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TURN PANCHAYATS INTO INFORMATION HUBS: PRATIBHA PATIL

President Pratibha Devisingh patil on Monday made out a case for turning gram sabhas and panchayats into 'information hubs for rural development' and using the National Cadet Corps (NCC) National Service Scheme (NSS) as 'messengers of development.'

Addressing a national conference of the project directors of district rural development agencies in Delhi, she also urged the project directors to plan, implement and monitor programmes like Bharat Nirman and National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme effectively to help the country realize the objective of rural development.

Lamenting the absence of coordination between various departments, the President called for a convergence of the various schemes of the Government to optimize benefits and avoid duplication. Because of such ills plaguing get population was not benefiting from the schemes despite funds being ploughed into them.

For her part, the President provided a yardstick to the project directors. "The yardstick that you should adopt when judging your performance should be whether funds are fully utilized in time and whether they have been utilized prudently for creating durable assets and by ensuring that there

has been no pilferage of funds either on account of wastage or corruption."

Also, according to the President, the project directors should generate awareness about the various developmental programmes of the Government through the gram sabhas and panchayats. These institutions of local self-government should become the "information hubs for rural development," she said.

Referring to the risks involved in rain-fed farming, Ms. Patil said farm ponds, village tanks and 'nallah bands' should be constructed to ensure supply of water to the farmers while ensuring the upkeep and de-silting of existing water bodies.

While highlighting the role of the government in these activities, she advocated community participation; stating that "these activities can also be undertaken through 'shramdan' by motivating people. In this regard, the President suggested that volunteers of the NCC and the NSS be roped in. "These young committed boys and girls will be of immense help in creating awareness about various government schemes in rural areas. We should tap this potential so as to make them messengers of development."

(The Hindu, January 29, 2008)

NO CONSENSUS ON CONSENSUS PANCHAYATS

By Syed khalique Ahmed

EVEN as the state Government is smarting after it managed to get elected samras (consensus) panchayats for 30 per cent of the villages during concluded village panchayat elections' it has drawn flak from activists and sociologists who have termed it as a process of 'subverting democracy' by offering "carrot of monetary incentives" and "linking development with political process."

Out of a total of 1,436 villages for which the elections were held on January 20, 426 villages opted for samras or consensus panchayats, with sarpanch as well as members getting elected without holding of elections.

Though the samras scheme had been in practice in the state since 1991-92 Congress regime, it became popular and attracted attention when Chief Minister Narendra Modi increased the monetary incentives in 2001 panchayat elections.

With increase in incentives, the percentage of samras panchayats naturally registered an increase. According to officials of the State Election Commission, the percentage of samras villages, which was hardly four to five per cent previously, jumped to 27.2 per cent in 2001 and to 30 per cent in this year's elections. The idea of samras, officials say, is to promote harmony, and reduce social and caste tension generated during village panchayat polls. State's Panchayati Raj Ministry, soon after the notification of January 2008 panchayat elections, had announced a monetary assistance of Rs 1 lakh for villages having seven panchayat members and Rs 2 lakh for bigger ones with more than seven members. The assistance, according to officials, is

given to samras panchayats for carrying out developmental projects in villages.

Activists are however, not against election of samras panchayats if it is achieved without any monetary attraction for development or what they call as "bribe" from the Government to influence the panchayat polls. Dubbing the whole scheme as "subversion of democracy at the grassroots level", Gangan Sethi of Jan Vikas questioned the logic of linking development with election," he said. Is a policy matter and can't be linked with election," he said.

Stating that samras was against the essence of democracy as it obstructed the devolution of political power to powerless through holding regular village panchayat election after every five years as per article 243E (I) of the constitution, Satyakam Joshi of Surat-based Centre for Social Studies said: "We can't ignore democracy even if it leads to some kind of caste and community tension."

State Election Commission (SEC) secretary V H Shah said that EC fully followed the electoral laws from laws from notification till final results of elections. "But if anybody felt it was illegal and unconstitutional, let the person challenge it in court," he said, clarifying that the commission neither announced nor gave any incentive, monetary or otherwise. It was given by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

(The Indian Express, January 26, 2008)

50 PER CENT QUOTA FOR WOMEN IN HIMACHAL PANCHYATS

By Sujay Mehdudia

Announcing a major initiative to empower women at the grassroots level, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal on Tuesday declared that his Government had decided to implement the 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions as well as local urban bodies.

It is our first effort to empower women and increase their representation in the share of power.

We have taken the lead to bring them into the mainstream to make them part of the decision making process and in matters of governance and development in rural and urban areas of the state,” Mr. Dhumal said during his visit to the Capital to attend a meeting of NDA constituents.

(The Hindu, January 23, 2008)

STATE LAW MINISTERS TO DISCUSS VILLAGE COURTS

A CONFERENCE of state law ministers, secretaries and registrar generals of High Courts is being held on February 1 at Vigyan Bhawan to deliberate on implementation aspects of Gram Nyayalayas.

To be presided over by Union Law Minister H R Bhardwaj, the meet will discuss establishment of Gram Nyayalayas and related matters like timeframe and financial arrangements to be made for such courts. The Gram Nyayalaya Bill, Parliament, aims at establishing rural courts at village level to clear the backlog of cases and provide a forum for settlement of disputes with simplified procedure to make justice accessible to the common man.

“The Centre has already accepted most of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Gram Nyayalaya and will now pursue the Bill in Parliament for its early

enactment,” the Law Ministry said in a release on Thursday.

The House panel had recommended setting up of mobile courts to ensure justice at the doorstep, plea-bargaining to clear backlog of cases in rural areas and inclusion of revenue matters in the jurisdiction of these courts as revenue disputes in rural areas comprise a bulk of cases.

“The Gram Nyayalayas will be established in addition to other courts and will act as the subordinate courts at intermediate panchayat level. These courts will be empowered to deal with both criminal and civil cases.

The Central Government will bear all nonrecurring expenditure for setting up these courts and will bear half of the recurring expenditure for three years after their establishment.” The ministry said.

(The Indian Express, February 1, 2008)

PANCHAYATS SEEK MORE POWERS IN RAJASTHAN

JAIPUR: Elected representatives of Panchayati Raj institutions in Rajasthan have demanded more rights and allocation of financial resources for implementing schemes under the 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.

Panchayats are still dependent on the Government with the real powers yet to be transferred to them.

About 400 panchayat representatives from Jaipur, Tonk, Dausa, Baran and Barmer districts, attending

a convention here over the weekend, said though the panchayats could formulate policies and schemes, they had no authority to execute them.

“Such a provision is meaningless as it does not benefit anyone,” said Jaipur Zila Pramukh Ramgopal Guard.

(The Hindu, February 13, 2008)

HUNGER PROJECT CONVENTION

The day-long convention was organized by the Kissan Seva Samiti Mahasangh, the Centre for Community Economics and Development consultants’ Society (CECOEDECON) and the Hunger Project.

While the participants called for tabling in the State Assembly of the report of the Kataria Committee appointed in 2004 for devolving powers to the Panchayati raj bodies, those addressing the convention pointed out that the rights on pasture land, holding of regular gram sabhas and appointment of more women Panchayat Secretaries were equally important.

State Social Welfare Board chairperson Saroj Kanwar said the provision for disqualifying a

candidate for panchayat election on having more than two children should be extended to the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections as well.

Resolution adopted at the convention demanded that the panchayat bodies be made self-reliant to achieve the goal of “Gram Swaraj” and provided with adequate funds to plan out their activities for development of villages.

Others who addressed the convention included Tonk Zila Pramukh Ramvilas Chaudhary, Malpura Panchayat Samiti Pradhan Rajesh Nagaura, Niwai Pradhan Tulsadevi, and the Chairperson of Chaksu Municipal Council Nirmala Devi.

(The Hindu, February 13, 2008)

RAJE SPREADS CARISMA IN RAJASHAN

If Gujarat chief minister Narendra used Internet Protocol (IP) technology to reach out to the drawing rooms of voters in Gujarat elections, here’s radio frequency based CARISMA network for the Rajasthan chief minister Vasundhra Raje to reach out to the rural voters in the election year.

The Rajasthan government is planning to launch the country’s first functional state wide network christened as computerization Automation Refinement of Integrated system of management and Accounts (CHARISMA) for village panchayats on February 15. Apart from being the mouth piece of government’s achievements and development works. The network would interconnect all the gram panchayats, panchayat committees and the state head quarter for facilitating the e-governance services at panchayat level. Minister for rural

development and panchayati raj Kalu Lal Gurjar told ET the network would cover 1,100 panchayat homes and 237 panchayat committees across the state.

“The network, laid and maintained by ITI Limited, costs around Rs 40 crore. Being the largest panchayati raj network of Asia, it would reach all the existing 9,500 panchayats in the next two year incurring another Rs 60 crore. The network would be used for issuing death and birth certificate at panchayat level, promoting literacy at last mile, sharing information about various government schemes and providing single point citizen centric utility services. We would also telecast documentary films every evening,” he said.

(The Economic Times, February 7, 2008)

PANCHAYATS SEEK MORE COMPENSATION FOR LAND ACQUISITION

Gram panchayat members of 19 villages have demanded that the compensation for land acquisition be increased from Rs. 75 lakh per acre to Rs. 2 crore.

At a meeting organized by senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader Vijay Goel at Alipur here, it was pointed out that the Delhi Government had increased the compensation from Rs.25 lakh per acre to only Rs. 75 lakh per acre in the last ten years, “even though the market price in these arrears had gone up to Rs.3 crore per acre.”

The panchayat members also said that the Delhi Development Authority had not shown any population in these 19 villages and declared the area fit for agriculture in the Master Plan for Delhi-2021.

Mr. Goel said people had been living in these 19 villages—some of which are Libaspura, Siraspur, Kheda Kalan, Kheda Khurd, Holambi Kalan, Narela, Teen Gaon and Seekri Khurd—since the time the British introduced the concept of “Lal Dora”. He said the government should roll back its decision wherein a farmer having plot of up to eight acres would have to sell it in one chunk. “This would prevent farmers from selling their land in smaller chunks,” he said.

Mr. Goel also accused the Government of not doing anything for the farmers. Private companies were harassing villagers living on the outskirts of the city for acquiring their land, he added.

(The Hindu, February 20, 2008)

PANCHAYAT HANDS TIED: REPORT

Administrative reforms panel finds local bodies lack authority to recruit staff

By Soumyajit Pattnaik

The second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) in its report on local governance has expressed concern over the lack of power by the Panchayats in most states to “recruit their own staff and determine their salaries, allowances and other conditions of service”. The commission is of the view that Panchayats “as the government at the local level” should have their own staff.

The ARC report has noted that the Panchayats have to depend on the officials of the state government for staff support. The report added, “Running an organization with staff on deputation suffers from two major weaknesses. First, frequent transfers do not allow development of a dedicated manpower. Secondly, employees have to answer to two authorities. This duality of control is one of the major obstacles in optimally coordinating the activities of various government functionaries in the rural areas. The commission is of the view that panchayats as the government at the local level should have their own staff. They should have full

powers with regard to recruitment and service conditions of their employees within a broad framework of State laws and certain standards.”

The ARC report further said, “Staff is a resource that an organization must possess to perform its activities. Control over human resources is an important element of organizational autonomy. In this respect, Panchayats across our country present a disquieting picture.”

The ARC has recommended that till the personnel structure of PRIs takes a definite shape, the employees of the state government may be taken on deputation, but such deputation should be made after the consent of the borrowing panchayat.

The ARC has also asked all states to undertake a detailed review of staffing patterns and systems over the next one year in order to implement the policy of Panchayati raj Institution (PRI) ownership of staff. Zila Parishads (district panchayats),

particularly, should be associated with this exercise, ARC has said.

The ARC has also suggested that panchayats look at additional sources of revenue to widen their tax base.

FINDINGS

- ? Panchayats have to depend on officials of the state government for staff support
- ? Frequent transfers do not allow development of manpower, the Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) report notes

- ? Moreover, employees have to answer to two authorities. This duality of control a major obstacle to optimally coordinating activities of various government functionaries in rural areas
- ? The ARC report suggests that all states undertake a detailed review of the staffing pattern and systems

(The Hindustan Times, February 25, 2008)

A MILLION INDIAN WOMEN HOLD POSTS IN LOCAL PANCHAYATS

It is Good for Democracy – TIMES View

This one's been a silent revolution. Women make up significant number of elected representatives in India, thanks to the Panchayati Raj Act that reserved 33 per cent seats in panchayati raj institutions for women. The Panchayati Raj Ministry claims that nearly 10 lakh women are elected members of local bodies. Such a large presence of women in democratic institutions is welcome.

Public policies at present fail to take into account the concerns of women. That's because social prejudices that treat women as inferior to men go unchallenged. As more women enter public life these assumptions will be questioned. To begin with, many women representatives might only do their husband's bidding, but not always and not for long. At some point they are bound to find their feet and voice. Once society gets used to the sight of women lawmakers in local bodies, people would send them to legislature and Parliament as well. They will also gain the expertise to legislate and administer. The government should pitch in by facilitating training programmes to provide necessary skills.

However, many people dismiss the numbers as an interesting piece of statistic and nothing more.

They argue that most of these women act as handmaidens of husbands and fathers. They are there because of the reservation policy in panchayats. Many women members are illiterate and lack the courage and expertise to stand up to bureaucrats. Some women sarpanches are indeed rubber stamps of husbands and they can't cope with the pressures of administration. But even if that's the case, how different are they from men in public life? Some of them are no less than rubber stamps of the local elite, and epitomize local caste and class interests. And, better not talk about their administrative capabilities. Look around and it's there for all to see.

It is least surprising that the developed world, particularly the Scandinavian countries, has a better gender ratio in its political institutions. Democracy works best when it is representative. It is time for India to consolidate the gains from panchayats.

Token Gestures Won't Work – COUNTER View by Swagato Ganguly

For women to be really empowered they need to contest and win general seats, not those specifically set aside for women. Otherwise they become surrogates for men, with male relatives of

panchayat seat holders exercising the real power. Reserving 33 per cent of panchayat seats for women merely encourages the Lalu-Rabri syndrome. When Lalu Prasad could not be chief minister of Bihar he set up his wife in that post while running the show himself. Bihar's decline continued and things did not improve for the state's hapless women. It is among rural women that illiteracy and oppression are at their highest. Giving panchayat seats to a few of them is a token gesture that won't change things around.

India performs poorly in terms of human development because we, as a nation, are addicted to holy cows. All political parties accept uncritically the idea that reservations will lead to social justice. A little reflection reveals the baselessness of this idea. Reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC\STs) have been around for more than a century. If they had worked Dalits would have been emancipated by now. If they have not succeeded, however, we

then need to question the efficacy of reservations as a tool for emancipation. Instead of asking this logical question, the political tendency is to expand reservations by bringing politically powerful groups such as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) under its ambit.

If reservations did not work for Dalits, why will it work for women? Instead of seeing reservations as the route to social justice, it is more useful to look at them another way. Our politicians like to talk about social justice, but only as a means of carving out vote banks. They do not possess the intellectual curiosity or application to real-life issues to take serious steps towards addressing cast or gender imbalances. Reservations, then, become a convenient substitute for social justice, a tokenist gesture meant to cover up the lack of any real action on this front.

(The Times of India, March 25, 2008)

BELLANDUR GP SHOWED THE E-WAY

WORLD BANK SEES THE VILLAGE AS PERFECT MODEL FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE

S. Kushala

When the gram panchayat meetings we on, they were telecast live to 20 surrounding villages through cable network. But its fame extended beyond this. It was the first rural local body in Asia to introduce e-governance in its administration.

Today Bellandur gram panchayat may be part of Greater Bangalore, but is looked at by the World Bank as a successful model for local governance to be emulated elsewhere.

Bellandur, about 15 km towards east of Bangalore, was a gram panchayat spreading over 3000 acres comprising five villages.

Computers were introduced here in 1996 even before cities did. By 2001, the administration had

gone completely the e-way – property tax collection, khata issuance, plan sanctions. Computers were a part of the learning process in government schools.

The progress was not limited to e-growth alone. Each house boasted bore well water supply and a water meter. Roads were tarred and door to door garbage collection was put in place.

Now, Bellandur has been taken over the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike and does not have an elected body. But its success model in e-governance has invited global attention.

“I am very pleased to inform you of the official launch of the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program, a global program at the

World Bank that supports the use of innovative communication approaches to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. Because of your work in this area, we have included your name on our priority mailing list. We would be interested in hearing about your recent work, with the objective of exploring potential collaboration in this important field”, wrote Sina Odugbemi, program head, development communication division, external affairs, World Bank, Washington DC, to K. Jagannath, former gram panchayat president in October.

The road to development and transparency within the administration was taken to a different level when the villagers of 20 hamlets were given an opportunity to watch the live telecast of gram panchayat and gram sabha meetings through cable in 2001.

“This enabled the village to know the decisions taken and the budgetary allocations and they would monitor the projects. This also increased the accountability factor of the gram panchayat was

answerable to its decisions”, says K. Jagannath who was instrumental in introducing sweeping measures. Mr. Jagannath headed the gram panchayat for two terms from 1994-2003.

Though the GP no longer exists, it’s still a researcher’s subject, students from various universities visit Bellandur to study the e-governance model as part of their research.

Bellandur was once a rich agriculture belt. Situated in the backyard of Bellandur Lake and Bangalore airport, this region’s fame to claim is its e-governance in administration.

Lately, it’s the lands that have attracted attention – the IT boom had its strong impact on Bellandur where land prices skyrocketed and agricultural lands were transacted by software firms. Overnight, the farmers reaped gold as there was rush to sell off lands for competitive prices.

(The Times of India, January 3, 2008)

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A study in grey Niraja Gopal Jayal*

The Global Gender Gap Report 2007 ranks India 114 out of 128 countries, using a composite index of economic participation, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival. On three of the sub-indexes, India's ranking is even lower than 114 — for instance, its ranking on health and survival is 126, higher only than Azerbaijan and Armenia. In sharp contrast, India's ranking on political empowerment is 21, higher than Australia, Canada and the United States.

This ranking, it must be clarified, does not take into account women's representation in institutions of local governance. Even as the Women's Reservation Bill — for the one-third quota in Parliament and state legislatures — has remained just a bill for over a decade now, one wonders what impact the inclusion of the one-third representation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), given a constitutional mandate exactly 15 years ago, would have on such a ranking.

A recent survey, commissioned by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and executed by the Nielsen Company-ORG Marg under the guidance of an academic advisory committee, addresses the knowledge gap, providing many new insights into the performance of women in the new Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This is the largest-ever survey on any aspect of panchayat functioning,

covering Gram Panchayats in 23 states, with a total sample size of over 20,000, including Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), Elected Male Representatives (EMRs), ex-EWRs, official functionaries and members of the community.

Nearly three-fourths of the EWRs in the sample belonged to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and OBC categories, and were evenly divided above and below the poverty line. That reservation has been critical to the representation of disadvantaged groups is confirmed by the fact that 88 per cent of them were elected on reserved seats. Approximately 85.8 per cent of all representatives surveyed were first-timers in the panchayats, while 14.3 per cent had been elected for a second or third term. While 15 per cent of women pradhans had been re-elected twice or more, 37 per cent of the male pradhans had been similarly re-elected. Of the ex-EWRs interviewed, 11 per cent said they had contested but lost the election, while 39 per cent indicated that they did not contest a re-election because the seat had been de-reserved. This clearly points to the need to rethink the rotation of seats reserved for women.

Much is often made of the phenomenon of surrogate representation, with the associated assumption that women who contest even reserved seats generally come from families with a record of

political engagement. An interesting finding of the survey was that the gender gap on this issue is less than 3 per cent — for while 21 per cent of EWRs reported a member of their household having previously contested an election, 18.6 per cent of EMRs did so, too!

The survey establishes quite clearly that while reservation provides the opportunity for entering the PRIs, it is no determinant of performance. Performance was found to be quota-neutral. In other words, a representative elected on a reserved seat performed no differently from one elected on an open seat. Performance is likewise not associated, either positively or negatively, with caste, though there is some negative correlation on this count with Scheduled Tribe status.

What, then, are the determinants of performance? In the case of women, these were seen to be age, education, training and prior involvement in social and political activities. Women in the age group of 21-35 years, educated up to middle-school and above, and either involved in political campaigns or associated with community-based organisations of various kinds were found to be more effective representatives. Those who had received training in the functioning of the panchayat system were likewise better performers.

Though it is tempting to ask whether women performed better in some states as compared to others, there is need for caution in attempting such comparisons of the performance of women across states. This is because every state has a different legislative framework for panchayati raj, with enormous variations in the extent of devolution of functions and finances, as well as in the robustness of the implementation of devolution provisions. To control for these variations, it makes greater sense to compare the gender gap across different states. The gap between the performance of women and men pradhans is lowest in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Sikkim, Tripura, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, and highest in the states of Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

However, the gender gap between community satisfaction with the performance of male and female pradhans is a mere 2 percentage points. Unsurprisingly, the participation of women ward members is of a lower order than that of women pradhans. The participation of women citizens of the village is even lower, averaging 25 per cent.

The gap between men and women representatives is much higher when it comes to their interaction with members of the local bureaucracy. Here the state-wise comparisons are of particular interest, as Kerala reports a one hundred per cent interaction of both women and men pradhans, with reasonably high levels of interaction also reported from Karnataka, Assam and Himachal Pradesh. On the whole, it was found that the household environment of EWRs has become more enabling, with about 30 per cent of them reporting a reduction in the time spent on household work and childcare. Thus, families have been supportive to elected women by sharing household responsibilities, but the outside environment — administrative and political — has clearly not responded as well.

There are broadly two schools of thought on the subject of women's participation in the panchayats — the cynics who see every EWR as a puppet and the evangelists who view her as an Indira Gandhi in the making. This study provides a more nuanced account, contesting the unmitigated pessimism of the cynics but equally moderating the over-enthusiasm of the evangelists. It is obvious that till such time as all states effectively devolve powers and finances, elected representatives cannot be properly empowered. For EWRs, the policy challenge is to provide an enabling administrative environment and to encourage the education, training and mobilisation of younger women, drawing them into public life as effective representatives of the people.

**The writer is professor of law and governance at JNU, and was the project director for this study*

(Courtesy: The Indian Express, April 29, 2008)

Reservation fails to give women a voice

Chetan Chauhan

The route to empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj (PR) institutions has several stumbling blocks a survey has shown. Caught in household chores, a majority of the women in PR institutions have little time to shoulder the responsibilities for which they were chosen.

Ironically, better-educated women steer clear of PR institutions, a new survey has found.

A survey on women in PR institutes in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh has found that most women are only figurative members of the panchayat. It's the men in their families who wield actual power. "The actual responsibilities were being shouldered by their family members, like husbands or father-in-laws. This indicates that women representatives have not gained their rightful place in the panchayats," the survey conducted by Centre for Social Research and National Commission for Women said.

Indicating that women were not even empowered within families, the survey found that not even a single woman representative owned land or a house in her name. The families of about 66 per cent of these representatives owned more than 20 acres of land.

Another interesting finding of the survey was that only women from the poorer families and those who not highly-educated were coming to the Panchayati Raj institutions. Fifty-nine per cent of the women in PR institutes in Gujarat had primary-level education.

"Richer and more educated women in both states have stayed away from PR institutions," the survey said. In the absence of more educated women, the PR institution heads from the lower income groups and the marginalised sections of the society had to fight caste bias against them. "People in the village as well as the bureaucratic set up were biased towards these women, especially in Himachal Pradesh," the survey said.

Election of women at the gram panchayat level was more out of compulsion than choice. All the women interviewed in Gujarat and Himachal were first-time entrants, meaning most of them were getting elected from seats reserved for women.

In the Panchayati Raj institutions, about 33 per cent of the seats are reserved for women. The seats are reserved for women in rotational basis.

"While the reason for becoming a PR member by a large segment of women representatives (61.6 per cent) was reservation of women, only some women (24 per cent) mentioned they had done so because of their interest in social work," the survey said.

Ranjana Kumari, director CSR, said that unless 33 per cent seats for women are reserved in legislatures and the Parliament sound participation of women at the grass roots level would be difficult. She urged the UPA government to bring in the legislation for reserving seats in legislatures and Parliament for women.

(Courtesy: The Hindustan Times, April 8, 2008)

Amendments mooted to Panchayat Raj Act

N.J. Nair

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Amendments to the Panchayat Raj Act have been mooted to make local self-government institutions (LSGIs) the industrial

licensing authority and empower them to regulate the units' functioning within their purview.

The amendments are expected to lend more teeth to the civic bodies to take punitive action against industrial units that function in violation of pollution control norms and exploit natural resources. It was the experience of Perumatty and Puthussery panchayats in Palakkad district that prompted the Local Administration Department to consider making significant modifications to the Act.

Following protests over the exploitation of groundwater by soft drink companies, Perumatty panchayat in Chittoor block and Puthussery panchayat in Malampuzha block decided to initiate action. The Perumatty panchayat cancelled the licence of the company on the charges of exploiting groundwater resources, but Puthussery panchayat

failed to take action, as the company was located in the area notified for setting up industrial units.

Department sources told *The Hindu* that the provisions of the Act which deny LSGIs free access to the notified areas had come as an eye-opener to the government.

“Such provisions are against the spirit of decentralisation of powers and the attempts to develop civic bodies as local governments,” the sources said. Civic bodies, which handle the lion’s share of the Plan funds and play a pivotal role in local planning and development, should also have the authority to take action against erring industrial units functioning in notified areas.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, April 14, 2008)

States must do more for panchayats: Manmohan Aarti Dhar

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday called for devolution of more powers and responsibilities to elected representatives of panchayati raj institutions. He also sought a debate on why some States failed to successfully implement the three-tier panchayati raj system.

He was speaking at a National Convention of District and Intermediate Panchayat chairpersons organised here to mark the 15th anniversary of panchayati raj.

It would be the endeavour of his government to strengthen the role of these institutions in the Centre’s programmes, he said while appealing to the State governments to impart additional responsibilities as well as training to the elected representatives in implementation of welfare schemes. Implementation must be done at the local level for effective management. “Most of our development works can be carried out in a better way at the local level.”

Dr. Singh said more attention needed to be given to the mid-day meal scheme being implemented

through panchayats. He recommended inclusion of local panchayats in the Integrated Child Development Services.

Pointing out that the Constitution clearly mentioned that the State governments and legislatures were fully responsible for setting up panchayats, he said the States had their own compulsions. Hence, during the past 15 years, different States had adopted different ways to strengthen panchayati raj institutions.

There were some States which did this to a large extent while others had to do much more. The Prime Minister called upon the people to make use of the Right to Information Act to curb corruption in gram sabhas.

Assuring the participants that the government would consider their recommendations on improvement of the panchayati raj system, he said the matter would be discussed at the Panchayat Ministers’ Conference and the National Development Council.

Women's empowerment

United Progressive Alliance chairperson Sonia Gandhi said the panchayati raj institutions had an important role to play in achieving the target of inclusive growth as envisaged in the 11th Plan. She said the biggest achievement of the panchayati raj system was women's empowerment. "Today, we have more number of women elected through this system than the total number of elected women in the world."

"Consolidate schemes"

A charter adopted by the participants during the three-day deliberations recommends that all schemes be consolidated into a single Panchayat Sector Window for budgets to ensure flow of funds to each tier. Other recommendations relate to functional and financial empowerment of panchayats, improving their capacities through devolution of functionaries, training and provision of technical support.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, April 25, 2008)

Dalit women scale caste wall

Pallavi Polanki

Even as grassroots democracy has given India over a million elected women representatives, it has empowered Dalit and Adivasi women leaders to challenge caste barriers.

"Remarkably, the actual occupancy of seats by women belonging to these categories (Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) substantially exceeds the percentage of reservation. For instance, in Karnataka, 46 per cent and 65 per cent respectively of SCs and STs elected to panchayats are women. Can there be a more telling evidence of women's empowerment through panchayati raj, particularly of the poor and the downtrodden?" states Minister of Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, in his last review of the State of Panchayats (2006-07).

This is remarkable because only one-third of reservations in the SC/ST categories are mandatorily reserved for women, implying that Dalit and Adivasi women are also winning from seats not reserved for them.

Mumbai-based Maharashtra Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MMRA), an association of elected women representatives formed in 2000, reflects an interesting social trend. Seventy per cent of its 2,000 members are Dalit.

"Dalit elected women representatives are more politically conscious and active than the Maratha women. They are better at organising themselves. They are more struggle-oriented because they feel they have nothing to lose," said project director Bhim Raskar.

A shining example of the success of this social experiment is Maya Devi Sorte, the state leader of the MMRA, who has contested three elections including the Zilla Parishad election. Sorte also participated in the United Nations conference, in New York, on the role of women in the panchayati raj institutions, in 2006. On how being an elected representative has impacted her life, she said, "It has given me self-respect and self-confidence.

Education of girls has now become a priority, our standard of living has improved and we are also becoming economically empowered," said Sorte, chairman of sub-committees on ration, police vigilance and education. She was elected from Wadwal Nagnath in Latur district, in Maharashtra, in 2006.

"Women Dalit and Adivasi leaders are making the best use of constitutional opportunities. There are Dalit elected women representatives in states where the caste dynamics is very strong," said Maalan Narayan, national media advisor to Hunger Project,

an international organisation that has trained 65,000 women panchayat leaders in India.

But the challenges are immense. “Women Dalit leaders have to battle caste discrimination every day. Influential villagers are not happy and want to

unseat women leaders. But the Dalit elected women representatives are receiving support from local NGOs,” said Bimal Kant of Hunger Project’s Bihar state office.

(Courtesy: The Hindustan times, April 25, 2008)

“Women elected to panchayats need better training”

NEW DELHI: A large proportion of the newly elected members to the Panchayati Raj system do not get the opportunity to undergo training programmes for effective performance.

The opportunity is not available to 43 per cent of them. The chief reason being ‘training not held’ in the case of 61 per cent of the representatives and ‘not called for training’ in the case of 22 per cent of the representatives, according to a study on ‘Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions’ carried out by AC Neilsen ORG-MARG for the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

Training in ‘Rules and Regulations of Panchayats’ and ‘Roles and Responsibilities’ are critical for better performance, but these are attended by only 57 per cent and 43 per cent of representatives respectively.

Irrespective of gender and position, three-fifths apparently feel the need for training on ‘Rules and Regulations of Panchayats.’

However, high levels of satisfaction with different aspects of training such as logistical arrangements

(seating, visibility of screen board, training material), quality of instructor (attitude and language) among those who attended the training further reinforces the importance of having a defined training programme for elected representatives, the study said.

By and large, training programmes are perceived as participatory in nature (90 per cent) where questions could be easily asked (85 per cent) and female representatives received treatment on a par with male trainees (91 per cent).

The findings also indicate that, overall, elected women representatives function within an enabling environment at the level of the village community and the household.

Overall, the quality of participation assessed across various dimensions turned out to be reasonably good. A sizable 93 per cent of male pradhans — seniormost functionary at the gram sabha level — reported performing their primary role of organising and attending the gram sabha meetings.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, April 28, 2008)

Rural women with a nose for news

Against all odds, an eight-member team of women drawn from Dalit and Kol tribal communities in UP have started a newspaper that is all set to give mainstream publications a run for their money, says Geeta Seshu.

“Mainstream papers don't talk to everyone. Usually, they talk to the 'sarpanch' (village head) and a few other important people. But we talk to everyone. We are interested in everyone,” said Shanti, 45, ace

reporter of 'Khabar Lahariya', the country's first and only newspaper brought out by women in Bundeli, a dialect of Hindi spoken in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (UP).

Against all odds, an eight-member team of women drawn from Dalit and the Kol tribal communities of Chitrakoot and Banda districts of UP began 'Khabhar Lahariya' in Chitrakoot in 2002 and, consequently, launched an edition in November 2006 in Banda. The paper is supported and funded by Nirantar, a Delhi-based centre for gender and education. The eight-page broadsheet that is full of news, photographs and illustrations covers the gamut of local to national and global issues with a special focus on local concerns.

With a print run of 3,500 copies, and an estimated 10 people who read each copy, priced at Rs 2, 'Khabhar Lahariya', or KL, as its team calls it, is all set to give mainstream newspapers a run for their money. Especially when it will shortly turn into a weekly from the fortnightly it is at present.

Fully living up to its name — which translated reads 'waves of news and information' — the publication is managed by feisty women who take on the roles of reporters, editors, illustrators, proof-readers, print production workers, marketing executives and distributors. 'Tazaa Khabhar', a documentary on these women, made by Bishakha Datta, captures wonderfully, an amusing scene of reporter Shanti making her way through a crowded train, hawking copies of the newspaper.

"Yahan bhi taash khel rahe hain (Even here they are playing cards)," she says, as she comes upon a group of men playing cards. One of them says the card game is 'time pass'. In a flash, Shanti fishes out a copy of 'KL' from her bag and tells the group to read the newspaper, saying it is the best way to be entertained and informed.

Kavita, 28, who, along with Kiran, Meera and Nazneen, looks after the Banda edition is proud of the fact that sometimes, reporters of the major mainstream newspaper 'Amar Ujala' have picked up stories that appeared first in KL. Interestingly, the Chitrakoot edition, looked after by Meera, 37, who is the editor-in-chief, Shanti, Mithilesh and Tabassum, carries reports in Bundeli too, but the language of the reports is in the dialect spoken in

this district, slightly different from the version of Bundeli spoken in Banda.

Its news is varied but, at all times, the focus is on the 300 villages — there are at least 220 in Chitrakoot district alone. The team comes from different villages in and around Karwi, the newspaper's head office and the headquarters of Chitrakoot district. The reporters travel extensively, juggling with aplomb their duties at home and their assignments.

Moderately educated

Most of the women that are a part of the KL team are moderately educated with the exception being Meera, who has done her Bachelor of Arts in Sanskrit. Shanti learnt to read and write in a formal school only 10 years ago while Kavita had not even completed her primary education till she prevailed upon her in-laws and husband to let her go to a non-formal school and study further.

Initially, the women say, their families were skeptical and even frightened at the 'dangerous' nature of their work. But they soon gained the respect of both their families and the community. In fact, now they are approached for help, and even feared.

A clip from the documentary shows, a reporter covering a local 'panchayat' (village council) election and the seat is reserved for women. As the result is announced, guess who is adorned with garlands and heaped with congratulations? The victorious woman's husband, of course. And guess who makes it into a story? The KL reporter, but naturally.

Like all newspapers that report on controversial issues, KL has also had run-ins with the authorities on several occasions. For instance, in 2004 in Manikpur, Chitrakoot district, the death of a woman over dowry demands was not written about by any mainstream papers in the area because it involved a local 'sarpanch'. When a KL scribe reported it, she was threatened with dire consequences. More recently, in Ramjupur in February this year, when the mainstream press

wrote about a woman, who was actually a victim of a rape and assault, as if she were the culprit, it was only the KL news team that broke the news as it was.

In a marked departure from the single-issue focus of most news bulletins brought out by NGOs, this newspaper has separate pages for national and international news, development, women's issues, the 'panchayat' and a letters column. Sensitive to the needs of newly-literate readers, its font size is larger and column-width wider than regular papers. Photographs and illustrations accompany the text, again to make it visually interesting for readers.

Inspired work

It has taken a while for KL to work out all these formulae. Its precursor was 'Mahila Dakiya', a single-page broadsheet brought out by the government-sponsored Mahila Samakhya, a women's education programme.

'Mahila Dakiya' was produced between 1993 and 2000, along with Nirantar, for newly-literate women readers.

"It closed down along with the project but people continued to ask for the paper. Chitrakoot is such a remote district and people really have no access to information," said Shalini, who works with Nirantar. "'Mahila Dakiya' was, of course, for women, but when we thought of starting a newspaper, we sought feedback on the kind of newspaper we would have, the profile of its readers and whether we would only target women and women's issues. We then decided that our paper would be for general readership," she added.

Today, Nirantar funds KL as a project and pays the salaries for its reporters, though the organisation hopes to make the newspaper sustain itself with subscriptions and sales. Nirantar hopes to explore different forms of organisation like trusts or cooperatives to help the barefoot reporters ride the waves of information revolution.

(Courtesy: The Deccan Herald, April 12, 2008)

Cyber village at Delhi doorstep

Deepender Deswal

BADSA (JHAJJAR): Sensing information technology's grip on all and sundry at a time when winds of change were definitely blowing across Indian villages, the panchayat of a nondescript hamlet in Haryana signed a MoU with Comet Technology Private Limited to make every family in Badsa computer literate.

The panchayat passed the first-of-its-kind resolution on April 20 to run a computer centre in the village that shares its border with the Capital after some youths in a general meeting raised the need for it. Speaking on behalf of village sarpanch Mishri Devi, 82, her semiliterate son Joginder said, "The panchayat has enough funds to run the project and so it signed the MoU with the company on June 20."

According to the agreement, Comet, which also runs e-disha centres in Haryana, will impart a basic course in computer education to each of the 560 families in the village with a population of over 5,000. Recalling the panchayat's resolve to make every villager computer savvy, DC Vijay Dahiya said, "We were doubtful about the project but they rightly argued that the education would help them land jobs."

Happy about the development, the octogenarian sarpanch who attends every panchayat meeting said, "The panchayat will pay Rs 200 per student to the company apart from Rs 160 that will be charged from the student." Unwilling to let age come in her way, Devi spoke of further plans: "The panchayat

will construct a new building for the computer centre."

A thrilled Vikas, student of 10+2 in the village government school, who joined the computer programme said, "It is an excellent opportunity for village youth." Beginning the enrolment process for

courses commencing in July, project coordinator for Comet, Dharmender Gulia, said, "We'll enrol one member from every family, irrespective of age and gender. With only two persons per batch, the timing will be kept flexible."

(Courtesy: The Times of India, June 25, 2008)

More power to women in Panchayati Raj

Bhubaneswar: "There is a need to build environment for women and elected women PRI functionaries for "active, free and meaningful participation" in the electoral process, and in the local self Governance system as well" opined participants in a workshop held here recently.

The workshop entitled "Women and Panchayatiraj" was organised by a voluntary organization – 'People's Cultural Centre' (PECUC) in collaboration with 'The Hunger Project'.

Inaugurating the workshop, panchayatiraj secretary Mr RN Dash called for a greater participation of women in the panchayatiraj process. Assuring all possible help from the state government, he said "Orissa is the first state in the country to make provision of reservation for women in pachayati raj system. The state government, through Mission Shakti, is taking up various activities in a massive way to empower women in the state" and called on the women PRI functionaries to be more self confident and participate in the development process more actively.

While sharing the learning of a project "Gender in local self Governance" implemented in Baliana Block by PECUC; Mr Anuradha Mohanty, coordinator of PECUC told that Baliana Panchayat samiti is the first in Orissa, where the third

Saturday of the every month has been fixed as a grievance day for PRI women members as well as working women.

On this occasion, a report on "Study of women harassment cases during Orissa Panchayati Raj Election 2007" was released. The study was conducted by PECUC and THP in different districts.

While sharing the report of the fact finding team which has documented 10 such cases, Mr Ranjan Mohanty, secretary of PECUC said that reservation has made women able to participate in the electoral process of the local self governance system in a larger way. But non-acceptance to women leadership by some power hungry male members, who resort to criminal means in elections including harassment and murder, is prevalent in the rural context, which needs to be addressed urgently, Mr Mohanty observed.

Participants in the workshop also recommended that necessary provisions be made in panchayat laws to fix ceiling on election expenditure and to disqualify an elected person from holding office and other candidates from contesting such election for violating the ceiling / failing to lodge election expenditure return during the prescribed time.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, April 1, 2008)

She is in panchayat drivers seat

R. Gopakumar

An ordinary village woman who used to rear cows, breaking into one male preserve after another is not commonplace even in a highly literate State like Kerala.

However, Sandhya Banerjee, who hails from a village near Ettumanoor in Kottayam district, is fast becoming a role model for others by doing just that.

The 31-year-old created a flutter three years ago when she began driving autorickshaw for a living at Kaipuzha Sasthanganal junction. Few people knew that it would become her launching pad for entering politics.

A year ago, she won the election to the Neendur gramapanchayat on a Congress ticket, and now she has become its president. Sandhya owes her popularity to her successful stint as an auto-rickshaw driver.

“I was the only woman driver there and they were 21 men. There were some hiccups initially, but later they became very accommodative,” says Sandhya. “Being a woman also made me popular with the customers since I did not fleece them.” Sandhya admits that she would not have plunged into politics without her husband’s influence since his family members were Congress supporters.

In the elections, the Congress-led UDF won 8 seats in Neendur gramapanchayat and the CPM-led LDF got four. Two of the independents elected, also pledged their support for the UDF camp.

“We were two woman UDF members and since the presidency of the panchayat was reserved for women, the two of us got the opportunity to share the term equally,” she told Deccan Herald.

The mantle fell on Sandhya on June 3 when the other woman member relinquished her post.

“I would like to think that nothing is impossible for women. It was not long ago that I was busy cutting grass for my cows like other village women. Then I began riding the auto and sometimes I used to come home after 10 pm. I encountered no problems at all,” she says.

The day started at 4 am then, and she often had to wash clothes after coming home late in the night.

As the head of the panchayat now, Sandhya says that she has now got a great opportunity to serve the people. “I would like to improve the facilities in the anganwadis, put up more streetlights and also solve the drinking water scarcity in the panchayat,” she says. She admits that it now takes some effort to juggle the roles of a mother, wife and panchayat president. Her husband P.R. Banerjee rides her auto-rickshaw and also takes care of their 9-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son while she is away.

(Courtesy: The Deccan Herald, June 15, 2008)

Women take panchayat centrestage

Ananya Sengupta

New Delhi: Lakhuni K. Kambar has a smile for everyone. Decked in silver, the 50-year-old in a pink *lehenga* could easily be mistaken for just

another ordinary village woman. Only, nothing about her is now ordinary.

Head of the panchayat in Saundatti, Karnataka, she was one of four women village heads who shared the dais with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and central coalition chairperson Sonia Gandhi on the final day of the national convention of panchayati raj.

Kambar, who cannot speak a word of either Hindi or English, had indeed come a long way. For Veena Devi, the journey hasn't been "easy". "I have been elected president (*mukhiya*) of my panchayat twice in a row, both times contesting a general seat. I got married when I was 12 and was widowed when I was 16. I had to struggle hard to come this far," said the 35-year-old.

"When I first contested, the men in my village rebuked me, saying 'Who do you think you are? Indira Gandhi?'" the resident of Loharpura, in Bihar's Nawada district, added.

The men in her village may have looked askance, but neither Singh nor Sonia was surprised that there were women representatives from every part of the country at the three-day conclave.

In fact, Kambar, Veena Devi and the two others who shared the stage with the Congress big two form just a fraction of the 1.2 million elected women who play a part in local governance in rural India.

"Our great success in this field has been the number of women representatives that outnumber the sum total of elected women representatives all over the world. Political and social empowerment

of Indian women is the greatest success of panchayati raj," the Prime Minister said. "It is unique in world history and in the modern era."

Chandarmani Negi, chairperson of the Kinnaur district council in Himachal Pradesh for the past one-and-a-half years, has campaigned against social evils like harassment for dowry.

"During my tenure, I have built the Panchayat Bhavan and am now making the Zilla Parishad Bhavan in Kinnaur. I have initiated a cleanliness drive in my area and ensured that work on making permanent roads continue," said the 59-year-old grandmother. Her three grandchildren, she claimed, were proud of her achievements.

"When I first decided to contest, people told me that women can't do anything, but I wasn't demoralised. Now, I have showed them."

It is the support of their families that has kept these women going.

If for Negi it is her grandchildren, for Veena, her 18-year-old son has been a pillar of strength. And for Rina Debbarma, chairman of the village council in Purba Dinabandhunagar, Tripura, it has been her husband.

"One achievement I am proud of is the National Old Age Pension scheme," said the 27-year-old. "We were successful in identifying and providing pension to most people above 60."

(Courtesy: The Telegraph, April 25, 2008)

Panchayati Raj to Stay with states: Aiyar G. C. Shekhar

Chennai: The centre has no intention of shifting Panchayati Raj from the state list to the concurrent or the central list, said Union Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar on Friday.

"The government is opposed to such a move. The Panchayati Raj belongs with the states and will

remain there," he said while delivering the first V. Shankar Aiyar memorial lecture on 'Panchayati Raj and Inclusive Growth' at the Indian Chartered Accounts institute.

Aiyar's clarification came in the backdrop of the boycott of the recent convention of elected

Panchayat heads by Tamil Nadu as a draft resolution had talked about shifting the subject from the state to the concurrent list. He, however, hoped that the states would rise up to the occasion by fully empowering the panchayats.

He also announced that the Centre would soon announce a scheme to give incentives to local bodies that were transparent and accountable. Aiyar said that the resources meant for rural welfare should be made directly available to the local bodies. "The system of involving the bureaucracy to deliver public goods and services has been the enduring tragedy of India," he pointed out.

The success of the Panchayati Raj system could also be seen by the fact that there were 1.2 million elected women representatives which was more

than all elected women in the rest of the world. "Imagine in every local body election 50 lakh women are campaigning, breaking social taboos and discrimination. Five hundred years of discrimination has been kissed away in two elections," he said.

He said that unless rural development actually reached its intended beneficiaries India's growth would be lopsided. And this change can happen only if the local bodies were fully empowered financially especially when the UPA government has increased the rural spend to Rs. 1.20 lakh crores. "When you allow people to spend money on their own welfare less money will be eaten up by administration and you can make an Ambani out of every poor villager" he said

(Courtesy: The Hindustan Times, May 10, 2008)

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National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Kerala: Some Glimpses

Mr. Gopalakrishnan*

God's gift

Sabura A, daughter of Aboobacker residing in "Abu Manzil" is an orthodox Muslim girl of Pudupariyaram Panchayat of Malampuzha Block, Palakkad District. Her husband Nazeer Ahmad is a packer earning Rs.90/- per day working in a shop at Coimbatore. He has two daughters of age 13 and 10. Sabura found it difficult to maintain the family with this meager wage of her husband.

At first, she was reluctant to join the NREGS of Pudupariyaram Panchayat. But one day Member Ms. Ginshy advised Sabura to register her name and gave her card No.5/119. Somehow she decided to join thinking that she got a government job in NREGS and worked sincerely in 2006-07. She received Rs.6750/- through State Bank of India Pudupariyaram Panchayat. She was extremely happy to receive this amount and decided to purchase gold bangles and approached Josco Jewellers at Pallakad town.

After the purchase of bangles, the Proprietor handed over a gift coupon to Sabura along with the bill and an attractive prize. She thanked God Almighty for all these and went home. On the day of the lucky draw i.e. 1/12/2007, Sabura won a red Maruti car through her gift coupon. She could not control her happiness and thanked God again for showering

these blessings upon her. As she did not want the car, she sold it for Rs.2 lakhs and with that money bought 3-4 cents of land at Madrassa Nagar, Thazhemuraly area in Pudupariyaram Panchayat.

Even today Sabura remembers with gratitude the government of Kerala and the NREG Scheme for helping her have own house which would have remained only a dream otherwise. She is thankful to the God Almighty for showering all these blessings!

Bye-bye money lenders

Several royal family members are seen in Akathethara Panchayat of Malampuzha block, Palakkad district. They were rich once but now they have lost their land, paddy fields and money and living in poverty. Some of them took job cards and are working on NREGS to lead their life.

Sri Unnikrishnan of Koipully House, Iringaparambu of Akathethara panchayat belongs to the royal family but now leading a middle class life. He is unable to work due to illness. His wife Latha registered under NREGS and took a card in 2007-08 and worked and deposited this amount in Indian Bank, Akathethara Branch, gradually it became a huge amount of Rs.12500. She worked for 100 days and now both of them are very happy.

In Palakkad town, there are some TAMILIAN money lenders who collect up to 35-40% interest for urgent needs. They are collecting money from their customers on daily, weekly and monthly basis. Most of them are Shylocks of Shakespeare in Merchant of Venice pushing customers in great poverty like Kuetela.

Latha repaid the loan amount taken by her husband from the money lender. The money lender was surprised as to how Latha was able to repay the loan though they were aware of the NREGS scheme of the government. Once Latha told the money lender "Annachi, I don't want your loan, but tell me if you want loan from me?" They were astonished to hear these words from a middle class Malayalee woman.

After this incident, Latha advised others whomever she met to registers their names in NREGS and make use of the government scheme. She also told them not to take any loan from the money lenders but to join NREGS to earn a living and say good bye to these money lenders for ever.

Oasis village

The Pudukkottai panchayat is situated on the southern side of Western Ghats in Palakkad district. This panchayat is hilly area consisting of many hills of the Western Ghats. There are several small canals and rivers flowing through these hills and mountains forming small and big tanks. These tanks used to become full during July-August but in course of time they became dry due to the extreme summer. The Vattakulam of ward No.18 here is an example of this which is now full of African weeds.

The panchayat wanted to bring back this tank to its previous condition. They included this tank restoration job in the 2006-07 budgets. With a lot of hard work and cooperation from everyone, they converted the dry tank into a large beautiful model tank storing water as before.

They started the work on 2 April 2007 and worked for 467 days spending about Rs.58, 375 as wages alone. Because of this tremendous work, all the other nearby tanks and 23 wells became perennial

water supply tanks thereby changing single crop Vallikode rice fields into double crop areas along with vegetable growing. The water pumps were working day and night and thereafter the tanks and wells never went dry even for a single day. This was a Herculean task which was done by Pudukkottai panchayat as a model to the whole of Kerala.

Little drops of water make a mighty ocean

Mrs. Kamalam wife of late Mr. Palli is a middle class family member of Narangaparambu, Sivanagar colony of Akathethara panchayat in Malampuzha block. They have 8 children – 6 sons and two daughters. After the death of her husband she found it very difficult to run the family.

Meanwhile her eldest son who was working as a wood cutter got married and went and lived separately. Kamalam registered her name in NREGS No.5/155 at Akathethara panchayat. She worked at the Mariyamankulam and Ambat canal which was full of mud and weeds lying useless. She got 100 days of work in 2007-2008 and received Rs.12500/- which she deposited in Indian Bank, Akathethara branch as Fixed Deposit.

One day her eldest son fell down while cutting wood and broke his right leg. He had been taken immediately to RV clinic and later to Trissur Medical College Hospital. Kamalam had to bear the expense of medicines, injections, car hire, dressing and the hospital charges etc which came to around Rs.40,000/- withdrawing her Fixed Deposit amount.

She was glad that she had worked and saved the money which she received from NREGS. This came handy and helped her get treatment for her son. She speaks high of NREGS and motivates others to get registered.

She thanked God for helping her save her little wages from NREGS to a huge amount as little drops of water make a mighty ocean.

**The author is a Block Programme Officer, from Palakkad, Kerala*

Sarpanch of a panchayat with zero crime

Narayani Ganesh

From Jodhpur, Savita Rathi was married into a family in Gopalpura village in Churu district, Rajasthan. She became sarpanch of Gopalpura gram panchayat by winning the 2005 elections, defeating her male rival by 600 votes in the general category. She spoke to Narayani Ganesh on the sidelines of a meeting on Panchayati Raj institutions organised by the Indian Women's Press Corps in the capital recently:

Q: You are a qualified lawyer. Is that an advantage?

Yes, it helped me understand procedures to get a plan passed or sanctions for funding. Poor and faulty records, if any, of land holdings caused great confusion and conflict; there were no exact measurements. Can you imagine — even pieces of rag clothes were used as measuring tools! Now we have computerised maps and records of land holdings in the area. Every village figures in the map. We have also drafted and computerised a master plan for infrastructure development. Our main focus is education and health care. I am proud to say that I am sarpanch of a panchayat with zero crime.

Q: How did you formulate a master plan?

We formed a committee and listed out problems — roads, drainage, water, electricity, employment, health, etc. For instance, the doctor posted here would not stay here because there was no residential facility. Girls didn't get educated because there were no girls' schools and the co-ed secondary school in a very old building had classes only up to the 10th standard. There were no roads.

I discussed these issues with the sarpanch of the neighbouring village, Surwas, and came to know that they had difficulty getting brides because there

were no roads! Also, no health-care facilities meant unsafe deliveries by quacks and midwives. There were no vaccination facilities.

On the basis of the list we raised demands for funds at the state and central planning cells. We prepared documents of estimates, applications and follow-ups. We got sanction of Rs 62 lakh for our water yojana project, now complete.

Gopalpura is now connected by road with other villages: Dewani, Surwas, Bidasar, Charwas, Sujangarh and Ladnu. Inner roads have been built too and drainage improved. Rs 11 lakh is sanctioned for the doctor's residence, Rs 39 lakh for extending the senior secondary to higher secondary school, and Rs 25 lakh for a new girls' school up to 8th standard.

Q: What are the setbacks?

We need job opportunities. We've arranged training for women in handicrafts from forest products; they're sold in metros. We're banking on rural tourism development to generate jobs. We're promoting heritage; the old fort is converted into a three-star hotel (five rooms are ready). We hope to host tourists who visit neighbouring Chapar (famous for blackbucks), as they have no accommodation there.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, July 07, 2008)

Reservation vital in election of women to panchayats: study

Cithara Paul

“I will not marry for the next five years— that is until I complete my term as the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat. If I get married and go to my in-laws' place, who will look after my village? People

will say the Panchayat is suffering as they elected a woman,” said 21-year-old Sukhwinder Kaur Sukhi, the newly-elected Sarpanch of Phull village in Jalandher district, Punjab.

Sukhwinder was the youngest among all women representatives who were in the Capital to attend the release of a study on Elected Woman Representatives (EWR) in Panchayati Raj Institutions initiated by the Panchayati Raj Ministry.

Elected under the SC reservation seat, Sukhwinder said her priority was to improve the educational facilities in the village, as she could not study beyond her Class XII. “Education is the key to success. I want all children in my village to have a bright future,” she said.

Sukhwinder is not the only one to be part of the gender revolution sweeping the most discriminated parts of the country. A study carried out by AC Nielsen ORG MARG has cited several instances similar to Sukhwinder among the 1,039,058 EWRs.

According to the study, reservation has played a significant role as four-fifths of the EWRs were found elected from reserved seats.

Empowering women

- 4/5ths of EWRs were found elected from reserved seats
- Reservation facilitated first-time entry of 83% EWRs into politics
- 39% women chose not to contest polls owing to withdrawal of reservation
- SCs constitute 26% of total EWRs and STs constitute 13%
- 24% EWRs were illiterate as compared to 6% of EMR
- Higher performers among EWRs were from Kerala, followed by Karnataka, Tripura, Maharashtra, Sikkim and West Bengal

While reservation facilitated the first-time entry of 83 per cent EWRs into politics, the study also found that 39 per cent women chose not to contest the polls owing to withdrawal of reservation.

“Those who oppose Women’s Bill have been saying that the elite would corner the benefits of reservation. The study, on the contrary, has found that Scheduled Castes constitute 26 per cent of the total EWRs and STs constitute 13 per cent,” said Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Iyer.

According to the study, 41 per cent of the EWRs belong to the under-35 category and a large number of them are from the more disadvantaged sections of society.

The study also found that while 24 per cent EWRs were illiterate, only 6 per cent of the Elected Male Representatives (EMR) were so. Unlike the case of

EMRs, most of the EWRs had no prior association with any form of politics and the act of contesting the first election signalled their entry into active politics. Husbands (30 per cent) and other family members (12 per cent) were reported to be playing an important role in motivating women representatives. However, a good number of their male counterparts — 40 per cent — were found to be self-motivated.

Higher performers among EWRs, according to the survey, were from Kerala, followed by Karnataka, Tripura, Maharashtra, Sikkim and West Bengal. The performance score was on the lower side in Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express, July 05, 2008)

Panchayat to initiate vegetable cultivation on seashore

ALAPPUZHA: The Mararikulam north grama panchayat, Kerala is back in news. This time by initiating a Seashore Vegetable Cultivation Project. The panchayat along with Kanjikuzhy Panchayat was in news in May when the two villages became the first in the country to declare a benchmark price for vegetables.

Under the project, inaugurated by actor Devan at Mararikulam, 1,100 households in three wards will cultivate five varieties of organic vegetables in 100 acres of land. These households will also be given five sacks each of a mixture of organic manure and sand to encourage cultivation in sacks. The vegetables will include bitter gourd, snake gourd, lady's finger, cowpea and spinach, and will be funded under the People's Plan.

The panchayat has already proved that vegetables could be cultivated on seashore when it successfully implemented an organic elephant yam cultivation project.

The Seashore Cultivation Project will be a source of livelihood for the fishing community, at a time

when there is a ban on trawling, said grama panchayat president D. Priyesh Kumar. "When they are not out on fishing or when the seasonal changes do not provide them a regular income from fishing, they can become farmers. This means steady income throughout the year," he said. The project will be implemented under the watchful eyes of Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac.

Actor Devan termed the project another 'green revolution', and said the panchayat was a model for the State.

The panchayat is undertaking another project under the Coconut Board. T.S. Viswan, project director for the Coconut Development Board's Bio-hedging Village Programame said in the six-month-old project, a cluster of farmers have replaced deceased and stunted coconut trees on 25 hectares on the seashore. Four rows of casuarinas were planted to protect the shore from erosion.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, July 23, 2008)

Tsunami survivors turn waste managers

CHENNAI: For four years after the tsunami washed away her home in December 2004, M Malar lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Now, the mother of three is set to begin a new life - as a permanent staff member of 'Green Friends' at the new vermi-compost yard set up at Sholinganallur by the town panchayat on its premises. She and 37 other tsunami survivors of Semmancherri along the IT Corridor will soon be in charge of the yard.

The yard has come with the help of Hand-In-Hand (HIH), an NGO that runs 19 yards in Kancheepuram district with the active involvement of the respective local bodies.

Two years ago, Malar, originally a resident of Odaikuppam in Besant Nagar, was accommodated in one of the 6,700 quarters built by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board for tsunami survivors in Semmancherri.

But this was not enough for Malar. She had to feed her children and give them an education - she did several odd jobs, from working as a maid to hawking goods.

Two months ago, there came another turn in her life. She and 37 other tsunami survivors of Semmancherri were offered a permanent job by HIH in the new yard.

A self-help group was formed to help them sustain their livelihood. "It is a second life for me. Now I can ensure that my three children get a good education. I want to ensure at least one of them pursues medicine," Malar told The Times of India.

Sholinganallur is the only one of the three tsunami-affected panchayats in the district to give permanent jobs to the survivors under the Rs 13.01 lakh Asian Development Bank-funded Tsunami Emergency Assistance Programme.

The new yard will daily handle kitchen waste from 10 wards of the panchayat - 2.5 tonnes from 4,927 houses and petty shops. The "Green Friends" will also keep the 82 streets clean.

The yard has 20 concrete bins where different kinds of waste – organic, recyclable and inert materials - will be handled. Each bin can handle 1.3 tonnes of waste. Every household will be given two bins for

biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste free. There is no user payment for the service.

"The tsunami-affected women were given free training on various aspects of solid waste management. From Monday, they will take up mass cleaning in the allotted wards to educate the residents on the need to segregate biodegradable and non-bio degradable wastes," Shiva T Krishnamoorthy, HIH project manager, told The Times of India.

Initially, the "Green Friends" will be paid for their services on a monthly basis. After an year, they will be in charge and will have the responsibility of ensuring the project's sustainability.

For a while, HIH will maintain the yard. The panchayat has provided infrastructure facilities - 16 tricycles, 10,000 bins and supporting staff.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, September 22, 2008)

Mankulam to become first organic panchayat in the State

Giji K. Raman

KATTAPPANA: Mankulam, a little-known panchayat in Idukki district, Kerala is all set to become the first organic panchayat in the State.

The project, to be completed in three years, will convert the panchayat into a chemical and pesticide free region.

The project, implemented by Kerala Agricultural Development Society (KADS) in association with Spices Board of India, Mankulam grama panchayat, Krishi Bhavan and Kudumbasree units, proposes to include 3,448 agricultural families in three years.

Under the project, farmers in the panchayat will be given certificates after the KADS conducts various tests that include soil testing and inspection by officials.

"It takes three years for a land to transform into the organic mode. A farmer is certified for organic cultivation only after getting C1, C2 and C3 certificates," said project director P.J. Sebastian.

So far, 1,076 farmers have passed the C1 level. Spice Board and the grama panchayat will bear the cost of getting the organic certification to the farmers.

KADS has already selected 40 cocoa farmers in the panchayat, and have started procuring the organic product produced by them at a high price. When the panchayat turns fully organic in cultivation practices, the farmers are expected to get a 30 per cent in the cost of their produce. The major crops that are cultivated in the panchayat are pepper, coffee, cocoa, cardamom.

Mr. Sebastian said the panchayat was selected on the basis of its geographical advantage. The region is surrounded by forest on all sides, and cultivation is done without using pesticides or fertilizers as the soil is fertile. He said that a Kochi-based agency that provides organic certification will be approached to ascertain the chance of exporting these products.

KADS has selected Mankulam panchayat under the Idukki Organic Project and more areas will be brought under vegetable cultivation.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, August 23, 2008)

Women pack a punch in panchayat polls

Rajeev Khanna

Uttarakhand has just been through the biggest exercise in democracy at the grassroots — the panchayat elections. Given that the tiny hill state is one of the youngest in India, even seemingly minor political events are significant in determining the democratic evolution of the region. In all, the state has 7,541 panchayats, from which 58,143 representatives were elected — the majority of them women.

To begin with, the elections came at a very important juncture. For the two major parties, the BJP and Congress, they are a precursor to what can be expected during the coming Lok Sabha polls. Despite the fact that panchayat elections are not contested on party symbols, both the BJP and the Congress had fielded their “candidates”.

An interesting development this time was the large number of Independents and dissidents who won the elections. This could force the parties to go in for some re-thinking. Although the Congress and BJP had issued repeated warnings to rebels, no harsh action was taken, indicating that each party wants to keep the victorious candidates on its side.

What was remarkable was the large number of women who emerged victorious. For the first time in the state, 50 per cent of the seats were reserved for women. Moreover, there were several women candidates from the remaining seats — general as well as those reserved for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. The result: women will now dominate the panchayats in Uttarakhand with over 50 per cent representation.

The increasing role of women in the functioning of grassroot democratic institutions is a progressive development. “Women in the hills have been the economic and social backbone of their families. While the men move to towns and cities in search of employment, it has been the women who have been carrying out agricultural and other activities in the villages,” said senior Congress leader Suryakant Dhasmana.

He added that it would be interesting to analyse how women bring about a balance between their household activities and their new-found political responsibilities. “A larger representation to women in the grassroot democratic institutions was long overdue as women played a major role in the movement for the creation of Uttarakhand. In the existing social chemistry of rural Uttarakhand, the women will be the actual rulers for the first time,” he added.

Interestingly, a large number of political bigwigs successfully fielded their spouses in these elections. These women are strong contenders for the top posts in zila panchayats. For example, Opposition leader Harak Singh Rawat’s wife Deepti Rawat won from Dwaikhal Block in Pauri; former Congress minister Shoorvir Sajwan’s wife Ambika Sajwan won from Hindoli Khal block of Tehri; sitting BJP legislator Munna Singh Chauhan’s wife won from Kalsi block in Dehradun; and Samajwadi Party national general secretary Vinod Barthwal’s wife Abha won from Raipur block in Dehradun. State Sports Minister Rajinder Singh Bhandari’s wife

Rajni Bhandari also emerged victorious from Salna Block in Chamoli district.

Another positive aspect of the panchayat elections was the largescale participation of locals, with a voter turnout of over 70 per cent. In some villages

which had not more than 20 households, there were about seven candidates.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express, September 18, 2008)

Panchayat urged to revive paddy fields

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Minister for Agriculture Mullakkara Ratnakaran on Tuesday urged the Kudappanakkunu grama panchayat to revive the paddy fields in its locality and to kindle a love for farming in the minds of children.

Mr. Ratnakaran was speaking at Government Upper Primary School, Kudappanakkunnu, after inaugurating a vegetable farming project at the school. He also issued identity cards to members of the 'Karshika Karma Sena,' a project launched by the panchayat's Krishibhavan to address the acute shortage of agricultural labour in the region.

While referring to Kerala's dependency on neighbouring States for vegetables, Mr. Ratnakaran alleged that most of the vegetables that reached the State were pesticide laden. "Unfortunately, we do not have the technology to ascertain the amount of pesticide in them," he said. "The situation can be addressed only by instilling a love for farming in the minds of the future generation."

According to Mr. Ratnakaran, even the student-teacher relationship in schools had soured owing to a lack of love for farming. Farming had a humanising effect on those who engaged in it, he said. "Parents should take the lead in instilling a love for farming in the minds of the students," he added.

The Agricultural Minister recalled a "friendship-chain" that prevailed in villages in olden days that effectively addressed some of the basic requirements of the people. "It was a unique marketing system that relied on mutual trust and

friendship wherein the residents of a village shared the fruits of their labour with the neighbours."

However, the proportion of people turning away from agriculture was growing. If this trend continued, the State's agricultural production would be wiped out in the next 10 to 20 years.

Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs M. Vijayakumar who presided over the meeting described it as a "shame" to rely on neighbouring States for vegetables. At a time when there was a lot of meaningless debate over the content of the Class VII textbook, the focus of discussion should have been ideally agriculture and students, he said.

The Karshika Karma Sena' launched by the panchayat has 25 agricultural technicians who are trained in using modern agricultural devices such as the power tiller, brush cutter, soil digger and sprayer. "The karma sena was started as a means to combat the intense labour shortage in the region," said C.L. Mini, Agricultural Officer, Kudappanakkunnu panchayat. "The cost of cultivation can be brought down significantly by using agricultural technicians," she added. The technicians assist interested clients right from selecting a plot for farming to marketing the produce.

The inaugural function was also attended by B. Sudhakaran Nair, president, Kudappanakkunnu grama panchayat; B. Subhash, vice-president; and K.K. Gangadharan, director, Department of Agriculture.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, July 09, 2008)

Village panchayats to receive more funds

T. Ramakrishnan

CHENNAI: Village panchayats will get at least 30 per cent more funds during the 11th Plan period (2007-2012) than the allocation in the previous Plan period (2002-2007).

This is one of the prescriptions of the State Planning Commission in the 11th Plan document. Among other prescriptions are employment to 30 per cent of households registered under the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, increasing the participation of people in gram sabha meetings by 20 per cent, dynamic online data transfer, at least in select programmes, from block to district and establishment of data bank of all self-help groups.

The Commission also stated that at the end of the Plan period, every village panchayat should be provided with at least one drinking water source, one pucca school building with electricity supply, a library, a village sports centre, streetlights and Internet connectivity.

As for improving the flow of funds, Since 2007-2008, the State Government has been allotting the XII Finance Commission's entire grant (for improving water supply, sanitation and streetlights) only to village panchayats that are being given Rs. 174 crore a year. Earlier, the grant was shared between village panchayats and panchayat unions in the ratio of 80:20.

The State Planning Commission's document said the pattern of devolution was proposed to be modified slightly, with more money going to village panchayats. The 9 per cent allocation would be divided between rural local bodies and urban local bodies in the ratio of 58:42. The allocation for rural local bodies was being distributed among village

panchayats, panchayat unions and district panchayats in the revised ratio of 60:32:8 during the 11th Plan period. That means village panchayats will get nearly Rs. 480 crore, panchayat unions Rs. 256 crore and district panchayats Rs. 64 crore.

The document said the devolution would be progressively increased to 10 per cent over the Plan period. The rise of one per cent will mean an increase of Rs. 360 crore over the previous allocation of Rs. 1,225 crore. Renovation and repairs will be carried in all schools maintained by rural local bodies. To improve study environment, the schools will be given electricity connections. A sum of Rs. 675 crore has been earmarked for this purpose from the devolutionary grant to local bodies. To encourage public-private partnership, the State proposes to introduce an award scheme for corporate houses that take up social responsibility activities.

Under the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the expenditure over the Plan period will be around Rs. 850 crore, with a generation of 750 lakh mandays. As for sanitation, a multimedia campaign will be launched this year to change the sanitation practices of rural people and generate demand for individual household toilets.

An outlay of Rs.13,467 crore has been proposed for rural development. The State's share will be Rs. 10,241.28 crore and the Centre will chip in with Rs. 3,226.05 crore. In the 10th Plan period, the expenditure stood at Rs. 6,242.41 crore against the outlay of Rs. 5,540.46 crore.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, July 09, 2008)

E-governance

KOLKATA: In order to extend e-governance to all gram panchayats, West Bengal state government would be providing computers to all 3,354 gram

panchayats in the state within 2009. A set of computer is essential in every gram panchayat as the state panchayat and rural development

department will install software like Gram Panchayat Management System (GPMS) and Integrated Fund Monitoring and Accounting System (IFMAS). The software has already been installed in the computers of 1300 gram panchayats, 18

zilla parishads and 225 panchayat samities. An amount of Rs 5 crore has been allocated for the project.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, September 16, 2008)

Gram Panchayat constituencies to stay for two terms

Karnataka State government proposes to reserve the constituencies of grama panchayat members for two consecutive terms, according to Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Shobha Karandlaje.

Replying to the issue of strengthening panchayat bodies raised by Dr. M.P. Nadagouda (Janata Dal – United) under Rule 330 in the Council on Friday, Karandlaje said the step was being contemplated in view of complaints that majority of members were not caring for the development of constituencies due to change of reservation after every single term.

The government also proposed to set up grama samitis consisting eminent persons of villages to monitor development activities. Similar bodies will be set up at district levels also.

The Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj also said the government would take steps to release grants to the panchayat bodies every quarter instead of at the fag end year and carry out social auditing.

Earlier raising the issue Dr. Nadagouda urged the government to focus on the development of select grama panchayats instead of allotting its funds equally to all panchayats.

“Once you fully develop the select panchayats, you can shift your focus in other constituencies”, he added.

(Courtesy: Deccan Herald, August 2, 2008)

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Test the quality of drinking water in your village

Kits being supplied to gram panchayats in the State to examine water purity

Shankar Bennur

In an effort to create awareness among the people in rural areas about the quality of drinking water, the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj has launched an ambitious project – National Rural Drinking Water Quality Monitoring and Surveillance Programme – in Karnataka.

The programme is being implementing through the zilla panchayats and five educated persons in each gram panchayat are being trained on testing the quality of potable water with the help of kits procured from Maharashtra. Each gram panchayat will get one kit containing items useful for examining the contents of fluoride, iron and magnesium in water.

The objective of the programme is to educate the residents of villages on the methods of keeping water pure and clean at home. Besides, they will be made to understand that unhygienic conditions around the drinking water borewells and other water sources will naturally lead to contamination.

In Mysore district, the programme is being implemented in 250 gram panchayats and the zilla panchayat is coordinating it jointly with the gram panchayats GPS. Zilla panchayat Executive Engineer Venkatesh told the Hindu that kits,

which contains some chemicals useful for checking 14 parameters of water quality, were being distributed to the gram panchayats and five persons from each panchayat were being trained on testing the purity of water,. “The kit will remain with the gram panchayat which can use the services of the trained villagers as and when required”, Mr. Venkatesh said.

He said 250 tests could be done using each kit and the quality indicators found during the tests were on par with the tests done in the zilla panchayat’s district laboratory here. “The tests using kits are as accurate. The accuracy rate is good. If water contamination is found, the results and the samples will be sent to us in Mysore for further tests and removing contamination at source,” he said.

According to the sources in the department, the programme was launched to ensure good health of residents of villages since water contamination resulted in serious health disorders. For this reason and to ensure that adequate quantity of quality of drinking water was available to everyone in the village on a sustained basis, the programme was launched, they add.

The common complaints are of fluoride content

in water since majority of villages are dependent on ground water for drinking purpose. At the same time, there could some other reasons for contamination, which the village people should keep in mind to protect their health, the sources said.

The programme will educate people on the causes of water contamination and make them aware of the methods of eliminating the impurities.

“It will also educate them on the methods of keeping water pure and clean at home”, the sources said.

Strip test reveals bacteria content whereas ph paper is useful in knowing the ac acidity and alkalinity of drinking water. These tests can be

carried out in home itself. The programme educates the rural people on simple tests.

Mr. Venkatesh said contaminated water was again subjected to further tests to eliminate impurities. Each gram panchayat would act as a unit of the district laboratory because of the kit, he added.

The zilla panchayat had roped in Myrada, an NGO to conduct training for the select persons from the gram panchayats on testing the water. It has signed, a MoU with the NGO, he added.

Besides distributing the kits, literature on testing the quality of water was also being distributed to the panchayats, he said.

(The Hindu, November 7, 2008)

Work begins on Gurgaon’s first solid waste unit

The municipal corporations of Gurgaon and Fardiabad and the National Building Constructions Corporation (NBCC) finally commenced work on Gurgaon’s very first solid waste management facility in Bandhwari village, just off the Gurgaon-Faridabad Road under heavy police presence on Tuesday. Fearing fierce opposition from locals, police fortified the site.

The 30.5-acres site is land that belonged to the panchayat of Badhwari and was acquired by the Haryana government. But the panchayat did not accept the award of Rs 7.7 crore and opposed the plant fearing it would cause stink and pollution.

Rajiv Sharma, municipal commissioner of Gurgaon, claimed the plant that had already received clearance from the Environment Ministry and Pollution Control Board would be a state-of-the-art facility and would not cause ill odour or pollution.

“The ultramodern facility will take about nine months to complete. According to consultants

NBCC, the inert material left for dumping will be merely 15 per cent of the total garbage treated. The rest will be utilised. NBCC told us a plant on the same technology is functioning in Rajkot. People even go for outings there, have beer in the green belt around it.”

According to officials, the plant will have a daily capacity of 1000 tonnes of garbage and would be surrounded by a green stretch. It will cater to the needs of both Faridabad and Gurgaon and the expenditure is to be borne by the Faridabad Municipal Corporation. Earlier the plan was to set up a separate solid waste management plant for Faridabad for which NBCC was appointed consultant. The site was just 7 km away from the current one.

But after Hindustan Times highlighted the plight of DLF City (Phase I) residents with garbage being dumped illegally near their locality and prominently published that Gurgaon lacked a solid waste management plant in its ‘Gurgaon Collapsing’ series, the state government decided

to develop the facility jointly by the corporations of Gurgaon and Faridabad. The development time was reduced from two years to nine months as NBCC had better technology.

Yet, villagers do not seem convinced. Surajpal, Badhwari's village chief, said officials took

control of the site, drawing away villagers on some pretext. "All passages to the site were heavily manned by police. We will decide a course of action tomorrow," he said.

(The Hindustan Times, December 17, 2008)

Panel to study Indrayani pollution

PUNE: The Save Indrayani Action Committee (SAC), comprising environment groups and warkaris, has decided to conduct a detailed study on the causes of pollution of the Indrayani River and support the local civic bodies take preventive measures with the help of the state government.

The action committee, which met at the temple town of Dehu on Thursday, decided to form different groups which will study the river from its origin near Lonavla to right up to where it joins the Bhima River.

Speaking to TOI, convenor of the action committee Vikas Patil said the study groups which consist of experts will document the reasons of pollution by clicking pictures, preparing short films and by collecting water samples. The study is expected to be completed by March next year. The report and the demands would then be submitted to the state government as also to government bodies, like the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board and the Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation.

He admitted that local civic bodies such as the Lonavla Municipal Council, the Vadgaon Gram Panchayat, the Talegaon Municipal Council and

the Dehu Gram Panchayat do not have necessary facilities to treat domestic effluents which get released in the river directly. However, he added, the action committee would assist the civic bodies in setting up these essential facilities with the help of the state government.

"We are not going to agitate against the civic bodies, but will try to help them out by getting in the required funds. We also want to create public awareness regarding river pollution," he said.

Another study group would be examining geographical details of the river, its original width and the changes that have happened over time, he added.

While 19 environment groups attended the meeting on Thursday, he said more groups and citizens have expressed their desire to join in. According to Patil, the committee would also initiate a similar movement in relation to the pollution of the Pavana River, as well as the Mula and Mutha rivers. The committee would also take up issues regarding air pollution, he added.

(The Times of India, December 27, 2008)

Parties to decide on structure of Panchayat Raj

The State Government will elicit the views of all political parties on whether to retain the existing three tier panchayat raj system, or to go for the earlier two-tier system. If a consensus emerges

on adopting two-tier system, the State will recommend it to the Union government, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Shobha Karandlaje of Karnataka said here on Monday.

Speaking to reporters, she said a section of people involved in rural development are of the view that the three tier system with Zilla, Taluk and Gram Panchayats – is not effective.

“They are saying that the earlier two tier system – with Zilla and Gram Panchayats – was most suited for effective administration”, she added.

Most of the programmes and schemes of the Union and State Governments get distributed between the Zilla and Gram Panchayats. Hence, taluk panchayats do not get much.

“We should either strengthen the taluk panchayats, or switch back to the two tier system, the Minister stated.

Under the present circumstances, the State Government is planning to strengthen taluk

panchayats. Works that do not get proper attention at the Zilla Panchayat level, will be handed over to Taluk Panchayats, she said.

Pending power bills

The Rural Development department has arrears of Rs.1,110 crore to be paid to electricity supply companies towards power bills.

The Rural Development department has asked the Government to waive off the arrears, Karandlaje said.

She also informed that the State Government has asked the Centre to allow it to make use of funds from the national employment guarantee scheme, for construction of toilets in the rural areas.

(Deccan Herald, October 21, 2008)

“Set right flaws in Panchayat System”

Decentralisation yet to be achieved in letter and in spirit, say participants in a workshop held in Bangalore.

Karnataka may have the distinction of being a success story in implementing the Panchayat Raj system. However, decentralization is yet to be achieved in letter and in spirit, even in Karnataka, 15 years after the three tier panchayat system was ushered in after an amendment to the Constitution.

Consider this: Karnataka is among the many States that are yet to constitute the District Planning Authority to decentralize the planning process as mandated by the Constitution amendment. And the State Panchayat Council, formed under the chairmanship of the chief Minister with a mandate to meet twice every year, has met no more than twice in 15 years.

C. Narayanswamy, former MLA and member of the Central Advisory Board of the Union Ministry of Panchayat Raj, highlighted some of these facts

at a daylong seminar on “Where is Panchayat Raj Headed in Karnataka?” He said that the proposal of the Karnataka Government to set up a vigilance committee to monitor gram panchayats could further erode the purpose of Panchayati Raj governance.

L.C. Jain, former member of the Planning Commission, said the implementation of the Panchayat Raj system is flawed even at the all-India level, with the Union Government taking no initiative towards decentralization.

He pointed out that the report of the parliamentary standing committee submitted on the implementation of Panchayat Raj System had stated that there was “willful defiance” in implementing the Constitutional mandate. But five years after the submission of the report, nothing had been done about setting the system in order. He said that out of the total annual allocation of Rs.72,000 crore for 29 panchayat subjects, Rs.40,00 crore was retained by the

Centre and the rest distributed to States for disbursement.

The seminar was organised by Bharatiya Vidya

Bhavan, Karnataka Panchayat Parishat and Samagra Grameena Abhivrudhi Samsthe.

(*The Hindu*, November 11, 2008)

Right to recall exists for local bodies

It was a simple question: Should Indians have the right to reject or recall legislators? *Hindustan Times* carried it and an accompanying story in its Delhi edition dated December 4, 2008 and on www.hindustantimes.com, their online edition. The answers, they figured, would tell us something about the popular mood regarding politicians.

The responses poured in — from across India and also from the Indian diaspora across the world. Readers were near unanimous in their view: Yes, Indians should have the right to reject or recall their elected representatives. Politicians, expectedly, reacted by saying: “It’s impossible in a multi-party set-up.”

It isn’t, actually. There is a little known provision, Section 49-O of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, that allows voters the right to go to polling booths, get their fingers marked, and then inform the returning officer that they don’t wish to cast their votes. The law, however, does not give voters the right to recall MPs and MLAs.

But Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have provisions in the laws governing their local bodies that allow people to recall representatives if more than 50 per cent of the electorate so desire.

In Chhattisgarh, villagers used this provision in June and August and recalled four panchayat presidents — for the first time in this country. A simple ballot paper with two symbols, an empty chair and an occupied one, was used for the referendum. Voters in Gundardehi and Nawagarh in Durg district, Rajpur in Surguja district and Kusum Nagar in Raipur district recalled their

panchayat presidents through such referendums.

Incidentally, Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee has advocated the “right to recall” to ensure accountability of Lok Sabha members. “When there are provisions in the Constitution for removing people holding high offices, why should there be a strict five-year term for legislators?” he asks. Law minister H.R. Bhardwaj could not be contacted for his comments.

But political parties, otherwise so fractious and noisy about their “ideological differences”, are unanimous in their opposition to this suggestion. Jayanti Natarajan, senior Congress leader, said: “I don’t know what my party’s stand is. But personally, I don’t agree with the EC’s recommendations (that ballot papers have a column saying “none of the above”). In a democratic set-up, it’s meaningless to say ‘None of the above’. People should exercise their right to franchise.”

The Congress’s ideological opponent, the BJP, is of the same view. Its vice-president, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, said: “It isn’t feasible in an era of coalitions when regional forces are becoming more powerful.”

The Left, too, dittoed the views of the two national parties, but, expectedly, justified political expediency with moral rhetoric. CPI(M) MP and politburo member Brinda Karat cited its “misuse by money powers against an honest village pradhan” to justify caution. “We have provisions for no confidence motions in the parliamentary system—they are similar to right to recall. You can’t have a piecemeal approach to electoral

reforms. It won't help," she said.

Meanwhile, the Association for Democratic Reforms, which is spearheading the movement to amend the law to give Indians this right, will

launch a national campaign on electoral reforms from Mumbai in January.

(The Hindustan Times, December 6, 2008)

RP 2021 still confuses citizens

PANAJI: Despite the government proclaiming "transparency" in the process of finalising the draft Regional Plan 2021, citizens continue to face difficulties in interpreting the settlement plan. The difficulties, compounded by errors in the plan, are such that some citizens are getting suspicious that the government is actually trying to hide and subvert the planning process.

Some citizens from Pilerne-Marra have sent a written complaint to the town and country planning (TCP) department asking how "no development" slopes in their village have been shown as settlement zones. Interestingly, an area shown green (orchard/hill slope) in survey number 206/2 even in the latest RP 2021 has a building coming up on it.

Residents said that the Pilerne gram sabha has passed a resolution to protect the area around the Sawlem Lake but the village panchayat and the TCP have given permission for the building.

Even more interesting is that the file pertaining to the building has gone missing from the TCP, a Pilerne resident said. The citizens had applied for the file under the Right to Information Act.

In another development, on December 20 the Pilerne village panchayat reportedly sent notices to selected residents stating that the last date for submitting suggestions to the RP 2021 is December 23. This was done even though the government had extended the last date to February 15, 2009.

They are even more perplexed why the four-colour map of many villages in Bardez remained

locked up in the office of the Bardez block development officer until recently. "The map was released only recently. It looks like an attempt to subvert the planning process," said a Pilerne local.

Similar suspicions have cropped up in Calangute. Even as the village panchayat and residents were studying the RP 2021 given to them around November 22, the panchayat received another plan on December 17. This plan had blue patches on it which residents believe are industrial estates. Even though officials of the TCP have clarified on those doubts, Calangute sarpanch Joseph Sequeira said many misunderstandings persist. He has now organised a meeting of the village committee on January 8.

Anjuna locals will meet TCP officials on Monday to clarify various discrepancies in the plan. "Settlement areas are shown as orchards and actual orchards are shown as settlement areas," said Anjuna sarpanch Sandeep Chimulkar.

Surprisingly, Chimulkar claims he has not received the questionnaire that was supposed to be distributed to the people to elicit their views. "We have not received any questionnaire" he said.

Each member of the 16-member Aldona village committee for RP 2021 has been asked to study certain chapters of the plan. The members will first discuss the plan and then meet on January 4.

Said Aldona sarpanch Monica Rocha, "If need be, we will request the TCP representative to come to our village and sort out the difficulties.

But Rocha also confirms errors in the Aldona plan. In some places orchards have been shown as settlement and in other places, bridges, ponds and khazan land have not been marked.

But overall, Rocha is happy with the process. "We have not only involved professionals but also elders and farmers," said.

(The Times of India, December 29, 2008)

Clean habits help win award

Jamshedpur: People of East Singhbhum district are a proud lot. For the second consecutive year the district has bagged the Nirmal Gram Award for successful implementation of Total Sanitation Campaign. Successfully adhering to basic sanitation and cleanliness guidelines of the government, 13 panchayats of East Singhbhum district have received this award. Last year, seven panchayats of the district were appreciated for promoting rural sanitation.

Remarkable it may seem but all the 13 panchayats of Ghatshila block have received the award. Therefore the officials of Devnet, the support agency for the Total Sanitation Campaign in the state, have nominated Ghatshila for Nirmal Gram block-level award.

"All the 13 panchayats falling under Ghatshila block have been declared Nirmal Gram this year by the drinking water supply department of Union government. So we have nominated Ghatshila block. If Ghatshila bags the award, it will be state's first Nirmal block honour. We are awaiting the results," said secretary of Devnet Amrendra Singh.

The Centre launched the Nirmal Gram Puraskar in 2002 with the objective to promote rural sanitation and to reward gram panchayats, panchayat samitis, zila panchayat, individuals and institutions for their sustained efforts towards achieving this goal. Depending on the population, the incentive amount varies between Rs 50,000 to Rs 50 lakh.

"Jharkhand started late and last year itself it

bagged the award. In one year we have made tremendous progress across the state and the results are showing," said Singh, adding he is satisfied with the overall performance of the state.

Twenty-two panchayats of the state have received the award of the 142 nominations from Jharkhand.

Similarly, 13 panchayats from the same sub-division have bagged the Nirmal gram award this year. Two of the panchayats are located in Dhalbhumgarh while rest is in Patamda, Chakulia, Bahragora, Dumaria, Musabani, Potka and Jugsalai.

"Our aim was to ensure all the household have a toilet and adhere to basic sanitation under the Total Sanitation Campaign. In East Singhbhum only we came up with about 21,000 toilets in various blocks for BPL (below poverty line) and APL (above poverty line) families. We also ensured that all the schools, colleges and Anganwadi centres follow the sanitation guidelines. The same process was carried in other parts of the state," said Singh.

The Total Sanitation Campaign encompasses personal hygiene and home sanitation like building latrines, using toilet soaps and nail cutters as well as cattle trough and safe food apart from regular cleaning of toilets. The award would be given by the President of India at a ceremony. The date of the programme is yet to be announced.

(The Telegraph, October 13, 2008)

Recognising start innovators

Google announces Gram Panchayat Puraskar

Google.org, the philanthropic arm of Google, has announced the Gram Panchayat Puraskar. The award, instituted under the “Inform and Empower Initiative” of Google. Org, will recognize the best innovations in local governance by five gram panchayats each in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Salimah Samji, Programme Manager, Google.org, told the Hindu here on Thursday that this initiative was the first of its kind by Google in India and provided panchayats an opportunity to showcase their innovative work in villages, and emerge as the start innovators of their respective States.

“Quality of public services is vital for the well-being of society. By awarding the gram panchayats and recognising the good work, we hope to trigger positive change and inspire other gram panchayats to take up initiatives,” she said.

27,000 villages

The competition will cover over 27,000 villages and 49 districts in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Gram Panchayats will be evaluated on the basis of various criteria, including empowerment, innovation and scale. The innovation needs to be in the context of education, health and nutrition, water supply, rural infrastructure or resource mobilisation.

Ms. Samji, said that gram panchayats would have to demonstrate inclusion of all social and income groups in the village decision making or planning,

sharing information with villagers, record maintenance and panchayat plan, community tracking and monitoring of budgets and quality of programmes and working with other programmes to reach development objectives.

“Panchayats create positive change at the grassroots, but their success stories are not known. For example, in Kerala, a panchayat ensured that the entire village was literate; in Thar district of Rajasthan, a panchayat converted the area into a tourist destination, thereby increasing income. We want to celebrate innovative panchayats and create incentives to further innovation in local governance throughout the country”.

The rules

The competition will be on till January 25, with one entry form per gram panchayat being accepted,. It should be in any one of the four languages – Kannada, Telugu, Hindi or English. All legally recognized gram panchayats in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are eligible to apply. A panel of public sector experts in India will select a total of 20 finalists from each State. A separate panel will select the five winners in each of the States, who will receive Rs.5 lakh.

Details are available at the district and block panchayat offices and in panchayat magazines and newsletters. For more details, visit www.google.org/ggpp.html.

(*The Hindu*, December 13, 2008)

Kids’ Grama Sabhas are catching up

Kavita Ratna

When the rural development and Panchayat Raj department issued a circular two years ago,

making it mandatory for all elected members of gram panchayats to conduct `Children’s Grama

Sabhas' to 'listen' to the young citizens once a year and be accountable to them, it was a time for celebration for those of us who have been advocating for children's 'right to be heard' for decades.

Other than casting votes, the Grama Sabha of a panchayat is the only political space available for its citizens to participate in a democratic manner to plan and monitor the development of their village. Until now, Grama Sabhas like most other public spaces have been denied to children. Hence the decision by the department to recognize the citizenship of children and to place their rights at the centre of local governance is worthy of emulation worldwide.

Unfortunately during the past two years – the state did not take necessary steps to build the capacities of panchayat members, the bureaucracy and civil society organisations to ensure that the space provided for the participation of children in local governance was used optimally. Hence, only a small percentage of local governments help Children's Grama Sabhas, that too in a very superficial manner.

Last year the Concerned for Working children (CWC) facilitated Children's Grama Sabhas in 56 panchayats, where over 20,000 children took part.

After much insistence, this year, the state sought the support of CWC and the Child Right Trust to design and conduct a three phase 'capacity building programme' for members of grama panchayats and all other stakeholders with the support of the Abdul Nazir Sab Institute of Rural Development (ANSIRED), Mysore. The first training of this series concluded last week, where

25 representatives from nine districts and 55 children from Harohalli took part. The highlight of this programme was that the entire process of preparing for and conducting an Children's Grama Sabha was inbuilt into the design to provide the trainees with a real hands on experience of all the principles, ethics, process and logistics involved in 'listening' to children's concerns and aspirations.

In addition to capacity building, the media campaign of the department is reaching the concept of Children's Grama Sabhas to every corner of the state.

One of the challenges the Children's Grama Sabha will face is from adults, who may try to usurp the space that has been provided for children. This is even more likely to happen where adults are not making the use of their own spaces to impact on local government. Both children and supportive adults will have to guard against this kind of manipulation.

Children always aim to use spaces, constructively. They avoid confrontation and always seek win win solutions. This is a value adult politics is urgently in need of.

Processes such as the Children's Grama Sabhas that evoke the true spirit of Grama Swaraj by creating a generation of empowered youngsters have an important role to play to counter the well orchestrated and persistent moves from the higher powers to curtail the scope and strength of local governments.

(Deccan Herald, December 9, 2008)

Land right for forest dwellers

Sukumar Mahato

MIDNAPORE: The idea is noble though the timing has political connotations. Forest dwellers

of Bengal will get rights of the forest land under their possession. Rattled with the rising

discontent among the Adivasis in the forest areas of South and North Bengal, the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government is working on the Scheduled Tribe and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (recognition of forest rights) Act 2006, nearly a year after it was notified by the Centre in January 2008.

As part of the ground work, backward classes welfare department officials in West Midnapore reached out to the trouble-torn hamlets of Amlasole, Amjharna and Kankrajhore on Friday to verify the applications that had poured in at the district office months ago. Binpur-II BDO Bhaskar Pal chose this area because Amlasole hit the headlines after a villager starved to death there in 2004.

Better late than never. Apart from Amlasole, the department is examining around 48,000 applications from the forest dwellers in West Midnapore. The government has been sitting on the applications because of the panchayat polls, and woke up to the cause at the prodding of the Prime Minister, who believes that the central Act will help states address the problems of aggrieved tribals who are being used by the Maoists.

"We've received 83 applications from Amlasole and about 250 from the adjacent Amjharna and Kankrajhore. A total of 23,000 applications have been submitted in Jhargram subdivision. True, we made a late start (in October) and could not make any progress due to the prolonged agitation in the Jangalmahal," said Tanmoy Chakraborty, subdivisional development officer, Jhargram.

The district administration has set up 750 forest rights committees that will scrutinize the applications after making a survey of the forest

land. Tribal families have to declare that they have been residing in the forests for at least five years and specify the quantum of land under their possession.

Non-tribal forest dwellers, however, are not so lucky. These families will have to declare that they have been living in the forests for at least three generations (75 years). All these applications have to be endorsed by the local panchayat and beat officers.

"We have verified 10,000 applications already and forest dwellers are likely to be the rightful owners of the land by January, 2009" district magistrate Narayan Swaroop Nigam said. Each of the beneficiaries will get a certificate, recognising their right to forest land signed by the district magistrate, divisional forest officer, and district project officer of the backward class welfare department. And like the patta-holders in agricultural lands, the beneficiaries will enjoy the right to the specified forest land for generations, but can't sell the land.

The Maoist-led Committee against Police Atrocities was quick to turn the tide against the government. "We have lost faith in the Left Front government. It sat upon the applications for one year and is expediting the process after the tribals started the movement in Lalgah," said Jharkhand Party (Naren) MLA Chunibala Hansda.

The state department has done a similar survey in the forest areas of north Bengal and left it to the forest department and the backward class welfare department to start the process in the Dooars.

(The Times of India, December 27, 2008)

Villagers fear abuse of forest rights act

The fear of abuse of the forest rights legislation was evident at a rally held today in Ranchi, Jharkhand. The participants complained that the

state government was not only slow in the implementation of the act, but it was also avoiding the participation of the villagers in the

process, as prescribed by the legislation.

“The officials should take into account the opinion of the villagers in formulating the list of beneficiaries of the forest Act. This is not happening. People fear that genuine candidates would be left out and fake people would become beneficiaries of this Act,” said Sanjay Basu Mullick, convener of Jharkhand Jangal Bachao Andolan (JJBA), the organisers of the rally.

Thousands of tribals and traditional forest dwellers came from various parts of the state to voice their concern over the implementation of the Act. Forest right activists from other states also joined the rally.

Jharkhand is the only state in the country, which is yet to implement the forest Act. Absence of panchayat bodies, which were necessary for the implementation of the Act, made the state government wait for legal clearance. However, recently the Union law ministry cleared the hurdle saying that in the absence of elected

panchayat bodies the traditional tribal organisations would be taken as gram sabhas. The state government then decided to implement the act from October.

The former Ranchi University vice-chancellor Ram Dayal Munda also participated in the demonstration.

Chief minister Shibu Soren and welfare minister Joba Manjhi had promised the villagers to join today’s rally and hear their complaints. But none of them turned up.

Meanwhile, Tribal welfare commissioner Sunil Kumar Barnwal, also the nodal officer appointed by the government to implement the Act, said: “We have started the implementation of the Act in the right spirit. Village level forest committees are being formed. After this, the claim forms would be distributed among the villagers.”

(The Telegraph, November 17, 2008)

Panchayat asks man to go on pilgrimage to atone for rape bid

In a bizarre order, a village panchayat has directed a 65 year old man to go on a pilgrimage as punishment for attempting to rape a minor at a village in Uttar Pradesh’s Barabank district, about 30 kms from here. The alleged culprit Guru Deen has been ordered to go to the famous Hindu pilgrimage centre, Naimisharnya in the neighbouring Sitapur district, where, according to the Hindu mythology, the epic Ramacharitmanas was penned by Tulsidas.

The panchayat has also directed Guru Deen to host a Brahmin-bhoj (feast for Brahmins) in Maui village, to which he belongs, as a penance after his return.

“Guru Deen not only confessed to the allegations but also happily accepted the Panchayat’s verdict and put his thumb impression on the papers

containing the directives,” One of the members of the panchayats told Deccan Herald on Saturday.

He said the Guru Deen barged into the house of a villager on Tuesday and tried to molest a minor while her parents had gone to a nearby market. The girl, however shouted for help and Guru Deen was caught before he could succeed in outraging her modesty.

The girl’s parents wanted to lodge a complaint with the police, but the village panchayat persuaded them against doing so and held a hearing in which the punishment was pronounced. “A visit to a pilgrimage will certainly rid Guru Deen of the sin and he will never do anything immoral in future again,” Singh said justifying the panchayat order: The panchayat has given time till November 10 for complying with the

orders, failing which a police complaint would be lodged against Guru Deen, he said.

Sub-divisional magistrate Vinod Kumar, however,

said that the panchayat had no right to hear such matters and it should be reported to the police.

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