disasters," she said confidently. Ganulata never dreamt of being able to purchase a goat of her own, though others in her joint family possess some livestock.

"In this case also women are different," Pramod continued. "Ganulata did not use all the one thousand rupees in purchasing a goat. She spent six hundred rupees and kept four hundred rupees in reserve to be used during emergencies. Had you given it to her husband he would have spent the total amount."

The movement is on in other villages too. Matthew Pickard said CWI had targeted at least 100 villages to carry out risk analyses and prepare Village Mitigation and Preparedness Plans. They would become functional with the active participation of women. Women, who never left their homes earlier, are now part of their own powerful disaster mitigation institutions, and active in village-level Disaster Mitigation Committees. These have been formed to deal with early warning, evacuation, search, rescue, water, sanitation; and first aid. They are gearing up to be the new managers following disasters.

(Courtesy: Grassroots, Vol. 7, No. 5, May 2006)

Divisions in the digital landscape

With many villages getting computers and Internet services, have the benefits of technology reached the hinterland?

A. Srivathan

From the pillion, sugarcane and maize fields of Uppukottai appear like large pixels laid in a carefully careless manner. Normally, this scenic view would have invited descriptions like a mosaic of green. But what bounces in the mind are phrases of a pixilated green landscape. What brings me to Uppukottai, a village in Theni district, is Ganakkulandhai and his Internet centre that won the fellowship from the National Alliance for Mission 2007.

In the last five years, many villages like Uppukottai have received computers and Internet services. Have the benefits of technology reached the digital hinterland? Can we now claim that the digital divide has been bridged? The story of Internet centres in six villages in Melur, Theni and Bodi taluks of Tamil Nadu reveal a story of success and shortcomings.

The Internet kiosk at Uppukottai was started with assistance from Chiraag rural information and communications project. Chiraag is the brand name of n-Logue, the private wireless network provider based in Chennai. The kiosk is off the main road, on a narrow lane abutting a cowshed. Ganakkulandhai, a well-educated Dalit, invested Rs.55,000 and established this centre a few years ago. Initially, his village wondered what purpose his "small-sized TV" would serve. Hurdles also seem to have appeared in the form of his caste background. They have all been overcome. He now claims that there is a steady stream of users.

Like many other centres, this one too provides a range of services — education, health and communication facilities. It also works as a make shift photo studio. For Rs. 25, one can browse, for another 10 you can seek a clarification from a veterinary doctor or check the eye online. However, an unexpected feature has gained popularity

among the users, particularly with the young ones, of this centre.

A group of four children was crowding around the computer. They were engrossed playing the motorbike race. It costs them five rupees to play a game. Two managed to save enough money. The one who had contributed the most sits with his fingers on the keyboard; the next takes the mouse, while the other two watched and cheered with equal enthusiasm. When asked, unanimously they declare it is the games that they are most interested in.

Pattern of usage

The data obtained from the Internet centres established by DHAN Foundation reveals an interesting pattern of usage. DHAN Foundation, a Madurai-based NGO, runs about 36 Internet centres in the Melur taluk. The monthly report of a typical centre shows that e-mail and videoconference are used for a maximum of 10 hours. There are not more than three to five veterinary and telemedicine enquiries. Educational kits that supplement school syllabus have less takers but the computer education finds favour with many.

Shanmugavalli, a 14-year-old schoolgirl, is busy practising her recently acquired skills at Oddaipatti — a village about 21 km from Theni. Her school does not have a computer. She spends Rs. 100 a month to learn to use the Internet and web camera among other things. She looks forward to a computer job. When asked what computer job can she get, she is not sure, but wants one, which will pay.

At the moment, those who hold certification in computer education find jobs as kiosk operators. Occasionally they get some data entry jobs. Premanand of DHAN says that language is the main impediment in getting jobs outsourced to villages.

Other jobs, if any, seem to be available only in towns. Salaries too are not encouraging.

Girls are mostly employed as kiosk operators and are paid about Rs. 1,200 a month or Rs. 40 a day; less than what an agricultural labourer gets for a day's work. Other jobs for women do not pay better either. Women working in the textile mills of Theni earn only Rs. 1,200. While men settle for nothing less than Rs. 2,500, women find the meagre salaries supplement the family income. More than the salary, it is the social pride that makes computer jobs attractive. A computer-educated bride is always preferred over an agricultural labourer.

Sundarajan, the kiosk owner in Govindanagaram, candidly owned that the Internet centre did not bring sufficient money. He observed that villagers must first have money and should find services valuable to spend on. This explains why, even after five years, companies like n-Logue have not broken even. NGO's like DHAN focus on kiosks as community development cells. But they too face the challenge of making the Internet valuable to a rural user.

Relevance to rural development

In its present form, the World Wide Web is not oriented to a rural user. Only a fraction of the web content would make sense to them. The language too is unfriendly. Kiosk operators write Tamil in English. The interface of many programmes appears verbal. More thought is required on making the content relevant to rural development. Successful centres elsewhere have a strong government component. What a villager wants are

services like obtaining *patta*, death and birth certificates and applications without harassment. Maybe active government participation would help rural Internet centres.

Currently wireless towers in many towns have a reach of only 25 km and connect villages within this distance. As a result, the town-based service providers seriously challenge the services provided by the rural centres. For example, Aravind Eye hospitals in Madurai and Theni have rural outreach programme and offer attractive alternatives.

Internet centres find it difficult to sustain the importance on their own. Instead, they seek imaginative alliances. In Uppukottai and Govindanagaram, the State Bank of India provides loans for those who want to buy cattle and COL, a Canada-based NGO educates the villages about cattle rearing through compact discs. The Internet centre hosts the classes and the coordinator manages the accounts. The villagers know that by coming to the Internet centre they can secure a loan. Ramesh of n-Logue feels that the future of rural networking is in services. He envisions the kiosks functioning as windows that bring in projects like mobile phone services and help villagers get new kind of jobs.

As companies and NGO's struggle to make rural networking sustainable and relevant, Veerarajan and his friend, studying in tenth standard in Uppukottai, sit in front of the monitor and aspire for a better future. They know a software engineer employed in the United States has built the biggest house in their village.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, June 11, 2006)

Nyaya Panchayat Bill in the offing: Aiyar

The government has set up a committee to draft a Bill on 'nyaya panchayat' to enable settlement of disputes at the local level itself instead of going through the routine arduous legal procedure and the legislation is expected to be brought during the winter session of Parliament.

"An expert committee headed by legal luminary Upendra Baxi has been set up to go into the modalities of this legislation and it is expected to complete its work by the end of the monsoon session of Parliament so that the Bill can be brought in the winter session". Panchayat Raj Minister Mani Shaker Aiyar told reporters on the sidelines of a

three-day workshop of writers and thinkers of local governance and panchayati raj.

“The debate on the Nyaya Panchayat Bill has been going on in governmental circles and time has come for such a legislation”, he said. The proposed bill would be so drafted that it would enable settlement of disputes at the panchayat level once and for all without the need of taking resort to higher courts.

Aiyar said Karnataka ranked second in the country after Kerala as regards the smooth functioning of the panchayat raj institutions. “Our expert group gave Karnataka the second position below Kerala and the State rates much higher on the side of effective panchayati raj system.”

He said the State had been doing very well in the last 10 years or so and “we found overall panchayat raj system has made good progress there”.

(Courtesy: Vijay Times, June 25, 2006)

Woman sarpanch leads sanitation revolution

Annu Anand, Rajnandgaon, Chattisgarh

In a small tribal village in Chattisgarh there was an air of festivity outside the house of Sarpanch Nirmala Bai Kanwar. Children were merrily beating the drums. In fact the entire Gunderdehi village in Rajnandgaon district seemed to be in a celebration mood. A large group of people was waiting outside Sarpanch Nirmala's house to congratulate her and wish a safe journey to New Delhi where she was to receive an award from the President of India, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam. She bagged the prize money of Rupees 2 lakh and a citation for her contribution in the construction of toilets in every single house in her village under the Sarva Swachata Abhiyan (universal sanitation campaign).

Until two years ago, most of the people in the village were forced to relieve themselves in the fields or open areas in the absence of toilet facilities. Even the local school or Anganwadi did not have this basic facility. Women went to the fields when it was dark, or before daybreak. They also feared harassment. There was always this fear of infectious diseases due to lack of proper sanitation and cleanliness.

Now the situation has changed in this village, where nearly 90 per cent of the population is tribal and works as farm labour or has small holdings.

The village is full of kutchra houses and it is difficult to make out that these are now equipped with toilets. The construction of latrines has been completed in all the 306 houses, including 146 belonging to BPL families. The primary school and Anganwadi also have their own toilets.

To maintain cleanliness in the village, 20 dustbins and 11 tanks have been constructed. A hand pump for drinking water has been provided. All this has improved the attendance at the school.

It has been a long journey for Sarpanch Nirmala Bai, who studied till the 10th class and won this reserved seat last year. "We made it an issue of honour and security of women as they had to go to lonely places in the dark," she said.

According to the Panchayat secretary Mahesh Kaushik, each toilet cost Rs 625. Only Rs 146 was taken from the BPL (below the poverty line) families and the government gave rest of the amount. People offered free labour. The Gunderdehi panchayat also includes Kilargondi village. In both these villages, 1833 persons have benefited from the scheme.

Although the universal sanitation programme was started in Chattisgarh in 2003, its implementation was much faster in Rajanandgaon district. That's

why 12 panchayats like Gunderdehi were selected for the Nirmal gram award, with a prize money of Rs 2 lakh each, in this district, the highest number for any district in the State. Villagers attributed the success to the district collector Ganesh Shankar Mishra. But Mishra said it was the result of a teamwork involving the administration, elected representatives and villagers. However, a still bigger challenge was to motivate the villagers to use the newly built toilets.

At the beginning of the programme, the district administration constituted a core group that carried out an awareness campaign at the village level. Seven rural sanitary marts were opened in the district run by women's groups and voluntary organizations. Plumbers and masons from different villages were trained in the construction of low-cost latrines that consumed less water. Village level meetings were held to tell people about the benefits of general sanitation and hand washing.

Once the toilets were constructed, villagers decided to impose a fine of Rs 51 if anyone was found defecating in the open, said Kiran Srivastav, Supervisor in the Department of Women and Child Development. Initially, some people were fined. But now people are comfortable using in-house toilets, said H S Dhingra, PHED executive engineer who worked on the campaign. About 7,000 self-help groups of women were involved in the campaign. Special training workshops were conducted for women in every block of the district. Street plays were organised to drive home the benefits of cleanliness and sanitation.

Keeping in view water shortage in villages, toilets have been designed in such a way as to minimize water requirement. They have been constructed at a slope of 40 degree and are three feet deep.

The UNDP has approved the toilet design, added Dhingra. Collector Mishra hopes that all villages in the district would follow this example and usher in a sanitation revolution.

(Courtesy: Grassroots, Vol. 7, No. 6, June 2006)

More women opt for rural job scheme in Rajasthan

Subodh Ghildiyal, New Delhi

Rajasthan is emerging as a model state under the rural job guarantee scheme, as vigil from civil society and response from a willing government is turning the wage employment law into a feminist movement. A survey of three of the six NREGA districts points to a gender revolution, with the women-worker turnout varying from 50% to 99%. The study shows that women outnumber men almost everywhere. "The percentage of women is very high," the report says.

Only five men figured among 47 workers engaged in the construction of a link road in Girba block of Udaipur, while a surprising 75 women figure in 110 workers on a road work in Bagidora block of Banswara district.

In Sajangarh block, 108 workers are enrolled for

constructing a pond, of which as many as 82 are women, while in nearby Kushalgarh block, 48 women and 12 men enrolled for construction of an earthen checkdam.

Sirohi district is no exception to the trend. In Pindwara block, 51 women and seven men turned up for a gravel road construction, while 62 women and just one man turned up for desilting a pond in the Kojra village panchayat.

No loopholes have been found in the scheme's implementation. With NREGA marking the arrival of village panchayats as governing bodies, the latter were untested commodities with there being fears of large scale corruption. But these fears are proving false. The difference is also showing in the sharp

jump registered in employment under NREGA over its earlier avatar - Food for Work (FFW).

In Udaipur, employment has been provided to 2.14 lakh persons against only 8,730 in FFW. In Banswara, work has been provided to 1.89 lakh persons against 3,130 in FFW.

The source of corruption in job schemes lies in fake entries in muster rolls. It does not appear to be happening in the state. Random checks in 10 blocks of Udaipur, Banswara and Sirohi found pucca muster rolls available at each worksite and muster rolls in the panchayats.

Entries in the job cards matched the rolls. Works are approved as per gram sabha resolutions and panchayats are maintaining the prescribed registers like job-card register, muster-roll register and asset register.

Payment of wages through banks is ruled out in view of the distance involved but the present system is "working satisfactorily and almost free from leakages", the report says.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, June 12, 2006)

Jharkhand tribals look up to new future

Till 2001, little children of most of the 55 Santhal families at Hamsada village, in Jharkhand's Saraikela-Kharswan district, bore the brunt of drunken brawl after family elders indulged in liquor binge and the village panchayat had once met three times in a day to settle a quarrel.

Not any more.

"Now the people have left behind those days. Nobody returns home drunk now," claims Budheswar Murmu, the head of gram sabha. It all started with the setting up of a group comprising all youths of the village.

In a two-pronged strategy, Murmu and his companions tried to make the elders realise how liquor had caused bankruptcy in many homes, with children being the worst sufferers. "Simultaneously, we kept a close watch on liquor vendors, and did not allow them sell their products that had been ruining the lives of the villagers.

Then the villagers, one by one, started giving up the bad habit," Murmu recalls.

The children of the village, situated a kilometre from the Ranchi-Tata Road, also now regularly go to a middle school at neighbouring Chilgu or the High School at Chandil, says the visibly proud Gram Sabha member.

"We have forgotten those nightmarish days, and I am happy that my two children are going to school," says a smiling Budhini Soren with the two little ones looking on.

"Now, we have another problem to cope - Malaria," says Murmu who says poverty forced him to drop out from school after Class IX. The same poverty had prompted many locals to drown their plight in liquor in those tumultuous days, but not again.

(Courtesy: The times of India, May 3, 2006)

A village others ought to emulate

Kalarabanka, a village in Cuttack district (Orissa), has undergone complete transformation, thanks to the untiring efforts of one A Samanta of Kalinga

Institute of Industrial Technology. Today it has become the first village in the country to have a knowledge centre with Microsoft and UNDP tie-up

and it is the second village where all families have been covered under the health insurance scheme.

Visiting the village for the inauguration of a high school and a hostel, among other things, Governor Mr Rameshwar Thakur was overwhelmed by the efforts of KIIT in making the village a model one

for others. He lauded the role played by Samanta and urged Mr K Raghu Ramaiah, chairman of Paradip Port Trust, to replicate such efforts in Manapur panchayat. The suggestion was promptly accepted by Mr Ramaiah.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, June 6, 2006)

IT boom in Sikkim

Rural IT empowerment through community information centres (CIC) in Sikkim is gaining momentum everyday as more people in the remotest corners are hooked to the rest of the world, besides becoming computer literates.

National recognition has followed suit with Temi-based CIC, South Sikkim, bagging a national award on 28 March based on a national survey conducted last year.

The newly acquired knowledge about computers and Internet has been used by a large section of rural people, especially farmers for downloading tender forms, viewing prices of agricultural commodities and happenings round the globe.

CICs were set up in the North-eastern states, including Sikkim, under the Five Year Plan in 2001. All the expenditure is met through the Centrally sponsored scheme.

The National Informatics Centre (NIC) looks after the technical aspects, while the state IT departments look after the administration. There are currently 487 CICs in the North-east for making the region a “knowledge hub” as envisioned in the Planning Commission’s India Vision 2020 document.

In Sikkim, there are 46 CICs and four more are on the line this year. Among them, East District has 12, West has 11, South has 10 and North District has eight CICs.

The highest CIC in the country was recently

established at Nathula in Sikkim at an altitude of 15,000 feet. The CIC at Nathula has one computer with Internet facility through VSAT and is being used by the local people, Army and government officials, said Mr Birendra Chettri, state informatics officer. CICs were set up to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas about computers and IT. “CICs are going to doorstep post offices for the government. The need is to utilise this facility more comprehensively and go for information dissemination in rural areas,” he said.

The CIC at Hee-Burmiok is a classic example of how the IT has percolated in rural areas. Established in 2002 by NIC, the centre houses six computers all connected to the Internet directly via VSAT and two printers, besides other computer peripherals. Mr Indra Mani Sharma, in-charge of the centre, said: “We teach a simple course on computer fundamentals to school students and local people. We also download forms from certain websites such sikkimgov.org that are useful for the local people.”

Around 60 per cent of the local people have become computer conscious and a few of them have their own individuals PCs, he said. Besides locals, tourists too use the Internet facility provided by the CIC.

The CIC has become a true community centre as people including panchayat members drop in and read newspapers and government tender forms online, he said.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, June 3, 2006)

Community rebuilds embankment

In a show of community participation, residents of a cluster in the perennially backward seaside pockets of Kendrapara district (Orissa) have successfully rebuilt a two-kilometre stretch of embankment to prevent frequent intrusion of tidal waters, all by their own endeavour.

Cut off from the mainstream, at least 40 people of Mangalpur, Gokhakhati, Deulpada, Kumbarpada, Gojabandha, Barakanda, Akhadasali, Dadhipur, Sathiebati and five other coastal villages perpetually suffer owing to the floods as the saline embankment constructed by the government is in a state of disrepair. Crisscrossed by rivulets, water inlets and innumerable creeks, most of the localities are hamstrung by an abysmal lack of communication. Over the past four years, the government has done nothing to plug the seepage points of the embankment other than making promises.

There was periodic incursion of tidal waters from the sea, ravaging agricultural fields. There was little that people could do to stem the annual crop loss.

Paddy cultivation had come to a grinding halt in these areas, affecting the agro-based economy of

the region, according to the Mahakalpada panchayat samiti chairman, Mr Balram Parida.

The local people, in a show of community empowerment and solidarity, resolved to do what the government wilfully forgot to do.

The residents of these clusters in 14 villages later took up the unique venture and began the task of repairing the all-important embankment, leaving behind years of governmental apathy. A comprehensive plan was chalked out and discussed in the village panchayats.

With the panchayat bodies not responding to the project in right earnest, people volunteered to lend assistance to the project.

Once the first donation of Rs 1,000 came from a villager serving as an employee in the state government, the project got a kick-start.

Voluntary donation invariably from all the households poured in and swelled to Rs 1 lakh. Then the work on project commenced about three months back and at present the embankment can stop the ingress of tidal waters, Mr Sapan Das, an unemployed graduate from Akhadasali village said.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, June 1, 2006)

UNICEF to launch literacy campaign in Bihar

Painting a grim picture of literacy level in Bihar, UNICEF assisted by the Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC) has decided to launch a massive campaign to make over four lakh girls literate in one month. UNICEF sources told that the BEPC together with UNICEF would launch a massive campaign next month to teach both out-of-school girls and academically weak girls studying in schools. "The campaign will use the accelerated learning strategy developed by Pratham, an NGO", sources said.

According to UNICEF, research has suggested that if children do not learn to read by their first three years of schooling, they may never learn and may eventually drop out from school. Both BEPC and UNICEF feel that these learning camps will improve enrolment and retention of girls in schools.

In all, 15,000 accelerated learning camps will be set up in over 7400 villages spread over 37 districts in the state and there will be 50-60 learners in each centre. "Each Centre will run for four hours per day for 30 days in June and Panchayat Siksha Mitras

(PSMs) who have been trained on accelerated learning strategy will be instructors", they informed. A training for 320 master trainers from various districts would be organised from May 18 to May 21 here and these master trainers, in turn, will train 15,000 Panchayat Siksha Mitras in schools to run the accelerated learning CAMPS.

Although the learning achievement of elementary stage students in Bihar is much better than that of children in many other states, a recent study carried out by UNICEF revealed that about 41 per cent of children of 7 to 14 years can not read a simple sentence and 56 per cent of children can not read a story text.

Another UNICEF study in nine districts of Bihar in December 2005 found that only 13 per cent of the children were able to read simple sentences without any mistake. The rest 87 per cent were not able to read anything at all or committed many mistakes.

An earlier UNICEF study has also painted extremely grim picture of all the three spheres-- primary, secondary and higher education, revealing that a teacher barely spends two months of the year in the class rooms in Bihar.

While there is no mechanism for the monitoring of teachers' performance, they are mostly involved in non-academic work, like government duty, which leads to poor attendance. Another major factor is the huge shortage of class rooms. Against the requirement of 3, 79,089 class rooms, as per the national norm (40:1), there are just 1, 43,027 available- 1, 99, 014 less, the report says. Though there was some improvement in the quality of primary education due to the introduction of Bihar Education Project, District Primary Education Project, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and mid-day meal schemes, the government could not not execute most of the central schemes. It had failed to get the second installment of the grant any year due to non-utilisation of funds.

(The Times of India, May 19, 2006)

Be alive to rights under job scheme, Aiyar to panchayats

Union Panchyati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar on Thursday called upon representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to be aware of their rights under the National Rural Employment Generation Act (NREGA) and get maximum benefits out of it.

Besides government agencies, non-governmental organizations could contribute significantly to creating awareness among the masses of the NREG scheme, he said. Each panchayat must display the rights of the people of wide publicity of the programme.

Mr. Aiyar was inaugurating a seminar on "Implementation of NREGA: Emerging Trends" in

New Delhi. It was organized by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia. Describing the Act as a revolutionary step in employment generation in rural areas, the Minister said there would be no resource crunch for the programme. Mere registration was not enough; the PRI representatives must ensure that job cards were issued to employment seekers.

Reacting to the feedback from the PRI representatives during an interactive session, Mr. Aiyar said each State had different problems in implementation and these would be scrutinized for corrective measures.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, June 2, 2006)

5 year term for panchayat chiefs may be restored

Karnataka Government is seriously considering restoring the tenure of office of presidents and vice-presidents of zilla, taluk and gram panchayats to five years realizing the folly of reducing the term.

The term of presidents and vice-presidents of zilla and taluk panchayats was reduced from five years to 20 months and that of gram panchayat heads from five years to 30 months.

Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj C.M. Udasi told pressperson here on Friday that a Bill to restore the term of five years would be introduced in the coming session of the legislature.

Presidents and vice presidents of many panchayat bodies had expressed their displeasure over the short tenure because they could get very little work done and wanted the five year term restored.

Mr. Udasi said the Government was planning to increase the daily wage for workers under the

Karnataka Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme from Rs.62.50 to Rs.75.

He recently said that villagers were not coming forward to work under the scheme in a few districts because of the low wage. Acting Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council H.K.Patil had suggested that the State could get more funds if it raised the daily wage.

The Minister said several States had increased the daily wage and Karnataka was one of the few States that had fixed a low wage. Kerala was giving labourers Rs.125 a day under the scheme. The scheme would be extended to Haveri, Koppal, Kolar, Tumkur and Gadag districts soon and the Government had written to the Centre for approval.

He said that 278 works had been taken up by the Minor Irrigation Department at a cost of Rs.178.50 crore. Sanction had been obtained for 128 works and tenders called, he added.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, June 2, 2006)

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Nomads Storm Panchayati Citadel

Annu Anand, Viratnagar, Rajasthan

They belong to the most backward communities of our society. They don't even have basic rights and continue to live much below the poverty line. Most don't have voting rights because for centuries they have not had a permanent address.

But now they have taken their first decisive steps in democracy. They are becoming a part of the local governance system and beginning to carry forward their struggle for the development of their communities. These are the gutsy, enterprising and dynamic women of nomadic communities – Nat, Bawaria, Banjara, and Bhopa. Last year they were elected for the first time to panchayats in Rajasthan.

Vimla aged 32 is one such nomad. She is currently deputy sarpanch of Pikhudi panchayat. She belongs to the community of jugglers, known as Nat, and has been head woman for long. To earn their livelihood, Vimla and her family members perform dances, street theatre and other traditional entertainment in the villages of Alwar, Bharatpur and other areas in Rajasthan.

A little away from the Delhi-Jaipur highway is a small hamlet called Sawari. Here about 700 to 800 Nat families live in *kuchha* house. Kaluram Nat says, "Most of our women dance and perform *nautanki* in fairs and festivals, while men folk beat the drums. We go out for such performances before Diwali and return to our homes around Holi."

However, the situation is changing slowly. Many in the community are trying other odd jobs as opportunities in their traditional vocation are shrinking. They have

stopped making temporary shelters, and are giving up their nomadic ways. Some have been living in Sawari for the past few years.

When Vimla filed her nomination for the post of deputy head of the panchayat, she faced protests from other villages in the vicinity. "The people of other casts declared they wouldn't give a senior post to "They blocked our way. But people of my community supported me, and at last I won the election by 17 votes."

After her victory, Vimla's first priority was to tackle the water shortage in the village. The two existing hand pumps were not sufficient to fulfill the village's needs. She raised the issue in the panchayat meeting, and got one more pump sanctioned. Now she wants to develop a *pucca* road for the village.

Vimla makes it a point to attend every meeting of the panchayat. She does not go on dancing trips, so that she can concentrate on development work as a representative of the panchayat. According to her, 40 to 50 bighas of land is lying vacant in her village, and it can be used for construction of an anicut that can solve the water shortage to a great extent. Her active participation in development activities means she could become an important link in the development of other nomadic communities as well.

Vimla is not alone. 45-years old Moomal of the Banjara community - always dressed in traditional lehanga, orani, arms full of silver bangles and tattoos on her body - has been elected unopposed as a ward panch of Bamanwas

Kankar panchayat. This village, located about 40 kms from Alwar, houses 700 nomad families called Raadi. Access to this village is difficult as the last kilometer is full of rocks.

Moomal and members of her family earn their livelihood by selling salt and Multani mitti (a fine clay) in the markets of rural Rajasthan. Curiously, the barter system is still in vogue in India. Moomal says, "We exchange four handfuls of salt to get one handful of grain. After collecting large quantities of grain, we sell it to local shopkeepers to buy other daily needs." This is the main source of income and traditional occupation for all villagers of Raadi. "We transport salt and multani mitti on donkeys to different villages," she added.

In her new role as a ward panch, Moomal is concerned with the lack of electricity in her village. Electricity is available up to the nearby road, but the settlement is not getting any since the residents don't have land rights.

"We have been staying here for many years now and this has become our permanent settlement," she says. "Still we have not been given pattas." She has raised the issue of getting electricity and making a pucca road in her village in panchayat meetings, but has not been getting support from other members.

"We have earned our place in the panchayat and we are able to express our demands, but we are being treated with discrimination," feels Moomal. "All discussion about development only starts on suggestions made by higher caste Gujjars. Perhaps it will take time for them to accept our suggestions in the panchayat meetings."

Sharda Banjaran, ward panch of Kishori panchayat also share the same sentiments. She says that whatever she earns by selling salt and Multani Mitti she spends in attending meetings of the panchayat. She is determined to attend every meeting to know where they spend the funds for development work.

Sua Banjaran of Prithvipura panchayat is also struggling to get a hand-pump for her village. She complains, "They write down everything in panchayat meetings, but when I go to the Block Development Officer to find out what has been done, the reply is that the proposal has not come."

Gaindi Bawaria has been elected as ward panch of Sothana Village, located near Alwar. She has been elected unopposed from the reserved seat for women in the last panchayat election.

Bawarias used to traditionally hunt wild animals. When a ban was imposed on killing of wild animals in 1972, most members gave up hunting and started working as security guards (Chowkidars). They protect crops from wild animals or by grazing animals like goats and sheep. They have not been able to get into other jobs due to the stigma attached to them.

Bawarias were included in the Criminal Suppression Act enacted in 1871. Though this law was scrapped in 1952, the community continued to be part of the new Habitual Offenders Act. Because of this, Bawarias are victimized by villagers, police and other law enforcement agencies.

Gaindi and her other 500 fellow villagers have been staying in sothana for the past fourteen years. This is forest land, and everyone is under constant threats from forest officers. "Neither have we been rehabilitated anywhere else nor give pattas" she says.

"Even forest officers victimize us for minor things. If they see a piece of wood in our houses they impose a fine." There is an acute problem of water with just one hand pump located one kilometer from the village. It is not sufficient to fulfill the needs of the whole village. "Nobody listens to me in the panchayat meeting," she complained. "The Sarpanch is a Brahmin. Many times I have raised the issue of water: Only today they decided on BPL cards and the widow pension scheme. Today or tomorrow they will have to listen our problems. For how long will they keep us quiet?"

Sheela from the Bhopa community has been elected as ward panch from the Kesroli Gram Panchayat. Sheela with 120 families of her community has been staying in Ramgarh, also known as Bhopawas, for the past three years. Bhopas sing songs and narrate stories based on ancient paintings. Sheela and her husband still play the sarangi to entertain and earn their livelihood.

There are 40-50 houses in this settlement. Most residents don't have pattas for their grass and mud houses. Their children study in the open. They have to fetch water from a source two kilometer distant.

According to Sheela, she raises the demand for a hand pump and electricity connection in every meeting of the panchayat.

“They make us write but our demands never reach the administrative people. This is not going to deter me from making these suggestions. I will keep raising them till they are resolved.”

Ratan Katyayani, founder of Mukti Dhara, a voluntary group instrumental in encouraging nomadic women, observes, “Now these women are sensitized and are

coming forward to participate in the local governance process. They are not afraid of speaking in panchayat meetings, or raising their problems, but society is prejudiced against them.” The Ghumantu Vikas Panchayat is fighting to secure constitutional rights for nomads. Katyayani is hopeful these nomad will ultimate succeed. Meanwhile, Mukti Dhara is providing a fellowship of Rs. 1000 a month to ten women who have been elected for the first time to panchayats, as a token of help and encouragement.

(Courtesy: Grassroots, July 2006)

“Grama Sarkara”: this wallpaper is meant for reading Nagarakere Gram Panchayat has painted its monthly paper on a wall

Villagers in the jurisdiction of the Nagarakere Gram Panchayat in Maddur taluk of Mandya district (Karnataka) love to read the writing on the wall. The inaugural edition of “Grama Sarkara”, a monthly paper published by the gram panchayat was painted on the wall of the gram panchayat building in May, and it is making news for content and for truly empowering the people with information.

The paper has its own editorial board and a layout like any newspaper. The objective is to celebrate the empowerment of the gram panchayat as the local government, disseminate information on all the programmes of the panchayat and create awareness about how this lowest rung of democracy functions.

To this end the “wallpaper” is full of useful news, people’s rights and responsibilities and tells the villagers how they can get the best out of the gram panchayat. The names of the president and other members do not figure anywhere and neither do their words or deeds make news.

What does make news is the unsigned editorial, simply titled the President’s Hopes, where he categorically states the paper is the first step to demonstrate that the Nagarakere Gram Panchayat wants to give a “bribe-free” administration, since it stands for honesty, transparency and efficiency.

The editorial states that in order to truly ensure that the benefits of decentralization reach the people, the panchayat has set up subcommittees on rural water supply and sanitation. The panchayat wants residents to opt for individual toilets in their homes and speaks

of many programmes launched to encourage anganwadi workers to work more effectively.

The editorial also notes the panchayat’s role in ensuring continuing education for neo-literates and says these learning centres will also double up as information centres. All said, the gram panchayat has used the paper to tell touts and middlemen to keep off by reassuring citizens that they can come to the panchayat office and get all their work done. The news items in the inaugural issue cover a gamut of topics that citizens commonly approach touts for, such as how much house tax must you pay and where will it go and the norms to be followed while getting a `khata’ prepared for a house or a site.

The lead article exhorts residents to pay only the specified rates for their rations, which has been fixed by the gram panchayat.

The prices are published and so is the information that the panchayat has directed the fair price shop owners in Nagarakere, Upparadoddi, Hulire and Malagarahalli to follow the rates fixed.

In the anchor story on the steep cost of rural water supply, the panchayat shows how water supply and maintenance guzzles a lot of money leaving a deficit of at least Rs. 3,292 each month.

There is news that a committee has been set up to regulate water supply and sanitation.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 26 July 2006)

This village is girl child-happy

Gur Kirpal Singh Ashk

With not a single case of female foeticide being reported from this village which comes under Fatehgarh Sahib district (Punjab) having the lowest male-female ratio in the country, Jallowal has shown way for others to follow suit.

Though reports of this social evil are coming frequently from various parts of the state, the village has the distinction of having more female than male child in the age group of 06 years with not a single case of femicide being registered here for the past several years.

Out of 90 children in the age group, 49 are girls and rest are boys. Also in the last six months, the village had witnessed five child births, all of them were female, though earlier, the ratio stood at 8+8, tells an Aanganwari worker Sarabjit Kaur.

Village Sarpanch Balvir Singh says, "Every villager knows about ultrasound scan centres but we have made it clear to all that the panchayat would not hesitate to go against a person if he indulged in female foeticide. We can even go up to the extent of social boycotting of such people. But I feel this will never happen in this village as the residents know to 'welcome' the girl child".

Gurdeep Singh, a panch, says, "We are also aware of this fact that quacks always play vital role in the cases of female foeticide and we do not allow any quack to run his practice in this village".

Another panch and president of the village Gurdwara

management committee Kulwinder Singh says, "I have two daughters but I never felt the need of a male child. I feel that girls are more affectionate as compares to boys".

Kulwinder further says that they are planning to organise plays to spread message against female foeticide. Gurdeep Singh, a shop keeper, has two daughters and a son, says, "I want to tell the people that girls are more important in the society as compare to boys."

Japinder Kaur, a resident of this village and studying in Mata Gujri College Fatehgarh Sahib says, "I feel dowry is one of the basic reasons of ignoring the female child but in my village the people understand that the best education to the girls is a befitting reply to the problem. So they have started sending the girls for higher education. My family wants to see me working as a journalist so that a girl from this village could fight against such evils."

Significant Trend

Fatehgarh Sahib district deputy commissioner Jaspreet Talwar says that the increasing number of girls is a significant trend. Though according to the last census there were 763 females against 1,000 males, recently collected statistics tells the ratio of girl children against per thousand boys has gone up to 829 but still lot of things are to be done in this direction. She said Jallowal has shown the path for which the village would be awarded.

(Source: The Times of India, 1 September 2006)

Reversing sex ratio: Two villages show how Balwant Garg

In Punjab, where skewed sex ratio — result of rampant female foeticide — has set alarm bells ringing all over, two villages have set a precedent by achieving a higher birth rate of girls as compared to boys.

And if Bhag Singh Wala and Machaki Mal Singh Wala, both in Faridkot district, are able to maintain their unique distinction by December end, they would get a special prize of Rs 3 lakh from the state government.

In Faridkot district, the sex ratio — 865 to 1,000 males — is still not encouraging. But a survey conducted by the department of district women and child welfare last month revealed out of 29 children born in Bhag Singh Wala village since January 2006, the number of girls was 17.

Similarly, in Machaki Mal Singh Wah village, out of total 32 children born, there were 18 girls. The ratio

comes out to be 1,400 to 1,000 and 1,200 to 1,000 for the two villages respectively.

In Bhag Singh Wala, it's not for the first time that girls have outnumbered boys in terms of birth rate. In 2005, the number of girls born was 12 against 9 boys. Worried over the poor birth rate of girls in Punjab, the state government has launched various schemes to motivate villagers, to check the imbalance.

Under Balri Raksha Yojna, the state had announced a special grant of Rs 3 lakh per annum to villages where the number of new-born girls was more than boys and a fund of Rs 50 lakh.

Child development and panchayat officer Chhinder Pal

Kaur told TOI that to check female foeticide, the department is keeping close tabs on all pregnant women in rural areas.

"Earlier, the department only registered new births in the villages. But now, once we know that a woman is pregnant, the department starts maintaining the case record till the time of delivery. This helps in detecting termination of a pregnancy," Kaur said.

In 2001 census, Faridkot district had registered a sex ratio of 805 to 1,000 in age group of 0-6.

(Source: The Times of India, 10 September 2006)

All Gram Panchayats to have libraries

The State Government of Karnataka has decided to launch a Grameena Granthalaya programme to ensure that there is one public library in each of the 5714 gram panchayats. This is said to be the first programme of its kind in the country.

Primary and Secondary Education Minister Basavaraj S. Horatti, who held a meeting with officials of the Public Libraries Department, told presspersons here on Friday that 3,251 gram panchayats had already opened libraries. Come October 2, the remaining 2463 gram panchayats would be provided assistance to set up libraries for which Rs.12.8 crores had been provided.

Each library would be given an initial amount of Rs.3 lakh, and the Government would meet the annual maintenance expenses. The budgetary allocation had been made in the current year as part of the Suvarna Karnataka celebrations, he said.

The gram panchayats, which had buildings or premises to spare, would house the libraries in such buildings. Others had been asked to rent premises and ensure that the libraries began functioning at the earliest.

On November 14, the Government planned to launch community children's centres in all the districts. Mr.

Horatti said the aim was to facilitate the all-round development of the child by providing access to the best of literature in Kannada, English and other languages, apart from providing access to toys and tools such as computers, game, and LCD projectors and related activities for children of all ages. In the current year, Rs.81 lakh had been provided for the project.

Books in Braille

In order to make available good books in Kannada in Braille, Rs.10 lakh had been allotted for the current year. Libraries for the visually impaired would be open in all the 27 districts.

Mr. Horatti said e-governance, information kiosks, book fairs and other events and training of officials and staff in the use of computers were also on the cards.

The Government would make drastic changes in the book selection and purchase procedure, as there were several complaints about irregularities in purchase; which were causing huge losses. Books purchase would be streamlined through a single window system, he added.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 22 July 2006)

Kerala Picks up Threads of Panchayati Raj System

L. C. Jain

The recent change of guard in Kerala has brought back the government that under the inspiring leadership of E.M.S. Namboodiripad had put life into panchayati raj in Kerala over a decade ago. The government in Thiruvananthapuram has quickly picked up the threads to be spearheaded by stalwarts of panchayat raj: Paloli Mohammed Kutty as minister for local self government and T.M. Thomas Isaac, minister of finance.

The steps to strengthen decentralization include: the rural development department, which existed under a different minister has been integrated with the local self government department; at the official level, urban development, panchayati raj and rural development have been brought under one principal secretary in the unified department; DRDAs have been abolished and integrated with the district panchayats; Participatory planning in which Kerala had earned a good name for the 11th Five-Year Plan is being renewed.

The focus areas are; Local economic development mainly through integrated watershed management (for the primary sector) and rural business hubs (for secondary and tertiary sectors); public service delivery improvement especially through hospitals, schools and anganwadis.

Karakula, a model panchayat, has set up 'gremeena patina ken-dram', to provide quality consultancy services to other local governments.

Recall, Kerala had fired the first thought provoking shot in 1978, via the note of dissent in the Asoka Mehta Committee Report. Namboodiripad listed first the points of full agreement in the committee: Political parties should be allowed to participate effectively at all levels.

We have reached, he said, a stage of political evolution when it would be unrealistic to expect that political parties would keep themselves away from these elections; All the staff engaged in development that is now available at the district and lower levels will have

to be placed under the elected representative bodies; Similar to the lack of will that is attributed to the political executive an administrative will to work an alternative system should be developed. Till now, control has never included a horizontal coordinating point.

As for state heads of departments, EMS called for a radical alteration: "The Constitution according to me, failed to envisage an integrated administration in which, apart from the Centre and the states, there will be elected bodies which will control the permanent services at the district and lower levels.

Democracy at the Central and State levels, but bureaucracy at all lower levels – this is the essence of Indian polity as spelt out in the Constitution; It was with such a centralized administration as its core that panchayats were envisaged in the Constitution and the Balvantray Mehta Report. It is not surprising that neither the bureaucrat nor the politician at the States level is prepared to decentralize whatever power has been conferred on the state. The point is to adopt what is called four-pillar democracy."

Based on another remarkable Kerala initiative, the Union ministry of panchayati raj is considering a national round table conference of Speakers of Legislative Assemblies to mobilise support for panchayat raj.

In August 2005, there was such a conference of MLAs on strengthening panchayats in Kerala.

The conference provided an opportunity for the MLAs to understand that their own interest lay in supporting Panchayat Raj. Article 243 G has left much to the State Legislatures to specify. That is where MLAs have opportunities to support or thwart devolution. This kind of exposure and mobilisation of MLAs had not been pursued systematically in any state.

(Courtesy: The Asian Age, 28 July 2006)

Rural women demand change

Dileep Chandan

An evening in May gave me a new insight into the perceptions of rural women on development and especially on the panchayati raj. There have been many complaints about the lack of development of women but a different approach was visible that evening at the end of May this year in the Golaghat district of Assam. Mr John Conrad, the vice president of an international organisation that has devoted itself to the prevention of poverty and to the uplift of women and children through the Hunger Project, talked to a group of village women in Golaghat, a town with a rural setting in Upper Assam. More than 600 women applauded him when he praised their work in the panchayati raj ~ many of them were rural leaders and elected sarpanches ~ and urged them to root out ignorance. The setting, we must remember, was rural in an urban setting: Mr Conrad was received with the traditional Assamese gamosa or hand-woven towel and the ululating sound of the uruli, reserved for major religious events.

The programme was organised by the North East Social Trust (NEST), an organisation that has been training women in the Panchayati Raj in Assam to move forward and to assertively play a leadership role with a strong understanding of basic concerns. And when speakers from Delhi spoke in Hindi, to my surprise, I found that most of the Assamese women understood them and even tried to converse with them in Hindi. This was unthinkable a few years back when rural women in the state were reluctant to interact with anyone who was not familiar with the local language. This is a major change.

Assam did not have an elected panchayati raj system between 1994 and 2001. For nearly a decade, the Assamese rural population was covered by the dark cloud of ignorance. The state governments which were in power blocked the panchayat election for years. As a result, the rural population was blocked from accessing governance and development in at least 29 subjects. It was not until May 2001 that the Congress under CM Tarun Gogoi ~ recently elected for a second successive term, a historic first in over 34 years in the state ~ came to power and organised the Panchayat election. And what was significant is that although a minimum of 33 per cent of the seats are to be reserved for women, the number of women winners surpassed this "quota."

Power devolved to the grassroots and women became increasingly conscious of their powers and rights.

The executive director of NEST, Mr Tassuduk Ariful Hussain, said: "The panchayati system is yet to be fully implemented. During the early days of government, the panchayat workers were not trained. But it was important for a region like Assam. In spite of that, we expect a change among women due to their consciousness."

Ms Junu Bora and Ms Konika Dutta Baruah were others who attracted much attention as their interaction was peppered with references to problems and developments at the international level as well as in the administrative system. Ms Junu Bora was a leader of an Assam-based women's organisation while Ms Konika Dutta Baruah was the deputy director of panchayat and rural development in the state.

The meeting was broken by the arrival of the evening and the lack of power. Women panchayat members and workers surrounded Mr Conrad and others, tossing questions at them. One even sought an autograph. But some workers were missing, I learned. And that brings me to the point at the start of this story. I asked Mr Ariful Hussain of NEST where they had gone. "To meet the chief minister," I was told.

Where had they gone? All the way to Dispur, the state capital, hundreds of kilometres away. Golaghat is also the chief minister's constituency. Of course, he would meet them. But why would they have left an important conference and gone to see the state's top elected figure? Was it a political event, I wondered. No, they had gone with a list of demands, a resolution to seek major changes in the Panchayati Raj Act for the state because they think that the existing Act is full of problems and difficult to implement. They wanted the CM to give a copy of their demands to the President of India.

Panchayati elections are due soon in Assam and the growth of consciousness and capacity among PR members, especially women, bodes well for governance, despite all the recent violence and complaints of corruption, non-governance and the lack of development. The darkness of the evening was dispelled for I saw that even in such circumstances of backwardness, women

were able to think about the need to bring about changes in specific terms in the system in not less than 18 subjects.

How do we measure change? How do we measure success? Surely, this story is an example of the changes

that are coming despite the problems and politics in the state.

(The author is the editor of *Asom Bani* in Guwahati.)

(Courtesy: *The Statesman*, 4 July 2006)

Pradhanpatis wield the real power

B K Singh, Allahabad

A gram pradhan or village headman may not make your head turn, but the mere mention of the word 'Pradhanpati' certainly generates excitement. Husbands of women gram pradhans, they wield more power in the area than their better halves.

In the last panchayat elections, 700 women emerged as representatives of gram panchayats in the district. However, in the past five years they remained active only on paper. This time too, nearly the same number of women are expected to emerge as representatives of various gram panchayats.

However, in reality these women will be reduced to mere rubber stamps, with their husbands ruling by proxy. Their role will remain confined to the four walls of their households — cooking, cleaning, washing, sweeping and in some cases, working hard in fields, says Govind, a social activist of Bara assembly constituency of the district.

The idea behind providing reservation to the fair sex in panchayat elections was not only to uplift their lot but to bring about a social change through their participation.

But the results have been dismal, said a district panchayat official. Not a single woman pradhan in the district could carve out a niche for herself till now, he said.

Believe it or not, none of the villagers belonging to Dadi Niraudha under Kaundhiyara block in Bara assembly know the names of three women who have

filed papers for panchayat election. They are known by the names of their husbands, Krishna Kant, Jeevan Lal and Jairam. People will vote for them on the basis of allotted symbols. Bara assembly constituency had 120 pradhans last time. Out of them 46 were women.

Sources said there might be a slight increase in their number this time but no change in the attitude of the menfolk. The fresh incumbents too will be only proxies of their husbands.

Sadhna Singh, belonging to Gobra village, who is again contesting this time after being elected pradhan for five years, feels the prestige of her family would be lowered in the eyes of the villagers in case she ventured out of the house. Her husband has been doing all the work on her behalf and would continue to do so if she wins again, she proudly announces.

Ram Rati Bind of Kati village who was elected pradhan previously, is again in the fray for the post. Though a graduate, she remains confined to the village as the elders don't like the idea of her venturing out. In this case too, her husband works for her and is widely known as the pradhanpati.

Anita Devi of Bhiskuti village under Jasra block, Prema Devi belonging to Majhiyari, Krishna Devi of Gadhai Khurd and dozens of such other women are in the same boat.

(Courtesy: *The Hindustan Times*, 5 August 2006)

Rural Rapture: 1 lakh village knowledge centres

Sujata Dutta Sachdeva

Rural India is being given a fillip. A consortium with representatives from the government, India Inc and NGOs aims to create 1 lakh village knowledge centres across India in the next two years. After all, connectivity is the key to empowerment in rural India. And these Information and Communication Technology (ICT) centres will break barriers between rural and urban India.

“A committee will be set up shortly to look at proposals and the best ones will be given financial aid and marketing assistance. The first set of awards will be announced on January 1, 2007,” said Venkatesan. Meanwhile, a rural portal is being developed to bring all services together in a comprehensive manner.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, 30 July 2006)

GOI to set up rural business hubs

The Government of India will shortly sign 22 agreements with private companies such as the Tatas, Reliance and Microsoft to set up rural business hubs in the country.

Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar said these rural hubs would help farmers to sell their produce at the best possible prices. Aiyar said under the government's e-Governance initiative, rural areas would also be connected. Better electricity supply would be ensured so that the e-Governance programme takes off in rural areas, he said. The Panchayati Raj Ministry has already signed 45 Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) for setting up rural hubs. Speaking on the

occasion, ASSOCHAM President Anil K Agarwal recommended e-Governance for better administration in the country and to push India's growth rate to double digits. e-Governance, using Internet and telecom to provide faster, efficient and reliable services at affordable prices, is a move from a government centric to a citizen centric paradigm in service provision. Agarwal said, to start treating citizens as clients rather than beneficiaries of government services and to empower them to demand convenient cost effective and transparent services from the government is the primary objective.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 16 July 2006)

Third Finance Commission on Panchayati Raj assumes office

The Third State Finance Commission for Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies, headed by A. G. Kodgi, came into being in Karnataka. Mahendra R. Kanthi and T. Thimmegowda are the two members.

The Third Finance Commission's mission is to allocate funds for the three tiers of the panchayati raj institutions and strengthen the institutions by devolving financial and administrative powers to the panchayats. This assumes significance given that since 2004, about Rs.3,300 crore had devolved directly to the panchayats

and the Government has transferred 29 functions and departments to the panchayats for administration.

According to the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993, the State Government should constitute the State Finance Commission once in every five years to review the financial position of panchayats and to make suitable recommendations to the State on the distribution of funds between the State and local bodies.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 7 September 2006)

Women in GPs forced to bribe

`Percentage' – the `cut' (read bribe) – given to the elected representatives and officials to approve a contract or release funds is not just confined to city civic agencies. It is deeply entrenched in the gram panchayat too.

And women gram panchayat members are in a piquant situation where they are forced by their male colleagues and officials to give them a `percentage'. This was disclosed by the members who had come together to participate in the convention of elected women representatives from panchayat raj institutions organized by Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation on Monday. And the person who heard them is the man at the helm of affairs – Union Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar.

We have to pay bribes everywhere. There is a lot of corruption happening at the gram panchayat level,

“complained a GP member Nagaratna from Chamarajanagar. In the same tenor she added: “The male GP members think we cannot understand accounts. So they misuse the grants allocated to the panchayat. They even threaten us if we question them”, complained GP member from Gulbarga Revubai. Gandhi Bai of Bijapur threw light on how the women GP members have to pay the `cut' to their male counterparts to get funds allocated for ward works. Though Aiyar gave a patient hearing, the confessions of GP members put state RDPR secretary M R Sreenivasa Murthy in a tight spot.

The minister directed the RDPR officials to look into the issue. Over 300 women panchayat members from all over the state took part in the convention.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, 5 September 2006)

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Together in success

Amrita Datta

A women's self help group in Dasi, Orissa, proves they are as good as anybody else in managing business. In the tribal belt of Orissa, in the infamous Kalahandi district, there is a village, Dasi, where the people live in extreme poverty and deprivation. Hunger and malnutrition are a way of life here, and the future seems bleak. In such conditions, in 2000, the Ma Thakurani Self Help Group was formed by Palivartan, a development organisation working with the poor in Kalahandi for more than a decade. The purpose was to bring poor women together; and to practise credit and thrift activities.

The men in the bhatti

In the village lies a Bhatti, a parlour for illicit liquor consumption where many men-folk consume alcohol, get drunk, become violent and create havoc. The location of the parlour, at the entrance of the village, worsens the situation; the entry and exit of women and children are extremely cumbersome and dangerous.

The Ma Thakurani Self Help Group consists of 13 women. Together, they save, borrow, meet and discuss issues. Together, they make a difference in each other's lives. One day, after their monthly SHG meeting, the members of the Ma Thakurani SHG group passed by the Matti. The men as usual were inebriated; they foul mouthed the women, and accused the SHG of ruining the village. The

women had already had enough. For 15 years, they had borne the brunt of the drunken men and the Math. They decided to do something about this situation in the village; they decided to take charge.

They decided to take a loan for the annual annual lease of Rs. 81,000 to run the weekly Haat market. They decided that if annual lease yielded a profit, it would be shared equally amongst the members; if it suffered a loss, that too shall be borne equally. Tasks were divided amongst the SHG members, the elders were to supervise and strategise, and the young and active women were supposed to be present at the weekly Haat, observe its functioning, keep the accounts and collect rents from shopkeepers and vendors.

Once the wheels of the market began churning, revenue started pouring in approximately 300 sellers sell their produce and wares in the weekly Haat, where residents of Dasi and nearby village purchase their weekly supply of vegetables, pulses, rice, fowl, and other utilities to run their households. The sellers pay a rent between Rs. 10 and Rs. 30 per week, depending on the size and location of the shop at the Haat. The SHG maintains the Haat, and takes care of its logistical requirements. The villagers are impressed by the professional management of the Haat by the illiterate women. The women are pleased and

proud of their venture, and the respect it brings them.

Sweet success

The ward member who had sneered at the women once and ridiculed them when they took the lease of the Haat, squirms when he passes the SHG members. They walk past him, with their heads

held high, their accomplishment written in their smiles. Together, for the women and Parivartan, the success of the Haat has been very sweet. Their struggle continues with the bhatti they are determined, and confident that it will soon be closed for good.

(Courtesy: The Hindu October 15, 2006)

Minister seeks UN funds for panchayat network

UNION Minister for Panchayati Raj Mani Shankar Aiyer has sought funds from the UNDP to support an ambitious national capacity-building framework (NCBF) for the 3.2 million elected Panchayati Raj representatives in the country.

It is estimated that the task would require an initial capital cost of Rs. 2000 crore and a recurring cost of about Rs. 300 crore per annum, which cannot be met from the current level of Panchayati Raj funds. The ministry is now trying to create a resource pool to fund this exercise by pooling funds from different sources.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express November 14, 2006)

Minister slams Panchayati Raj, Finance

UNION Minister for Rural Development Raghuvansh Prasad Singh lambasted Panchayati Raj and Finance Minister for not giving a fair deal to rural areas.

Addressing project directors of District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) from across the country; Singh accused the Finance Minister of going back on his commitment to provide additional funds for rural housing under the Indira Awaas Yojana. (IAY), As against the overall shortage of 148 lakhs, the Ministry is providing only 60 lakh houses, Singh said, adding that no additional funds have been sanctioned under the Bharat Nirman Programme.

Singh claimed that the Planning Commission has supported his view point and even the Prime Minister has taken note of it. He told the DRDA chiefs to clear backlogs in construction under IAY to strengthen his case for additional funds and

asked to fill vacant posts urgently. Deficiencies in the delivery mechanism will allow other ministries, particularly the Panchayati Raj Ministry, in extracting more funds, which should ideally be routed through his ministry, he said. He said though the Panchayati Raj Ministry has utilized only Rs 3 crore against the allocated Rs 42 crore for Rashtriya Samvikas Yojana, it is demanding more funds for rural development to be routed through it.

This issue seems to raise a tussle between both the ministries, as Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar once told *The Indian Express* "... so long there is DRDAs, there will remain institutional difficulty in implementing... (the) ministry's vision of devolving powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express October 17, 2006)

Karnataka women leaders step into panchayat forefront

Shruba Mukherjee

When one looks at Lakshmidhevarnma making a strong argument in the Panchayat office, favouring a young woman, who has been unlawfully dispossessed of her husband's property, it is difficult to imagine that she was once a meek Anganwadi worker, who could not confront officials or seek help from the Government.

It is her new assignment as ward member in Gram Panchayat Doddahasala in Kolar district, Karnataka that has boosted her self-confidence. Her newfound awareness of women's issues has motivated her to take up the battle for gender justice and equality in her panchayat.

Manjula, the 30-year-old Vice President of Gram Panchayat Thyamagondlu in Bangalore (R) district, grew up in a poor dalit household. But now, her initiatives - in repairing roads, getting electricity supply, mobilising funds for the widows, elderly, people with special physical needs and the homeless - have been appreciated.

Like these two brave women, several Panchayat members are active in bringing about a silent revolution in the sleepy villages of Karnataka, thanks to a novel initiative by Aagaz Foundation, a voluntary organisation that helps women emerge as effective leaders in their constituencies for ending hunger, poverty and injustice.

An initiative of the "The Hunger Project (THP)" in India, the Aagaz Foundation's primary focus is to strengthen women's leadership in the Panchayati Raj system.

These women leaders are in the Capital now along with 188 elected women panchayat representatives from Karnataka, MP, Maharashtra and Rajasthan

to receive their degrees for the formal course in leadership development.

Norways Crown Prince Haakon and Crown Princess Mette-Marit will grace the convocation ceremony to be held here on November 2. The women have also been invited to tea with the President at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Recalling how the training programme had transformed her from a village housewife to an able leader, Lakshamma Vicepresident of gram panchayat Thyamagondlu, Bangalore district, says, "Earlier I used to attend the panchayat meetings routinely only as a silent member. But the Aagaz Academy transformed me. I can feel the difference. I now consult the secretary and after seeking clarifications, I make informed decisions. I have a better understanding of the ward sabha and the gram sabha meetings."

A majority of the women representatives, who were picked up for training, belonged to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) and had never been to school. In the yearlong course they were taught skills ranging from how to handle a mobile phone to how to take control of development in their community, Rita Sarin, chief functionary, Aagaz Foundation, said.

"The course begins by helping the women realise their abilities to transform social conditions. Once they become self aware, it is easy to build skills for functioning effectively in a panchayat," she said adding that during the course the women developed skills for effective communication, decision-making and public speaking and a deeper understanding of the Panchayat Act and government schemes.

(Courtesy: Grassroots, December 2006)

Emergence of rural entrepreneur

Rahul Ramagundam

In Keonijhar district of Orissa, a village is experimenting with a new idea. A few rural women have bonded together to form a self-help group. But that is not the new idea. Such formation of self-help groups (SHGs) nowadays is a common practice among grassroots development practitioners and NGO entrepreneurs. What is noteworthy is not the SHGs, but the use it is put into.

The illiterate women have been daring enough to take up challenges of entrepreneurship by breaking the contractor-bureaucrat nexus. The group of women responded to the panchayat tender to build a concrete road through their village. For the past few years, women in the group had been pooling a monthly contribution from members.

Such SHGs taking up public works in their locality is fraught with many consequences. These groups comprise of women who are wage-workers or hail from marginally better households with no compunction to work from wage. First, the members would not settle for anything less than minimum wages when they themselves are the bosses. Second, the construction work shall seldom be below standard, as they themselves and their peer group shall be the watchdogs. Third, the corruption can be brought down. Fourth, the village shall not only get employment, but also bring in general improvement as resources shall be drawn in rather than given out to one contractor.

(Courtesy: The Pioneer, October 25, 2006)

Last laugh for TN panchayat bidders

Jaya Menon

There was excitement, loud cheering and fireworks near the Arulanandar college in Karmathur, near Madurai, during counting of votes for the local body posts falling within the Chellampatty Union. Villagers swarmed around the college gates ignoring police orders to keep a distance. They were cheering for Kanda Thevar Bose, who successfully bid for the post of Ayyanarkulam panchayat president with a handsome offer of Rs 601001. He had just announced his election victory.

Despite the crack down by district authorities across Tamil Nadu, brisk biddings took place for the various panchayat posts in Erode, Dharmapuri, Vellore, Namakkal, Vizhupuram, Theni and

Thanjavur districts. Even a few arrests in Erode and Dharmapuri districts did not deter villagers, intent on cashing in on the polls.

In one case, according to S Loganathan of Thirumalaipatty, in Namakkal district, a Panchayat president's post was bid for Rs 18 lakhs. "The Namakkal district collector, G Sundaramurthy, ordered his staff to go around the village with the *tandoora* (drums) to announce that he would book those participating in auctions under the Goondas Act. The person who successfully bid for the post got cold feet and did not even contest," said Loganathan.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express October 19, 2006)

New deal for panchayat workers

Panchayat Karmis (workers) associated with over 23,000 panchayats across Madhya Pradesh will now be covered under a special group insurance

package. Under the scheme, the workers would be covered for serious ailments, accidents and death. The Group Insurance Scheme would be introduced

in all the panchayats of the State on April 1, 2007. At present there are about 18000 workers in 23,051 panchayats across the State.

Under this scheme, there is provision for financial assistance of Rs. 1 lakh to the family of a panchayat karmi in case of death while in service. Besides, an assistance of Rs. 50,000 would be given to a

panchayat karmi in the case of permanent disability or loss of both eyes, two body organs, one eye or one body organ due to some accident. Similarly, an assistance of Rs. 25,000 would be given for the loss of one eye or one body part or any serious ailment.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, October 26, 2006)

Dalit woman panchayat president auctioned for 2.16 lakh in TN village Jaya Menon, Madurai

You have read how panchayat posts were auctioned in Tamil Nadu villages. Here's a more bizarre story. A Madurai village, Kodikulam, today auctioned its president, a poor, illiterate Dalit woman who the villagers were forced to elect because the post was reserved for a Dalit woman.

Balamani Veeman, the panchayat president, was auctioned off despite her pleas that she would hand over all her "earnings" to the village committee.

At about 11 this morning, there was much excitement in Kodikulam village, about 25 km from Madurai, at Thevar (an 'upper caste') elders and the bidders gathered at the village square for the auction. While T Madhivanan was the hot favourite with his offer of Rs 2 lakh till this morning, another farmer, Karuppusamy Ayyavu Thevar (36), surprised everyone with his offer of Rs. 2.16 lakh and 'won' Balamani.

The village had decided that the highest bidder could use Balamani as a "rubber stamp" for signing

agreements and other contracts for the village and take the "commissions" for himself. "Now Balamani would be under total control of Karuppusamy," said Dhanam Pandi, a widow, who hails from the village.

"The auction for Balamani was to be held last Saturday along with that of the three *cummas* (water tanks, where fish is reared and sold). But the village elders decided to take up the auction for Balamani separately," said dhanam after the one-hour proceedings. Balamani's husband, Veeman, told *The Sunday Express*.

The recently concluded civic pools saw several villages across Tamil Nadu auction panchayat posts, as was reported in *The Indian Express*. At least in two cases, in Dharmapuri and Erode, the police arrested bidders based on complaints by the Block Divisional Officers.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express, November 19, 2006)

Panchayati Raj Ministry prepares software to aid transfer of funds

The Union Panchayati Raj Ministry has prepared to maintain databases of bank accounts of all Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to facilitate the transfer of funds through banking channels, preferably electronically. Once the data is entered money can be transferred directly to the 2,40,000 PRIs from the state's Consolidate Fund. Karnataka has already

implemented this system, using the fast expanding electronic network of banks to transfer funds from the State treasury to individual panchayats. This has reduced the time taken for funds to reach each panchayat from two months to 12 days.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, December 3, 2006)

Panchayati Raj useful to Sri Lanka: Aiyar

B. Muralidhar Reddy

The Indian experiment on devolution of powers through Panchayati raj model could be useful for Sri Lanka in dealing with its ethnic strife, Union Minister for Panchayat Raj, Youth Affairs and Sports, Mani Shankar Aiyar, said this on 26 September 2006 in Colombo. Mr. Aiyar was attending an interactive session with the All-Party Representative Committee (APRC) and Panel of Experts at the Peace Secretariat. The APRC and Panel of multi-ethnic experts have been constituted by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his quest to evolve a consensus within the majority Sinhala community on the contentious subjects of devolution and sharing of powers. According to the participants at the conference, Mr. Aiyar emphasised that while it was up to Sri Lanka to devise ways and means to resolve its ethnic problem, it was his considered view that the way the Indian State dealt with various secessionist demands could prove beneficial for Sri Lanka.

An official statement said Mr. Aiyar explained the concept of Panchayati raj and described its implementation in India. "System of local democracy through local councils known as Panchayats has been established by the Constitution. It provides a mechanism for devolution from the Central Government to people at the local levels," it said.

According to the statement, Mr. Aiyar provided insights into the methodology, principles, and practical issues regarding this system of devolution. At the conclusion of his address, Mr. Aiyar responded to questions from members of the All-Party Representative Committee and the Panel of Experts, and offered to provide further assistance and cooperation to them, it said.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, September 29, 2006)

Centre to keep tab on Panchayat funds

Union Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar informed the Lok Sabha that the Centre would keep electronic tab on the funds allocated for panchayat institutions to ensure that money was optimally utilized to carry out developmental works at the grass roots level. The minister said that the Government would ensure that every Gram Sabha has a proper building and adequate staff to carry out developmental works. He said that Panchayati Raj had led to the empowerment of the women in general and women from the weaker sections of the society in particular.

"Among ST representatives in the Panchayat bodies, almost 65 per cent of them are women. The overall representation of SC/ST women in the local bodies is 31 per cent. It is a great change taking place at the grassroots level," Mr. Aiyar said.

Such a huge representation of women in the local bodies is unparalleled in the world. There are 32 lakh representatives in local bodies in the country. There are 10 lakh women representatives in Panchayats countrywide. They are doing a fantastic job," he added.

(Courtesy: The Pioneer, December 14, 2006)

“State has a decent record in empowering panchayats”

C. Narayana Swamy

There can be no Swaraj without Gram Raj said Gandhiji.

“The State shall establish panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as will enable them to function as units of self-government”, says the Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Constitution. Transforming the vision of the Mahatma and the Constitutional directive into reality, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution have ushered into the Indian polity a system of local governance. The local bodies, both urban and rural, no longer need to depend on the mercy of State Governments for their survival, even though the domain of the panchayats falls within the jurisdiction of States.

Karnataka has a decent track record of devolution of powers and functions to the panchayats. The Village Panchayats and Local Boards Act of 1959 enabled the establishment of gram panchayats and taluk development Boards in 1960. These local bodies functioned till 1983.

The 1983 Assembly elections brought about a change of government in the State. The Janata Party government headed by the late Ramakrishna Hegde, with the late Abdul Nazeer Saab as Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, took steps to realise the Gandhian dream of Gram Raj in the State. The Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Bill, 1983 was unanimously passed and became an Act in 1985.

Golden Age

The period between 1987 and 1992 can be described as the golden age of Panchayati Raj in the State. Powerful and effective Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) were established.

The concepts of gram sabha, State Election Commission, State Finance Commission and special powers and functions that were later incorporated into the constitution found place in the

Karnataka Act of 1985, Reservation of 25 percent for women in zilla parishads and mandal panchayats was provided.

An effective system of panchayati raj is a prerequisite for an efficient delivery system for planning and implementation of rural development and social welfare programmes. More than a decade after the Constitutional amendment, many important mandatory provisions are still to be implemented in many States, including Karnataka.

New legislation

Karnataka was the first State in the country to bring in new panchayat raj legislation - the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 – after the Constitutional Amendment by replacing the Act of 1985. The repealing of the earlier Act was seen as a retrograde step. An era of a vibrant and an effective system of democratic decentralisation was brought to an abrupt end.

The Panchayat Raj Act of 1993 envisages the setting up of a statutory body called the State Panchayat Council headed by the Chief Minister. It is expected to meet once in six months. But the first meeting was held after 12 years when the present Chief Minister convened a meeting of panchayat chiefs and others recently.

The Constitution mandates the setting up of District Planning Committees (DPCs) to prepare annual plans. Until recently, no action was taken to set up the DPCs. It is at the instance of the Union Government and the initiative taken by the present State Government that the DPCs are now being made functional.

Model

Kerala is cited as a model in panchayati raj. It has introduced many innovative changes, which others

can emulate. But Karnataka has the capability to restore a vibrant democracy at the grassroots.

(The author is a former MP and former President of Bangalore Rural Zilla Panchayat”

(Courtesy: The Hindu, October 28, 2006)

Direct election of panchayat chiefs likely

The government is considering amending the Panchayati Raj Act to allow people to directly elect panchayat presidents and vice-presidents. “We believe this will make the system more effective”, Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj C.M.Udasi said at Madakatti in Bhalki taluk on Saturday.

Now elected members of panchayats elect presidents, who retain their position only as long as they have the support of a majority of members. This brings in a certain amount of uncertainty into the system. The Government wants to remove this uncertainty and strengthen the system. Hence, the need for an amendment, he told presspersons.

The Government is also considering increasing the tenure of presidents and vice presidents to 30 months from 20 months.

Earlier, Mr. Udasi inaugurated a drinking water scheme under the Jal Nirmal Yojana at Madakatti village. The BJP leader said the Opposition parties were not engaged in constructive criticism. They had wasted time in the Legislative Assembly and Council raising irrelevant and unnecessary issues, he said. He also faulted the Congress for making baseless allegations against the coalition government.

The Government was committed to implementing the D.M. Nanjudappa committee recommendations on the removal of regional imbalances, he said. BJP district president Prakash Khandre, senior BJP leader Baburao Madakattim taluk BJP president Praksh Mashetty and others were present.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, October 29, 2006)

Women Panchayat leaders’ chance lost in translation

“Courage, knowledge and experience – these qualities will make you acceptable in a man’s world” – APJ Abdul Kalam

What could have turned out to be an opportunity of a lifetime for these women Panchayat members from Karnataka, lost its sheen due to something as basic as a language barrier.

The Panchayat members were invited to have tea with the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. But they missed the charm of tete-e-tete with the First Citizen as most of them could not speak Hindi or English and there was hardly any time for translation.

Only Nethramma, member of Sidrahalli panchayat in Chikmagalur was lucky enough to convey her apprehension over the running of liquor shops in her village.

“Sir, please help me. I have tried my best to shut down the shops. But even my colleagues in the panchayat are not supporting me”, she said.

The President, however, was happy when he heard that five out of the 12 members in her panchayat were women.

“Madam, half of your battle is won. Go back to your village and organise a mothers’ movement”, he said. Recalling his experience in a village in Kerala Dr. Kalam said wives and mothers had launched a social movement of exerting pressure on the male members of their families to give up the habit of drinking and gambling. “Follow it in Karnataka too”, he said.

Assuring the panchayat members, who have come here from Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and MP for a training programme by voluntary organisation Agaz Foundation, Dr. Kalam said, “It does not matter whether you have the knowledge of three R’s or not, Courage, knowledge and experience – these three qualities will make you acceptable in a man’s world”.

But Athija was disappointed as she could not speak to the President about the eviction of 130 SC families in Mudigere taluka in Chikmagalur.

However, the 120 odd panchayat members from the state have found a way to reaching out to the President. They would write a long letter to him

giving him details about their concerns and apprehensions.

“We are going to write whatever we feel about him. We will congratulate him for being a people’s President, an honest and sincere person and we will also compliment him for his hair style”, said Ayesha.

Swarnalata from Siddapura panchayat in Tumkur was optimistic that the papers for road construction in her village would move if the President intervened.

“At least we have got an opportunity to visit the President and see where he lives. If only we could spend more time with him and speak to him,” Lakshmidevi from Bangalore (Rural) said.

But for Madhumalini from Sathyamangala panchayat in Hassan, the visit could not have been more fruitful as she could get the President’s blessings for her five year old daughter Harshita, who was accompanying her.

(Courtesy: The Deccan Herald, November 3, 2006)

Women change panchayat rules

No long ago these women were hidden behind veils. But talking to Sumeetra Devi, one immediately realises that the 40 year old dalit from rural Rajasthan has long thrown off the *ghoonghat* battled unscrupulous doctors in tehsil hospitals, fought to get ration for below poverty line families and even ticked off errant district level officers.

“And much against tradition, I am a rare village woman who talks directly to her father in law”,

says the ward panch from Khajuwala village in Bikaner district.

The overall percentage is still low. But undeniably in pockets of rural India, a small but significant group of women panchayat leaders are making a difference to the lives of people around them. They have stepped into a unwelcoming man’s world and wrenched their share from the bureaucracy.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, November 6, 2006)

Krishi-techno parks in Gram Panchayats now

After IT and BT parks, it will now be ‘krishi-techno parks’ in Karnataka. The Karnataka agriculture policy-2006, which was released by chief minister H D Kumaraswamy here on

Thursday, proposed to establish in each gram panchayat a krishi-techno park – a place where new agricultural technologies will be demonstrated to farmers.

The parks will help the state in achieving growth rate of 4.5 per cent per annum in agricultural gross state domestic product during the next decade. As this can be done by bridging the gap between laboratory and land, krishni-techno park will take technology to the doorstep of farmers.

To be based on the public-private partnership (PPP) model, the park will come up in one hectare area in each gram panchayat. Scientists working in agricultural universities and agri-research stations will provide scientific back-up at the park.

Other salient features of the policy are:

- ? Budgetary expenditure on development sector to be at 10 percent of total development expenditure

- ? Increasing investment in rural farm and non farm enterprises by five per cent per annum
- ? Planned programme focussing on improving soil health titled 'Bhoomi thayiya arogya' will be taken up by covering 35,000 hectares each year.
- ? Farmers to be give raitha mitra pusthaka (RMP) a small coded passbook containing information of the farm family.
- ? Constituting rainfed agricultural commission and establishing Karnataka Trade Authority.
- ? Establishing telemetric rain guage stations at gram panchayat level on a phased manner.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, December 31, 2006)

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