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## A scene from the South

Karuna Muthiah

A social audit of the NREGA in Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu in July 2007 and a field survey in Surguja district in Chhattisgarh in June 2008, conducted as part of the six-States survey, brought out to this writer the contrasts between Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu.

In Chhattisgarh there were many lapses in implementation, including the involvement of contractors, the fudging of muster rolls, corruption in material usage, low scale of work, and delays in wage payment.

Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, has taken measures to address these problems. It has successfully kept out machines and contractors through close monitoring and strict action against any breach of the ban on both under the NREGA.

Another reason for Tamil Nadu's success is the stipulation (under Tamil Nadu's "employment guarantee scheme") that only works devoid of any material component be taken up. (The Act allows up to 40 per cent expenditure on material costs.) The material component tends to give private contractors a foothold as they provide engineering expertise the gram panchayats may not have. The possibility of doing away with the material component arises partly from the fact that Tamil

Nadu has a vast network of canals and other traditional water-harvesting structures. The repair and maintenance of these structures is a vast source of useful, labour-intensive work.

If the Act requires that at least 50 per cent of the works to be taken up by gram panchayats, the Tamil Nadu "employment guarantee scheme" stresses that all NREGA works be managed by gram panchayats. In Chhattisgarh, there is more reliance on the line departments (for example, the Irrigation Department or the Forest Department), which tend to be less accountable than gram panchayats. Tamil Nadu also avoids delays in wage payment by a well-rehearsed routine of payment on a fixed day every week. In Chhattisgarh, by contrast, delays in wage payments cause great hardship to workers, to the extent that some of them have given up NREGA work. In one work implemented by the Forest Department in Udaipur block, people had not been paid for almost a year.

Tamil Nadu has put in place a good monitoring system. For instance, every worker is required to put his signature or thumb impression on the muster roll every day (by way of marking attendance), making it difficult to fudge muster rolls. The employment guarantee assistant

("Makkal Nalla Panniyalar") in each gram panchayat is expected to phone the block office every day before 10 a.m. to report worksite attendance figures. This information is immediately collated at the district level and officials from different departments do random checks the same day to verify these reports.

In Chhattisgarh, there was no regular monitoring of muster rolls or worksite attendance. At many worksites, the official muster rolls were not available. In Kedma panchayat of Udaipur block, our survey found that more than half of all entries in one set of muster rolls of a completed worksite were fake.

In Tamil Nadu a strong message has been sent from the top that NREGA works are unlike other schemes and that corruption will not be tolerated. This has been done by taking strict action against panchayat presidents, employment guarantee assistants and block development officers who have been found guilty of major fraud. The seeds of such a change could be seen in Chhattisgarh: on the basis of a social audit in Mareya panchayat in June 2008, a complaint was lodged with the district authorities and strict action was taken.

To be sure, Tamil Nadu has its own set of problems, including politicisation and some corruption in NREGA works, conflicts over non-payment of minimum wages, low worker productivity, lack of worksite facilities, unmet demand for work and lack of community monitoring. Nevertheless, Tamil Nadu has achieved some success in providing employment on a large scale, paying wages on time and avoiding mass corruption.

Another special feature of the NREGA in Tamil Nadu is that an overwhelming majority (about 80 per cent) of NREGA workers are women. Most of them have no comparable work opportunities in the private sector.

Indeed, Tamil Nadu's strong tradition of active involvement in the social sector is finding a new expression through the NREGA. There is much to learn from this experience, just as Tamil Nadu itself has much to learn from pioneering experiences elsewhere.

*(Frontline: Vol. 26: 01, 03-16 January, 2009)*

## Women panchayat chiefs seek more power, funds

CHENNAI: More power, more funds for the panchayats — this was the demand of over 350 women panchayat presidents who gathered here on Tuesday for the fourth State-level convention of the Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government.

The Federation demanded that the State increase the devolution of funds to the Panchayat to 18 per cent at least. V. Vasanthi Devi, former chairperson, Tamil Nadu State Women's Commission, speaking at the inaugural session, said that it was a democratic demand that needed to be fulfilled.

According to the Constitution, the Panchayat Government was guaranteed devolution of powers,

financial and administrative reforms on 29 subjects. The State did not conform to this, said A. S. Rajeshwari, a panchayat president from Virudhu Nagar. If the powers were given, "we can take care of all the needs of the panchayat." In the current situation, she was faced with hurdles in every step.

Political parties, who fought for devolution of powers to States, could not refuse devolution of powers to panchayats on a democratic basis, said writer V. Geetha.

Repealing section 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act of 1994, which allowed the removal of a panchayat president by the Collector, was another demand of the Federation. Resolution of gender and

caste discrimination faced by the women panchayat presidents were among the other issues raised by the federation.

A charter of all the demands of the federation was released. This would be taken to various political parties for inclusion in their manifestoes, a spokesperson of the federation said.

U. Vasuki, member of Central Committee, CPI (M), said that her party would take up the issues

presented by the federation. Salma, chairperson, Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board, who represented DMK, said that she would take the demands to the party command.

Silambuselvi, secretary, Pattali Magalir Sangam, Pattali Makkal Katchi, and Jothimani, national secretary, Youth Congress, spoke.

*(The Hindu, 19 March, 2009)*

## Woman sarpanch rides cart to check pollution

Riyan Ramanath V

**BALANGIR:** At a time when pollution is a burning issue, our politicians should take a cue from this woman sarpanch of a back of beyond village in the district. In order to save fuel and money and check air pollution, she has chosen to use a horse-drawn cart to move around the villages in her panchayat area although she is quite capable of riding a car.

Meet Bedamati Majhi (42), sarpanch of Sihini panchayat under Titilagarh block. She has been moving in a horse-drawn cart ever since she was elected in the last three-tier panchayat election two years back. To the surprise of the people of her panchayat, she starts from her home riding the cart everyday and tours the villages. She goes to the panchayat office too in the cart. Quite often, she also brings with her some ward members in the cart to inspire them.

But, how did she hit upon this idea? Her husband had a female horse. When the horse gave birth to a baby horse, she brought up her and after she became

sarpanch, she didn't buy a vehicle like her counterparts. She rather preferred to rear the horse so that it can draw a cart. "I think this is the most convenient medium and everybody in the village should adopt this. I advice not only PR members but also villagers to use a horse-drawn cart," said Bedamati.

She said by riding the cart she is not only saving fuel and money but also protecting the natural environment of the village. "Air pollution is increasing in villages with even lower middle class families buying motorcycles. Cart is cost-saving and environment-friendly," she reasoned.

Her husband also supports her idea and helps her maintain the cart. Ever since she began commuting in cart, she has become a source of inspiration for others in the area.

*(The New Indian Express, 7 January, 2009)*

## Adattu panchayat goes organic

Thrissur: Adattu rice, a branded organic rice cultivated in the kole fields of Adattu panchayat, reached the market on Friday. Adattu panchayat has

received many laurels including six State awards and a national award for its development initiatives.

Speaking after inaugurating the sale, poet Sugathakumari appreciated the efforts of the panchayat. "Owing to use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, even breast milk has been poisoned. Newborns are victims of chronic diseases. The other panchayats in the State should emulate the efforts of Adattu in organic farming", she said.

Adattu panchayat president Anil Akkara said the rice would be available at Rs. 24 a Kg. through its regular outlets at Muthuvara junction and Puzhakkal River Tourism Village. It also would be available at

Kudumbasree outlets at the Thekkinkadu maidan up to Vishu.

"About 3,000 acres of *kole* fields in the Adattu pachayat were using almost one-and-a-half tonnes of Furadan, a highly poisonous pesticide, for each season. Seepage of poisonous water contaminated water sources in the panchayat and caused many diseases. The panchayat started organic farming in 2002," Mr. Akkara said.

*(The Hindu, 15 March, 2009)*

## Task force ignoring comunidade bodies

PANAJI: While the government has involved 189 village panchayats in formulating village level plans, an association of members of 223 comunidade bodies (The Comunidades of Goa are a unique and age-old collective land-ownership pattern that has been predominating in the former Portuguese colony of Goa) has alleged that they have been totally ignored' by the task force in the planning process, though the land in most village panchayats belongs to them.

"Comunidades in Goa are absolute owners of their respective private villages and their existence as well as the nature of contractual relationship with the state, has been ignored by the task force members," Andre Pereira, secretary, Association of Components of Comunidades said.

After liberation, it was a constitutional requirement to form revenue villages. Unfortunately, the government has failed to do this. The TCP has no right to decide the use of land owned by comunidades, the association has pointed out.

"After independence, the Central and state governments have abolished the zamindari system as well as proprietary titles to the land and assumed state landlordism after entering into land tenures (leases) with the holders of the land," Pereira said.

However, task force member secretary S Putturaju denied that comunidades had been excluded from the participatory process. "We have opened the process two ways reaching the public through the village panchayats and also to submit comments directly to the TCP. Also, representatives of comunidades can be included in village committees."

He said citizens can participate at their level, be it a panchayat or municipality. But he declined to comment about the aspect that the Goa government had not fulfilled the constitutional requirement of executing state land tenure contract.

*(The Times of India, 6 January, 2009)*

## DC cracks the whip on GP officials

MANGALORE: Dakshina Kannada deputy commissioner V Ponnuraj warned gram panchayat authorities for turning a blind eye towards violation of Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) Act and

government land encroachments. Such authorities will have to face disciplinary action from the district administration, he asserted.

Inaugurating a training programme and CRZ map distribution ceremony by the Department of Forest, Environment and Ecology here on Tuesday, he said violation of CRZ Act was seen widely in the district and gram panchayat officials were helping the violators.

"The district administration will consider this seriously and gram panchayat officials found guilty in this connection will be suspended and criminal cases booked against them. Already cases have been filed against gram panchayat officials in three incidents where they had helped land grabbers encroach government lands at Manjanady," Ponnuraj said.

Any kind of new development is not possible in CRZ 1 and 2 areas but the rule is being violated in the district. Those who are violating the act are liberally making use of concessions given to the fishermen to protect their interests. Huge investments are being made to buy property belonging to the fishermen, he said citing an instance in Sasihithlu where a building worth about Rs one crore was constructed within 10 meters of the high tide line.

Instructing the gram panchayat officials and other lower level officials to strictly follow the CRZ Act while issuing permits for development works, he said licence should be issued only after obtaining No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the CRZ regional director. Regretting the lack of coordination between different departments in implementing the CRZ Act, Ponnuraj said the Act was not implemented for last 18 years mainly due to lack of clarity among the officials. The officials should make use of the workshop and strive honestly to implement the Act, he said.

Ponnuraj and DK Zilla Panchayat CEO P Shivashankar distributed the CRZ maps to the gram panchayat and other government department officials on the occasion.

H R V Reddy, HoD of fishing environment management, College of Fisheries, Mangalore, stressed the need for organising awareness programmes at the grass root level for the effective implementation of the Act. He observed that lack of information among the common people was the main reason for the violation of the Act in the district.

*(The Times of India, 24 March, 2009)*

## TRIPTI to help empower women

DHENKANAL: While Mission Shakti has empowered women of the state, the Targeted Rural Initiatives for Poverty Termination and Infrastructure (TRIPTI) project aims at promoting sustainable livelihood options and utilisation of financial services for further empowerment of women, said Director, Mission Shakti and TRIPTI project, Usha Padhee.

While interacting with media persons at a two-day workshop on newly-launched TRIPTI project at IIMC here, she pointed out that it is a poverty reduction and livelihood project, which is to be implemented from gram panchayat level to the district-level with emphasis on capacity building.

The project, with the assistance of World Bank, will be implemented in 38 blocks of 10 districts in the State. Padhee informed that the government has earmarked Rs 400 crore for the five-year project. It would be carried out with credit mobilisation through registered gram panchayat-level SHG federation. She said the project is largely process-based than fund-based on non-negotiable principles and in many ways different from other government development projects. "Due stress will be given on the vulnerable groups like the physically challenged and socially backward women," she added.

Assistant Project Director, J.N. Sarangi said TRIPTI would bridge the gap between demand and supply

with active participation of the women folk at the grassroots level.

On the occasion, IIMC's Prof Mrinal Chatterjee spoke on various development and livelihood issues

in the State. IIMC student, Abhaya Nanda Singh was awarded for winning in best punch line writing contest.

*(The New Indian Express, 28 March, 2009)*

## Village women unitedly shut liquor shop through voting

Kolhapur: Women of Nandni village in Shirol tahsil unitedly closed down the liquor shop in their village by raising hands for voting in the village panchayat in the presence of the officers concern.

Nandni village is 40 km away from here and famous for vegetable exports. The women decided to close down the liquor shop in their village under the leadership of woman Sarpanch Suvarna Devkate.

But earlier two attempts were failed due to poor support of women, and this time large number of the women in the village came together and made awareness among village women about the bad effect of liquor.

Leaders of the village and youth supported this campaign. On Tuesday, the village panchayat was organised in the presence of the block development officer (BDO) of Shirol tahsil M R Jadhav, state excise officer (SEO) K T Londe in the village school. At the meeting, out of 4,622 women in village, 3,235 women were present and all unanimously voted by raising hands to close down the liquor shop.

According to the State government rules, if more than 50 per cent of the particular village women vote for closure of liquor shop, then the liquor shop in that village could close down by cancelling its license.

*(DNA Mumbai, 11 February, 2009)*

## Undefined roles overlap work between ZPs, P'yats and MLAs'

Joaquim Fernandes

PANAJI: Thanks to the step-motherly treatment accorded to it by the government, Zilla Panchayats (ZP) in Goa have no powers, no funds and the lack of activity mapping is depriving them of undertaking even the few small projects they work on, ZP officials have alleged.

"Activity mapping is very important," Amol Morajkar, chairperson of the north Goa ZP told TOI on Saturday. "The lack of clearly assigned roles to the village panchayats, zilla panchayats and MLAs is causing overlapping of works. This creates a lot of confusion with more then two wanting to do the same work," she said.

For example, she explained, one north Goa ZP member recently obtained sanction for improving a road in his constituency. But the MLA objected to the ZP doing the work. He said he had already tendered the work for the same road through the PWD. Now the ZP has reliably learnt that no such tender was floated and that the legislator is simply trying to do the work himself for the sake of taking credit.

Similarly, another ZP member in north Goa wanted to undertake the work of constructing gutters in his village. But the village panchayat objected saying it would construct the gutters, alleged Morajkar.

Clefacio Dias, chairperson of south Goa ZP echoed Morajkar's sentiments. "There is a problem mostly with MLAs in at least 30 per cent of the works undertaken by ZPs. The problem arises especially if the MLA perceives the ZP member as being against him. The MLA thinks the ZP member's work will undermine his position."

Dias lamented the lack of powers to ZP bodies. But he hoped the joint representation of both the zilla bodies in Goa to the chief minister will bear fruit.

Morajkar said, "We have long submitted a memorandum to the CM listing our various grievances. Activity mapping is one of our demands. The chief minister has agreed to a joint meeting with both the north and south Goa ZPs shortly. We will press for activity mapping to prevent confusion and confrontation."

Another instance to show how ZPs are not accorded due importance is the neglect of the district planning committees which are chaired by ZP chairpersons. These committees comprise other ZP members, sarpanchas of village panchayats and municipalities' chiefs.

Morajkar said, "Although our district planning committees are gazetted, we are given neither the

required officers nor the funds. Our mandate is to collect village development plans from the village sarpanchas. We have to compile these plans and submit them to the government. But this task needs technical staff which we do not have."

The role of these committees has now come under focus because of a two-day all-India conference on the same to be held in Delhi on January 16, 2009. Goa will be represented at the conference by the chairpersons and chief executive officers of both the ZPs.

Required to make their presentations, the north Goa district planning committee chaired by Morajkar has now called for a series of meetings with sarpanchas, block development officers and municipality chairpersons from north Goa to gather their inputs. With time so short, this is an uphill task, she said.

"The least the government could have done in this regard was to give the district planning committees representation on the task force for the Regional Plan 2021," Morajkar felt. "We were there. But we were neglected," she alleged.

*(The Times of India, 4 January, 2009)*

## Panel favours more funds for panchayat raj institutions

*Third State Finance Commission submits recommendations to the Chief Minister  
Statutory development grants distributed are grossly inadequate  
Rs. 3 lakh recommended as incentive grant to village panchayats*

Bangalore: Chairman of the Third State Finance Commission A.G. Kodgi on Tuesday presented the Commission's final report/recommendations to Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa.

Accompanied by members Mahendra S. Kanthi and T. Thimme Gowda and K.R. Shashidhar, Member Secretary, Mr. Kodgi urged the Chief Minister to part 33 per cent of the State's Net Own Revenue

Receipts with the panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (ULBs) in the ratio 70:30.

The PRIs and ULBs have been recommended 23 per cent and 10 per cent of the above grants, respectively. The commission has said that the statutory development grants distributed was grossly inadequate and its distribution at a flat rate per panchayat was inappropriate.

Selection of indicators and applying weightages thereon for determination of share of each village panchayat would be cumbersome. Instead, the commission recommended a pattern of distribution for statutory development grants to the village panchayats. They were 14 per cent for category I panchayats with population below 4,000, 71 per cent for the category II panchayats with population 4,001 to 8,000 and 15 per cent for the third category with population above 8,000.

The commission has noted the disparities prevailing across the regions of the State, and the findings and recommendations of the Dr. D.M. Nanjundappa Committee report and contemplated additional statutory development grants. The other pattern is a fiscal responsibility- based incentive grant for the better performing village panchayats.

A village panchayat under the category I has been recommended Rs. 9 lakh, a year, while those under

the category II and III would get Rs. 12 lakh and Rs. 15 lakh a year respectively. Similarly, each of the panchayats in all the "most backward taluks" have been recommended Rs. 3 lakh, a year. This is Rs. 2 lakh and Rs.1 lakh, in respect of panchayats in the "more backward taluks" and "backward taluks," as mentioned in the Nanjundappa Committee report.

Mr. Kodgi said that Rs. 3 lakh should be given as incentive grant to a village panchayat every year and Rs. 50 crore should be set apart for it. The commission was of the view that it would be inappropriate and unreasonable to use any indicators and weightage to determine the share of panchayat raj institutions to pay salaries and arrears of pay. In view of this situation, the commission recommended that the salary component of officials working in the PRIs should be delinked while working out the total share of PRIs and ULBs.

*(The Hindu, 2 January, 2009)*

## HIV+ woman elected for panchayat in Tamil Nadu

Sam Daniel

Kodangipatti, Theni District, Tamil Nadu: We've often heard of HIV-positive people being ostracised. But in a refreshing change, people in Tamil Nadu's Kodangipatti village have elected Eswari, who is HIV-positive, to represent them in the local panchayat.

In two years, Eswari has provided the villagers with many basic amenities they were deprived of for years. "She has brought us good roads, drinking water, set right street lamps and has provided us many facilities," said a villager. "We are ready to do anything she asks," said M Thirukannan, president,

Kodangipatti Panchyat.

But behind the lady's confidence lies a tragedy. Two of her children had died of AIDS after she contracted HIV from her husband. The couple and their youngest son are now surviving on anti-retroviral drugs. "We can achieve anything. The fact that despite HIV, I've contested and won, I think it's a big achievement," said Eswari, councillor. Eswari has now dedicated her life for the prevention of HIV.

*(Courtesy: www.ndtv.com, 6 January, 2009)*

## Training programme on solid waste management for panchayat presidents

Pollachi: A training programme on Solid Waste Management for the presidents of village

panchayats was organised at Pollachi Municipality recently



A release from the Municipal Commissioner, K.R. Selvaraj said that solid waste management scheme was being implemented successfully in Pollachi and a ban has been imposed on use of plastics below 20 microns.

Special arrangement has been made to collect the waste from hotels, kalyana mandapams, theatres and hospitals by collecting a service amount once in six months.

The waste was being collected from houses and segregated at source. S. Kamaraj, Professor of Bio-Energy, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University in his inaugural address appealed to the corporations, municipalities and panchayats to come forward to generate electricity through anaerobic treatment of bio-degradable solid waste.

From the 800 tonnes of solid waste collected in Coimbatore city per day, it was possible to generate eight mega watts of power resulting in 700 lakh units of electricity production annually.

The annual income from electricity would be about Rs. 21 crore.

Similarly, from the Solid Waste Management of 60 tonnes collected from Pollachi Municipality it would be possible to operate 600 kw power plant with the annual production of 50 lakh units of

electricity. The annual revenue from the electricity generation would be Rs 1.5 crore.

In addition to power generation, equal amount of income could also be generated through manure production from slurry coming out of biogas plants.

The maintenance of waste to power generation project through anaerobic digestion (biogas plant) could be economical, if maintained by the local youth groups like Self-Help Groups.

The investment for such projects could be recovered within two to three years. He also appealed the NGOs and SHGs to engage in such economically viable ventures. He also appealed to help reduce the emission of green house gases by anaerobic treatment of waste instead of normal burning.

The burning of waste emits a lot of green house gases which lead to global warming. Therefore the best option of energy generation without affecting the environment would be through anaerobic treatment. The existing waste water treatment systems were mostly aerobic.

The energy requirement for operating such systems was very high and thereby the system was becoming uneconomical.

*(The Hindu, 2 February, 2009)*

## Panchayat seeks control of roads

*'PWD trying to scuttle power devolution'*

*Only 52 roads were transferred by PWD, alleges panchayat*

*Panchayat capable of maintaining roads: president*

KOZHIKODE: The district panchayat has sought control over all roads that should be transferred to its purview by the Public Works Department (PWD) and alleged that the department was trying to scuttle the government guidelines on devolution of power to local bodies.

The demand for transfer of roads was made at a

meeting of district panchayat at its meeting on Thursday in a resolution. It was pointed out only 52 roads had been transferred to its care by PWD.

The resolution urging PWD to transfer roads to district panchayat was moved by T.V. Balan, chairman of standing committee for public works.

### *Government guidelines*

According to government guidelines, main roads and State highways are under the jurisdiction of the Public Works Department (PWD) while all other roads in the district are under the district panchayat. Village roads have to be transferred to grama panchayats.

However, K. Kunhamed Master, president of district panchayat, felt that the PWD was trying to regain control of the roads it had already transferred to local bodies.

"The district panchayat is capable of taking good care of roads. Proof of it is the condition of the 52 roads under its jurisdiction," he said.

The panchayat also decided to order an inquiry by the Executive Engineer into charges of irregularities

in purchase of pipes for the Kongott-Tumbatta drinking water scheme.

### *Stamp duty*

It was also decided to seek legal advice from the government pleader on the request for subsidy on stamp duty for small entrepreneurs who needed plots in Cheruvannur-Nallalam industrial estate.

A special meeting of district panchayat is being convened on March 10 to consider audit objections.

All bills relating to implementation of projects should reach district panchayat by then.

*(The Hindu, 7 February, 2009)*

## Daily wages

Ms Karandlage said that the daily wages paid for the works undertaken under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) would be doubled.

Talking to newsmen here, she said a decision to this effect has been taken at a meeting held earlier in the day with ZP Presidents and concerned officials present.

Under the proposal, which would be sent to the Union Government for its approval, it has been decided to reduce the work to be done by a worker, especially women, from the present 2.05 cubic feet to 1.02 cubic feet and they would be paid Rs 82. For the physically handicapped, aged and women 65 years and above the work to be done had been further reduced by 50 per cent. "If they work more the amount of earning would increase and it amounts to double the wage at present paid", she added.

Ms Karandlage said it was decided to include more works under the scheme including levelling of ground and construction of compound wall for schools, digging open wells, sanitary works and levelling of land in the fields of small farmers owning below five acres of land, bio gas plants, water and soil erosion works.

"Though these works were in the NREGS, the officials and panchayats were not aware of it. Now it had been included and would be sent to the Union Ministry for its approval." Replying to a question, she said of the Rs 473 Crore available with the government, so far, Rs 149 crore had been spent in the first and second phase since 2003. In the first phase, five districts were taken up, in the second phase six districts and in the third phase it had been decided to cover all the remaining districts.

*(Courtesy: www.Mangalorean.com, 7 Jan., 2009)*

# Mayilampadi panchayat a role model

C Baranidharan

ERODE: The Mayilampadi panchayat in Bhavani block here has become a model panchayat to the 343-odd village panchayats in the district for its administration.

It is one among 15 panchayats in the State to bag this year's Uthamar Gandhi Award. The award, which comprised Rs 5 lakh cash prize, a shield and credential, was handed over by the Chief Minister in Chennai on December 19.

Violating the Panchayat Raj Act, many panchayats in the state are ruled by politicians and political parties. These panchayats are not supported by all sections of the public, and are also facing administrative problems. Mayilampadi panchayat, on the other hand, is an exception.

M. A. Thirugnansambandamurthy, an agricultural graduate who served in Agriculture department, is donning the mantle of panchayat chief here for the fourth time in succession. "In this panchayat, there are four wards with a population of over 8,500 represented by 13 members in the panchayat. Due to efforts made by its panchayat members, drinking water problem has been solved in all 53 habitations and water meters were installed to check wastage of water", he said.

Now, efforts are on to fix taps in 230 houses that would net a permanent deposit of Rs 2.30 lakh and the panchayat would earn Rs 80,000 as water cess

per annum.

"Solving the drinking water crisis is my major achievement," he said. The panchayat has also set up 282 street lamps with meters helping free movement of public during night. They have also provided 15 panchayat TVs, established a PHC, two health subcentres and one veterinary dispensary in the panchayat.

"Given the good functioning of the PHC, the government plans to upgrade it," he said.

Over 100 saplings were planted on 600-metre road from Kannadipalayam to Andhiyur-Bavani main road. The self help groups and NGOs in the panchayat help remove garbage and sewage to keep the village neat and tidy, hold legal, health and police awareness camps periodically, and distribute pamphlets on various welfare schemes of the government.

All grama sabhas are held through out the year as per the norm, said a farmer B Ramasamy.

"Construction of Rs 5.45-lakh worth compound walls for two government schools with public donation was an indication of public participation in the development of the village," he said.

*(The New Indian Express, 6 January, 2009)*

## PRC to examine Panchayat-level works

Yavatmal: A 25-member Panchayat Raj Committee (PRC) headed by legislator Subhash Thakre would be visiting the district on January 14 to review the works carried out by various agencies here.

The four-day inspection would continue till January 17 as per the date communicated to the Zilla

Parishad Administration by the Rural Development and Water Resources Ministry on January 1.

The PRC visited Yavatmal in 2003 and was expected to come next during 2005 and 2007 but they could not make it, Zila Parishad sources said.

During the ensuing visit, the Committee would examine the audit report of fiscal year 2003-04 and the administrative report of the year 2004-05.

The Committee would visit the Panchayat Samitis, schools, Primary Health Centres and

Grampanchayats to examine the works carried out by them.

Besides, it would also look into the works of the Zilla Parishad in the district.

*(Courtesy: [www.indopia.in](http://www.indopia.in), PTI; 2 January, 2009)*

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## Gram Panchayats to get development officers

The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department in Karnataka has decided to recruit development officers for all gram panchayats in the next two to three years for effective implementation of rural development programmes.

Minister of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Shobha Karandlaje told presspersons on Monday that some gram panchayats had a budget of Rs.40 lakh a year for development schemes and some others up to Rs.1 crore. For efficient utilisation of resources, it had been decided to recruit development officers for all 5628 gram panchayats, the Minister said. Preference would be given to engineering graduates and diploma holders, Graduates in other disciplines were also eligible to apply. Eligible in-service candidates would be promoted as development officers.

The Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, had been asked to conduct the recruitment process for the appointment of development officers. The Minister said all taluk and gram panchayat secretaries had been instructed to stay at the headquarters for four days a week to address grievances of the people.

Asked about the low utilisation of funds under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, she said a proposal had been submitted to the Centre seeking an increase in the daily wages from Rs.82 to Rs.93. She said tenders would be called for implementation of all rural drinking water supply schemes. The department had decided against piece work contracts, which caused delay in the completion of schemes.

*(The Hindu, 12 May, 2009)*

## Gram Panchayats to have data centres

As suggested by the State Knowledge Commission, the Karnataka Government is planning to establish data centres in all the 766 gram panchayats shortly. The objective of establishing the centres is to provide firsthand information about government schemes, programmes, procedures to be followed and benefits available to the public. Educating rural people about administrative functions and stopping the exploitation of the poor and non literate people by middlemen are also envisaged, according to sources in the Government.

Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa has evinced interest in establishing the farmer friendly data centres and has instructed the authorities concerned to address some problems, including wages and infrastructure, being faced by those working in the existing data centres, sources said.

The Department of Public Libraries is set to set up libraries for children in all the districts. The aim is to draw children's attention to a range of culturally and scientifically useful subjects.

Director of the department Hondadakeri told the Hindu that the Government would establish libraries in all the wards of the Bruha Bangalore Mahanagara Palike and other local bodies across the State. It is also identifying vacant sites in all the Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies in the State for constructing reading rooms and libraries with the help of funds provided to MPs and MLAs by the Centre and the State Government. Besides, the library cess collected

by the local bodies would also be used for strengthening the library infrastructure in the State, Mr. Hondadakeri said.

The 22 committees appointed by the Government had recommended 3,800 titles for the department's book purchase scheme for 2007.

*(The Hindu, 9 June, 2009)*

### Task Force to strengthen Panchayat Raj System

Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister (RDPR) Shobha Karandlaje on Friday said that a 20 member task force comprising experts from the government, professional organisations and NGOs would be constituted to suggest measures for strengthening the panchayat raj system in the State.

Abdul Azeez and Ashraful Hassan, Director, State Rural Development Institute and others.

Ms. Karandlaje said that she would head the task force. Those who speak at the meeting suggested that the panchayat raj system could be strengthened by introducing an ombudsman.

#### Meeting

She was speaking to presspersons after chairing an interactive meeting on decentralization of the system with senior officers in the State and Union Governments such as M.R.Srinivasa Murthy, V.P.Baligar, T.R.Raghunandan, K.V.Raju, Economic Adviser to the Chief Minister, R.S.Deshopande, Director, Institute of Social and Economic Change,

She said that the member of the task force would study the functioning of the institutions of the ombudsman constituted by the Kerala Government and its success and their report would be useful in taking a decision on the issue.

*(The Hindu, 20 June, 2009)*

### New development plan for villages

HYDERABAD: The state government would soon unveil a grandiose plan to make administration at the village level more meaningful by taking up accountable development through the panchayat system of governance.

gathered on the utilisation of funds at the mandal level where most of the works were not completed either due to paucity of funds or due to negligence by the local legislator.

With the existing method of granting Rs 90 lakh to each of 1,108 mandals in the state failing to give the desired results in the last five years, the chief minister wanted officials to work out a new model where development works were not stalled due to paucity of funds.

As per initial plans, the government would adopt one-third areas of the state, around 7,311 panchayats, each year. The sources said that the chief minister wanted the funds released directly to the 21,943 panchayats in a regulated manner.

Sources in the panchayat raj department said that the chief minister was not happy with the feedback

This is similar to the model adopted under the Integrated Novel Development in Rural Areas and Model Municipal Areas (Indiramma) Housing scheme, wherein one-third areas of the state were covered. The

state government could not achieve what it promised despite spending nearly 1,000 crore for development works through the panchayat raj department.

Surprisingly, all activities would be similar to the devolution of powers and functions to panchayat raj institutions in respect of subjects related to rural development. The sources said that this new plan

would also serve as a USP for the local body elections which would be held in the next six months. This in effect means that no money would henceforth be released under the Assembly Constituency Development Fund or the Mandal Development Fund.

*(Times of India, 17 June 2009)*

### Panchayat school bags ISO 9001 certification

A panchayat middle school in a remote taluk of Tiruvarur district in Tamil Nadu has bagged the internationally recognized ISO 9001:2008 certification, perhaps the first to get such recognition among panchayat schools. The International Standards Organisation 9001:2008 certificate was given to the school last Thursday.

"We maintain high level of cleanliness and hygiene within the campus. Apart from keeping the standard of education very high, attention is paid to maintain clear records in a transparent manner pertaining to admission of students and money transaction. Adequate focus is also bestowed on extra-curricular and sports activities among students," says R Padmanaban, headmaster of the panchayat union middle school at Sithanvazhur. The school with seven teachers caters to 185 students from villages in and around Sithanvazhur.

Voluntary bodies, trusts and education department officials also helped the school achieve the feat. The Rotary Club supported the school in establishing a 45,000-sq ft playground. The school also has a library with a good stock of books. Aram Trust, a local voluntary organization, contributed uniforms to the students, making the children appear like any of their

ilk in a private school. "It is a collective effort aimed at providing the right ambience for the children to excel in studies," says Padmanaban.

Conservancy workers were employed to clean the school premises periodically during the day. These efforts also helped a great deal in educating the children on the importance of sanitation and hygiene, says Padmanaban.

When Padmanaban learnt about the standardization certification a few months ago, he sent a request to Quest International, a UK-based certification agency in Chennai. Subsequently, representatives from the agency visited the school several times in the last six months and got convinced about the standards maintained by the school.

Chief educational officer AS Radhakrishnan said the award of standardization certification to the panchayat union middle school would attract more parents to enrol their wards in government schools. It was in this direction that government schools were working, he said.

*(Times of India, 29 June 2009)*

### Community wastelands in UP to be taken for Jatropha plantation

Aarti Agarwal

ALLAHABAD: Jatropha (bio-diesel) plantation is going to be undertaken on community lands in 30 districts of Uttar Pradesh under the Jeevan Jyoti

project. A JV (Joint venture) company, Bharat Renewal Energy Limited (BREL), is to act as facilitator for jatropha plantation and marketing of

jatropha seeds. The plantation would be carried out under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), utilising the wastelands in rural areas under ownership of local panchayats.

UP government has directed vide GO no. 2592/38-7-2008 dated 31.10.08 that wastelands under gram sabhas be used for plantation of jatropha or Pongamia Pinnata under NREGA in 30 districts of the state. BREL, a JV unit set up by Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, is to facilitate the entire process working in coordination with district administration and village panchayats.

District magistrate, Allahabad, Rajiv Aggarwal informed that the Jeevan Jyoti Project has been taken up for implementation in the district in right earnest. This project involves jatropha plantation on gram sabha wastelands, utilising funds and labour under NREGA. Last year, nurseries were established by the forest and horticulture departments to grow jatropha saplings. The project is beneficial to the villagers as it provides them employment in their own village, uses their wastelands productively and the jatropha produce gives additional earning to the village through marketing of jatropha seeds for bio-diesel production. The most important issue is the buy-back of the seeds produced, which is underwritten by BREL at a price decided by the state government. Oil companies stand to gain as they get the raw material to extract diesel at cheaper rates, he declares.

The land remains in the possession of the gram sabha. An agreement valid for 15 years is going to be signed between the two parties -- the BREL officials and the gram sabhas through the pradhans. The agreement can be extended for two tenures of 15 years each, if so desired by both the parties.

The project envisages bio-diesel crop production on gram sabha wastelands with jatropha and Pongamia Pinnata (locally known as karanj). Karanj, another bio-fuel crop, would be planted only in waterlogged areas as jatropha cannot be cultivated on such lands. Of the two, jatropha is the preferred crop as it is a shrub with lesser gestation period, gives synchronous flowering (flowering at the same time) and hence the seeds are easier to harvest and market. Karanj, on the

other hand, is a TBOS (Tree Born Oil Species) with asynchronous flowering which are difficult to harvest, informed Shesh Narayan Mishra, district forest officer Allahabad.

The price of seeds of these bio-fuel crops would be decided on the basis of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of the year, to be decided by a team headed by the agricultural production commissioner (APC), UP government. At present, it is priced at Rs 6 per kilogram. However, once retail of bio-diesel fuels starts in the market, the seeds will be bought back at 20% of the retail price or MSP, whichever is higher. This income can be used by the gram panchayat for the desired developmental work in their village.

Jatropha offers numerous other uses apart from the seed yield that begins from the third year of plantation. Being bitter in taste, animals do not graze on it leading to better survival. Thus it can be used as a bio-fence, even against the dreaded menace of Neelgais (an antelope, one of the most commonly seen wild animals of central and northern India). Then the branches of jatropha plant can be pruned and used as firewood!

Jatropha should be planted during the monsoon season between 15 July and 15 October. BREL would be taking technical help, like selection of saplings and manner of plantation, from Bio Energy Mission (BEM) department of the UP government. Plant saplings would be procured from approved nurseries at a fixed rate of Rs 2.50 per sapling and a total of 1,000 saplings would be planted per acre of land. Jatropha crop requires only protective irrigation and pruning from time to time.

The project is underway in Chitrakoot and being taken up in Allahabad and Rae Bareli at present. In Allahabad, 1,000 acres of land has been identified in Koraon tehsil and work is being carried out in Meja and Manda by the lekhpal and the BREL functionaries jointly. Final agreements would be signed with the gram sabha pradhans soon and we hope to start plantation by the time plantation season arrives. 10 lakh saplings have already been prepared, informed local officials.

*(Times of India, 18 June 2009)*



## State launches green drive under NREGS

JAIPUR: In an effort to increase the green cover in the state, the Rajasthan government has decided to launch a tree plantation drive under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) before the onset of monsoon.

The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by chief minister Ashok Gehlot on Tuesday. He directed the officials to prepare an action plan for the plantation programme, named "Harit Rajasthan". He said the campaign would prove to be a model project in the direction of building a green state.

Following the change in power, the state government has revamped the programme. In a major shift in priorities, the project has been streamlined to water and environment concerns.

Considering the acute water shortage in summers, the state has decided to focus on water conservation and afforestation, a senior official said.

He said earlier road construction was a major task under the scheme. Since the sector has reached a saturation level, the government decided to work on these two areas.

The nature of the work would concentrate on creating provisions for drinking water and farm use. NREGS workers would be employed to work under the project. However, this time, the government has also

emphasized on the quality of work. It is planning to appoint retired officers as state level monitors, who would work on an honorarium basis.

Often complaints under the scheme are investigated by the same officials who are directly or indirectly involved in the execution of the project. Therefore, the state has decided to appoint people with experience for an independent opinion. These officers could go to any district of their choice and inspect the work carried out under the scheme, he said.

District level help lines will be made operational in 18 districts. Citizens can register their complaints or suggestion through these toll free telephone lines.

The government also wants to bring a convergence among its different departments. "The scheme is facing a dearth of technical people at the panchayat level to ensure the quality of the work. Besides, many employees supervising the scheme are appointed on contract, who are less accountable towards the project. A greater participation of departments like public works, irrigation and forest would help in addressing this issue," he said.

The state has stressed on an intensive training programme of various functionaries under the scheme. Rupees 14 crore have been sanctioned for this programme, he said.

*(Times of India, 31 May 2009)*

## Govt to spend Rs 1,500 crore on rural road connectivity

HYDERABAD: The state government would spend Rs 1,500 crore over the next three years to ensure rural road connectivity to thousands of scheduled caste colonies and tribal hamlets across the state.

Addressing a joint press conference, panchayat raj minister B Satyanarayana and rural development minister V Vasant Kumar on Tuesday said both the departments would act in a cohesive manner to achieve 100 per cent success in the implementation of

the programme.

They said that the permanent rural road connectivity programme would be inter-linked with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and taken up in a big way in the interior areas, as rural connectivity works were permissible under the list of works allowed to be taken up under Schedule I of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

Both the panchayat raj department and Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) have been entrusted with the responsibility of coming up with a blue print for laying all-weather roads in scheduled caste and scheduled tribe colonies. Nearly 7,500 villages would be covered each year under the proposed works, which would be taken up in a phased manner by spending Rs 15-20 lakh on each of the colonies, the ministers said.

"The objective is to supplement wage employment opportunities in rural areas and also create durable assets. We are not only ensuring rural connectivity, but also creating assets by maintaining the NREGA guideline of 60:40 ratio of wages and material," the rural development minister said.

He said information regarding taking up of rural road works would be widely publicised, especially in remote areas, SC/ST hamlets, through multi-media forms so that wage-employment opportunities were created for people in interior regions. "The sense of involvement is very high among rural populace,

hence the participatory approach," he added.

The ministers were speaking after holding a state-level video conference with officials on strengthening local bodies and ensuring foolproof implementation of all welfare measures being taken up under the rural development, especially effective implementation of NREGS. The Centre has earmarked Rs 5,500 crore funds under NREGS this year for the state, they said.

The rural development minister said they were closely evaluating the poor response to NREGS in the delta region and would take up remedial measures to link up development works with the scheme so that people get employment.

The panchayat raj minister said all MPDOs have been directed to ensure proper implementation of NREGS works. He said an elaborate exercise was underway to reorganise departments with emphasis on performance-linked reviews for officials.

*(Times of India, 24 June 2009)*

## Government plans revamp of NREGS

JAIPUR: The Rajasthan government would take up tree plantation in a big way under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) before the onset of monsoon in the state.

Chief Secretary Kushal Singh said Neem and Sesam trees have been identified as the major plants most suited to the conditions of the state. The government had already named the initiative as "Harit Rajasthan" and working on it, she said.

The state government was working on total revamp of the NREGS programme in tune with the priorities set by the new government. In a major shift in focus the programme has been streamlined on the water and environmental conservation fronts.

Considering the acute water problem facing the state in every summer, the state government has decided to focus on water conservation under the scheme, said a

senior official.

The major task under the scheme was road construction earlier. Since this sector has almost saturated, the government has decided to shift the focus from road sector to water conservation and afforestation. The nature of the works could be either drinking or farm use. Now NREGS workers could also be employed for the digging of ponds on private lands as well, said an official as a major shift of focus.

Another area the government wants to focus on is on quality of the work. She said that in this direction the state government is also planning to appoint retired officers as state level monitors. They comprise retired state or Central government employees who would work on an honorarium basis.

Besides, district level help lines are being made operational. Now, the citizens can register complaints

or suggestions through the toll free telephone lines made operation at the district level. In 18 districts these help lines had started operation.

Underlining the logic, officials in the rural development ministry which is the nodal department says very often complaints under the scheme is being investigated by the same officials who were directly or indirectly involved in the execution of the work. So the government has decided to appoint people with experience for an Independent opinion on the works carried out. These officers could go to any district of their choice and inspect any work carried out under the scheme, he said.

Another area the government priority area is bringing some kind convergence among different government

departments. "Major problem facing the scheme is the dearth of technical people at the panchayat level to ensure the quality of the work. Besides many of the employees supervising the scheme is employees appointed on contract basis diluting the accountability factor. So, greater participation of the government department like PWD, irrigation and forest would go a long way in addressing this handicap, said the official.

The government is also giving a lot of emphasis on intensive training programme of various functionaries of the programme. He said Rs 14 crore has been sanctioned for the training programme of various functionaries associated with the scheme.

*(Times of India, 9 June 2009)*

### Check dams or health, he gets them on track with RTI

VANGDHRA VILLAGE (Rajkot district): For Hanubhai Derawaliya, sar-panch of Vangadhra village in Jasdan taluka, RTI is the tool to fix all ills from getting an ill-constructed check dam repaired to having money allocated for health committees being put to proper use and making the village panchayat accountable.

"In 2007, the government built a check dam on Guma river here under the Sardar Patel Sahbhagi Sinchai Yojna at Rs 12 lakh. But the construction was so poor that the very first monsoon left it dam-aged. It was public money and villagers contributed 20 per cent to it. I sought information under RTI about details of construction materials used and the reason behind the damage. First, engineers were not willing to provide answers. But, I decided to fight for villagers' rights. Later, the local administration was convinced. It accepted the the irregularities and spent Rs 4.80 lakh to repair the check dam," says Derawaliya.

"Right now, farmers on both sides of the river are getting benefits of the check dam as this check dam has helped their well get re-charged," he adds.

Last year, when he was a member of the village panchayat, Der-awaliya was upset that not a single

meeting was called by body for a long time though it should meet every month. "I approached the talati but he refused to act. So, I used RTI and sought details. He was careless to my RTI but my application, which went to information commissioner and the talati was fined Rs 500 for not giving information," says Derawaliya. He is now the village sarpanch and also works with a local NGO, Saurashtra Voluntary Action.

"Once, I was perturbed when I came to know about money for the village health committee lying unused. According to the rules, every village-level health committee receives Rs 10,000 grant from the government. But in most cases, grants were not used and often accounting was not done. I sought details of money spent under this scheme," says Derawaliya.

"When we received the information, we found many norms were violated. Later, health officials decided to spend the entire grant in every every village and also streamline the system by the use of RTI. The application benefited 102 villages in Jasdan taluka" he adds.

"Whenever I find irregularities in any sector in my

taluka, I use RTI immediately. I have found that it results in serving the larger public interest. People now come to me to learn how to use RTI," says Derawaliya.

\* When a check dam in his village was built with sub-standard material, he used RTI to nail officials.

\* Perturbed by the village panchayat not holding

meetings, he filed an RTI and the talati was fined for not answering his queries.

\* When he found funds for village health committee lying unused, he filed an RTI.

\* Now, he trains villagers in using RTI and empowering them.

*(Times of India, 27 June 2009)*

### Samithi seeks info under RTI Act

MANGALORE: Thokur Nagarika Hitharakshana Samithi has filed an application under the Right to Information (RTI) Act seeking information regarding the meeting officials held with the gram panchayat members in connection with the acquisition of lands for the Mangalore Special Economic Zone (MSEZ) project on June 8.

The Samithi member Oswald Viegas sought information from Prabhuling Kavlakatti, assistant commissioner, whether forcible land acquisition could be done for MSEZ and whether the Centre would permit such an acquisition.

Viegas raised the issue as the gram panchayat members had told him that he (Kavalkatti) had told the members that the villagers should not oppose acquisition process and they should handover the land by accepting the rehabilitation packages. The official also allegedly said the villagers can ask for more compensation, if they think the present compensation is inadequate.

Viegas stated in the letter to Kavalakatti that they were still opposed to MSEZ and were not ready to sell the land for MSEZ. As this is their continued

stand, the acquisition would be deemed forced, he said.

Viegas also pointed out that in the Supreme Court's directive to KIADB (in Civil Appeal No. 7405 of 2000 - KIADB vs Kenchappa and Others), the apex court had directed that, in future, before acquisition of land for development, the consequence and adverse impact of development on environment must be properly comprehended and the land acquired for development do not gravely impair the ecology and environment. The court also directed the KIADB to incorporate the condition of allotment to obtain clearance from the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board before the land is allotted for development. The said directory condition of allotment of lands be converted into a mandatory condition for all the projects to be sanctioned in future, the court noted.

So, Viegas said any attempt by KIADB to proceed on the land acquisition process without obtaining the necessary clearances from KSPCB on the proposed road-cum-pipeline corridor for MSEZ at Thokur would also amount to violation of the directives of the Supreme Court.

*(Times of India, 17 June 2009)*

### This village has finally tasted the power of RTI

Viju B

MUMBAI: For about two years, Suvarana Bhagyawant made rounds of the panchayat office to get her grandfather's death certificate. Every time, the

official there would tell her to come later or pay a bribe of Rs 500 to get the work done.

Suvarana, a resident of the Ambhegaon village, needed the certificate so that her grandmother could apply for the widow pension scheme. Finally, Suvarana filed a query under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. She got the certificate within eight days.

"This piece of paper is like a weapon for the powerless to fight against corrupt establishment," says Suvarana, pointing to an RTI application.

For the villagers of Ambhegaon, the RTI Act has come as long-awaited rain in a drought-prone area, where government files moved only when the villagers were ready to pay bribes.

"Today, we tell the officials that if they do not look at our problems, we will file an RTI query," says Archana Bhagyawant. She was forced to file an RTI query after the officer demanded a bribe of Rs 150 for the issuance of a new ration card. "I waited for a year and finally when I filed an RTI query, I got it within three weeks," said Archana.

Suvarana and Archana are part of a unique initiative begun by the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT)-in partnership with the Bahujan Hitay Trust-that aims to improve the quality of lives in villages in Kalyan by using RTI.

"The idea was to empower every person in these villages who are above 14 years to use the Act so that they can have better basic amenities," said Julio Ribeiro, one of the founder trustees of PCGT. A team of 35 volunteers were identified from six villages and they were given training on how to use the RTI Act. "We also set up an RTI information centre at Kharad village," says Shabnan Siddiqui, programme manager.

The villagers then used the Act to get more teachers appointed at two primary schools in Ambhegaon, solved the shortage of water, and got the damaged electric cable repaired. "We also filed RTI queries asking for the health centre's status. Now, doctors have started visiting the centre."

The initiative-supported by the Ratan Tata Trust-now aims to take it to the next level and stop corruption. "We have found out that the ration shops here are always in short supply for rice and wheat. After filing an RTI query, we found out that the government agencies had distributed adequate stock. This means that pilferage is happening on a large scale. We have now complained to the prosecution agencies to take action," said Santhosh Jadhav, a Kalyan-based RTI activist.

*(Times of India, 28 May 2009)*

### RTI workers campaign to enlighten villagers

PATNA: Ranjit Kumar of Vaishali has formed a group of youths who are making villagers at blocks and panchayat levels aware about the Right to Information (RTI) and trying to solve their problems related to various government offices through this mechanism. It includes listing of names in BPL list, scholarship to students, old age pension, ration, Indira Awas units etc.

Similarly, Sunil Jha of Darbhanga made it a point that all the government offices in his block should declare names of information officers and now his group is doing this at district level.

These two youth narrated the efforts they have made in the larger interest of the poor and illiterate people who have very little information about the RTI. They were among 70 members of the Bihar Right to Information Manch who gathered here at the Youth Hostel. The meeting was chaired by Manch convener Parveen Amanullah.

The members listed the problems people were facing in seeking information from the government offices. They alleged that despite three years of implementation of the Act, most of the information officers were not providing full information within the prescribed time limit and closed the matter.

*(Times of India, 7 April 2009)*

## Urali village prepares development plan

Radheshyam Jadhav

PUNE: Less than a month after the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) promised to fund development projects in Urali Devachi, the village has draw up a development plan which will be submitted to the PMC via the district collector.

After the PMC's assurance to stop garbage dumping at the village in seven months, Urali Devachi residents withdrew their eight-day agitation last month. The civic body rejected the villagers' demand to adopt the village and allot Rs 10 crore for 25 years. However, it asked the villagers to draw up a development plan and hand it over to the district collector. The PMC promised to fund all the projects listed in the plan.

"We have prepared a detailed development plan for the village. It will be finalised within a week and given to the district collector. All residents have contributed to it," Urali Devachi deputy sarpanch Tatyia Bhadale said. He added that the plan focuses on areas like the road network, drinking water and health facilities.

"Now the ball is in the district collector and the PMC's court. They have to provide funds and look for alternative locations for the garbage processing plants. After seven months, we will not allow any dumping," Bhadale said. "The authority over any initiative that comes up on the garbage dump site after capping should lie with the gram panchayat. This, so that we can earn some money from it," he added.

Meanwhile, PMC standing committee chairman Nilesh Nikam and mayor Rajlaxmi Bhosale assured that all the promises made to the villagers will be fulfilled. A few months ago, the committee had approved Rs 10 crore for the development of the village, which included the laying of a water pipeline and drainage system. "Work on a few projects, like a crematorium and a hospital, has started. But we are not fully satisfied. The PMC needs to speed up the work," Bhadale said.

All these years, the villagers have complained that the garbage dumping has led to water contamination, turned the land barren and caused health problems. With repeated promises by the PMC of resolving the issues remaining unfulfilled, the villagers launched an agitation in April. The stir was eventually called off, but was resumed in May after the PMC failed to keep its promises again.

To add to the villagers' woes, the dumping site and the nearby villages were engulfed with smoke last month following a fire at the site. Such fires regular break out at the site, residents say, as the methane gas generated under the heaps of garbage ignites due to chemical reactions and the heat.

With the issue now reaching the state assembly, the villagers are confident that the promises made by the PMC particularly the one pertaining to the removal of the dumping site will be fulfilled.

### **Politicising garbage**

After Urali Devachi residents took a tough stand against garbage dumping at the village site, local politicians, who had stayed away from the issue all these years, have suddenly jumped into the action.

Sensing that the matter could snowball into an important political issue ahead of the state elections, they are joining villagers in their agitation and raising the matter in the state assembly. Congress MLAs Balasaheb Shivarkar, Chandrakant Chajjed and Ramesh Bagwe are demanding quick steps to solve the problem. "These leaders are forgetting that the Congress was in power in the municipal corporation all these years and they chose to neglect the issue," the villagers say. In fact, when questioned recently about this by the villagers, Shivarkar had to admit that the party and its leaders including him indeed "ignored" the problem over the years.

*(Times of India, 13 June 2009)*

## Foresters kept out of relief work

HINGALGUNJ (Sunderbans): Villagers and panchayats in the Sunderbans are unhappy with the fact that the forest department has neither been involved in planning nor distribution of relief.

"As far as the Sunderbans are concerned, we are best equipped to take the relief to the farthest end of the islands," said a forest official. The forest department carried out relief on its own. "But our resources are minuscule compared to the need," said the official.

Foresters have some natural advantage over others. "They know the topography. It would have been prudent to involve them in relief work," said Hemnagar panchayat member Sukdeb Mondal.

Every island adjacent to the forest has a Forest Protection Committee or an Eco-Development

Committee, which could also have joined relief work. "Cases like BDOs facing public fury would not have happened as the forest department has much better relations with villagers," said Piyush Mondal, a Kalitala panchayat member.

Meanwhile, the NGO South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE) took medical relief to Satjelia, Luxbagan and Lahiripur panchayat areas in Gosaba. "A large number of people are infected with diarrhoea, skin irritation and upper respiratory tract infection. Relief is only reaching the bank of big rivers. The situation is worse in the interiors," said Dipayan De of SAFE. SAFE has provided treatment to 627 patients. Most of them are suffering from malnutrition. So, the recovery rate is also very poor.

*(Times of India, 8 June 2009)*

## More voices needed to protect ecosystem

MANGALORE: Development policies should be based on utilization and conservation of renewable resources than destroying biodiversity, observed B C Chowdhari, scientist, The Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun.

Speaking at a state level workshop on Coastal Regulatory Zone and Protection of the Coastal Biodiversity organised by Western Ghats Task Force, department of Forests, department of ecology and wildlife and Nagarika Seva Trust here on Monday, he said natural resources are not the exclusive gift for the present generation. Instead, it is a resource that should be passed on the next generation. Further, due care should be taken to maintain the eco system in the development mechanism, he said.

Referring to the ecosystem in the coastal zone, he said high density of population in coastal zone that have large renewable resource generation capacity. However, this capacity may come to a standstill due to modern development activities in the coastal zone, he said.

Pointing out at the possibilities of effective utilization of renewable resources in the coastal zone, he said as on today, only 50% of the renewable resources have been utilized and the remaining resources could be utilized without harming the eco system.

Earlier, speaking at the inaugural session, Western Ghat Task Force chairman Ananth Hegde Ashisar stressed the need for the public participation in protecting the ecosystem. He said people should raise their voice against anti-environment projects and to safeguard their livelihood. Referring to the role of locals in protection of environment and their livelihood, he said local people should strengthen the various village committees and local government to fight against any project or programme which affects their livelihood and environment. Through mass efforts only we can protect our agricultural land, he said.

Later speaking to the press persons he said the task force would prepare an action plan to preserve, conserve and develop mangrove forests in the coastal

zone. Mangroves are the better way to protect the seashores from erosion. Task force would also come out with plans to rejuvenate the village forest committees and village biodiversity committees in consultation with the department of forests and the Department of Panchayat Raj.

The Task Force will also undertake the task of having two crore saplings planted across the state with help

from various government agencies and student bodies such as NCC, NSS on June 18 through the 'Vrakasharopana Saptaha'. Stating that the CM B S Yeddyurappa would kick off this campaign in Bangalore on that day, Hegde said the campaign would be extended in the Malnad and other non-heavy rainfall receiving belts.

*(Times of India, 1 June 2009)*

### Green drive in Nerasa village

BELGAUM: The Gram Panchayat of Nerasa village in Khanapur taluk will soon launch a green drive by asking each family to plant 50 saplings.

The village forest committee of Nerasa GP, which comes under Londa forest range, has passed a resolution to direct the villagers to plant saplings at their farm or anywhere near to it.

Most villagers here depend on agriculture. The village had a good mix of forest and agricultural land. But over the years, the forest land has eroded, thanks to tree felling for firewood. Now the villagers are going deep into the forest to fetch firewood. "Realizing that, the people here have agreed to plant the saplings," said Dattatreya Giri, a villager.

Paryavarani, a pro-environment organization, has been creating awareness on the benefits of

afforestation among the villagers. "The villagers have seen that the resolution is passed in the panchayat. It is a reward for us," said Lt Col (retd) Ravendar Saini, head of Paryavarani.

The forest department will supply plants to the villagers, if needed. Deputy conservator of forests Girish Hosur said they have over 35 varieties of plants. "Villagers can get plants of their choice," he added.

With villagers deciding to conserve the forest, we would like to help them by supplying the plants at their doorsteps, the officer said.

The saplings will be planted in June, when the rain is expected. During the drive, around 3,000 plants will be planted.

*(Times of India, 12 May 2009)*

### In shrine state, water & firewood top poll demands

Sanchita Sharma

Women are driving the vote in Uttarakhand, home to 10 million people, and have made development issues central to the elections on May 13. Much more than caste and community concerns, issues relating to water, firewood, employment, healthcare and education are dominating the debate around elections in the state that sends 5 MPs to Parliament.

Suchita Chauhan, 40, the block pramukh (head) in Joshimath, lists water crisis, cooking fuel and

employment as the biggest election issues this year.

"Of course religion matters to us, these mountains have some of the holiest of shrines in the country. But we all need to survive first, and for that we need water, fuel and jobs for our people locally," she says. With the enforcement of 50 per cent reservations for women at the panchayat level, women like her have become the agents for development in their respective villages.



“We are the only state in India that has strictly enforced 50 per cent reservation for women. Of the 7,239 gram panchayats in Uttarakhand, over 50 per cent — 3,743 — have women pradhans,” CM Bhuwan Chandra Khanduri AVSM (Retd.), told the Hindustan Times.

Reservation in governance has given women political power and helped in the efficient implementation of development schemes at the panchayat level. “Over 30 per cent of Uttarakhand’s population are in the Indian armed forces and many others went out of the state for work, making the state dependent on ‘money-order economy’. Historically, women have been responsible for running the household and taking decisions, which is why water, fuel, fodder, farming and education are big election issues here,” said Khanduri.

What also makes development a bigger electoral issue is the comparatively higher literacy rate, 71.8 per cent

compared to the national average of 61 per cent. In Uttarakhand, 83.3 per cent men and 59.6 per cent women are literate (national average, 73.4 per cent men, and 47.8 per cent women). The sex ratio — number of girls to 1,000 boys is 964, much higher than the national average of 927.

The increased presence in governance has indeed made women vocal in their demands. Painsi village in Chamoli district, is located over 6,000 feet and home to 600 people. The village is situated 1 km above a motorable road and can be accessed only by a steep path.

Lakshmi Devi, 50, says, the women have decided they will be heard. “All the women in my village will vote this year. The government is accountable to us, and election time is the best time to drive home the point.”

*(Hindustan Times, 11 May, 2009)*

## State to be e-connected right up to panchayat level

Sanjeev Kumar Verma

PATNA: Considered to be a laggard on the information technology front, Bihar is likely to join the list of elite Indian states which brag of having e-connected offices right up to panchayat level.

Having successfully set up the State Wide Area Network (SWAN) under the National e-Governance Programme (NEGP), the state is likely to take up an ambitious project which envisages horizontal expansion of SWAN right up to the panchayat level.

According to plan details, all the 8,463 panchayats would be connected with SWAN which in turn would ensure their direct connectivity with the state headquarters.

There are also plans to connect around 200 government offices at state headquarters, 30 to 40 offices in each of the 38 districts and five to 10 offices in each of the 534 blocks under the horizontal expansion of SWAN.

To expedite the said project which envisages putting the horizontal SWAN in place in about 24 months, Wi-Max technology would be used which would allow glitch-free wireless connectivity over a very wide area.

The plan would be implemented using build-own-operate-transfer (BOOT) model and those taking up the project would have to set the infrastructure for the horizontal expansion of SWAN. The state government would make quarterly payment of the cost to the agency after assessing the performance of the system every quarter.

"Planning is in advance stage and after approval from the state government, bids would be invited to start the work on the project," said principal secretary, information technology department, C K Mishra.

Incidentally, the NEGP has a mandate to set up SWAN only up to the block level. As of now, the

state headquarters, all the 38 district headquarters and 459 out of a total 534 blocks have been brought under the network. The 75 blocks, which are yet to be brought under the network, too would be brought under the SWAN very soon as work for providing the connectivity in these blocks is in an advanced stage.

SWAN, which is also called the information

superhighway, allows government to government (G2G) communication in real time and in turn nullifying the distance barrier between field and state headquarters. Apart from using it as a communication tool, Bihar has also used the network for running different applications, including introduction of online treasuries.

*(Times of India, 28 May 2009)*

## Women sarpanchs script success stories, fade away

Radheshyam Jadhav

PUNE: After successfully leading a sanitation movement in Jalgaon village of Ratnagiri district in 2001, Rutuja Jalgaonkar was seen as a potential leader who could make it to state and eventually national politics. However, eight years after her term ended as village sarpanch, Rutuja is no longer active in village politics.

Forget contesting the Lok Sabha election, she has gone back to household chores. Rutuja is not an isolated case in the state where women sarpanchs had to end their political careers prematurely. Other woman sarpanchs like Sumantai Surywanshi, Chhaya Kamble, Savitri Khuspe, Gita Killedar and Bharati Redekar have taken the same road.

“Because of reservation we got a chance to at least contest elections and head our village. However, male dominance in politics and in families continues. Though we would like to continue in politics, our men do not co-operate,” says Lata Latke, sarpanch of Kole village in Satara.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1993 introduced a three-tier system of local governance

ranging from the village to the district level. By this, reservations for women candidates were introduced at the gram panchayat level. This was the first step towards strengthening grassroots-level leadership among women.

“Since then, hundreds of women sarpanchs, many of them untutored, have led a silent revolution and brought a paradigm shift in rural development. Be it anti-liquor movements or saving the girl child campaigns, women leaders have played a pivotal role,” says Satara-based activist Varsha Deshpande.

“While working as a sarpanch I felt that I could work more actively than men. I initiated cleanliness movement in my village and decided to work on waste water management. I am happy that I was able to do something for my village”, says Rutuja. The village has two water schemes, 534 private and 8 public wells today, thanks to her efforts. An equitable water distribution system has been introduced so that each family gets adequate water.

*(Times of India, 19 April 2009)*

## Haryana woman’s revolution stops public drinking

Chetan Chauhan

Till about four years ago, Ram Kali Devi, a 50-something Dalit woman in Kothal Khurd, a remote village in Haryana’s Mahendragarh district, 128 km west of Delhi, used to dread the sunset. Her husband

Dhani Ram, 56, would visit one of the three country liquor vends in and around the village and drink himself silly. Sometimes, he would get together with some associates, and drink outside the local dhaba.

Drinking at public places and public scenes of drunken behaviour were an everyday sight in this village.

Dhani Ram would return home, hurl abuses at her and her three children and beat them up. Ram Kali was living through a veritable hell. This routine, with minor variations, had been her lot — every evening — for more than three decades.

Hers wasn't a unique case. A majority of the women in Kothal Khurd, and several nearby villages, faced the same lot. In fact, this is a problem faced by millions of women in most villages across the country. Cut to the present. No one drinks in public places in the village any more — thanks to a bunch of gutsy women. In the process, they have also ushered in a modicum of caste and gender equality in a cloistered, hierarchical society dominated by age-old prejudices.

The architect of the four-year long movement is the 30-something Roshani Devi, a Dalit sarpanch (village head) — and the only Dalit graduate in Kothal Khurd. “I promised, during my campaign for the 2005 panchayat elections, that if I got elected, I'd ban the consumption of liquor in public places,” she said.

She was elected with more votes than her nine other male opponents combined. But it caused a lot of heartburn in the male-dominated village, where women still had to follow the purdah system.

“I still remember my first day as sarpanch. A few upper caste men abused me and wanted to know how a Dalit women could be the sarpanch,” she recalled. The men disrupted the meeting and refused to let her carry out her duties. “They locked me up in a room for four hours,” she added.

“I complained to the local police but the station house officer (SHO) refused to take any action. None of other officials I approached, helped. I then met the Superintendent of Police who directed the SHO to take action,” she said.

Sensing that she meant business, the village elders asked her to take back her complaint. Roshani demanded a quid pro quo — they would have to agree

to the closure of all liquor shops in and around the village. The men, long used to subservient women, had met their match. Hard-nosed, and often tense, negotiations followed over the next few days.

Finally, the men blinked.

Roshani lost no time. She immediately passed a resolution in the panchayat, seeking the closure of all liquor shops within a kilometer of the village. This was then forwarded to the Mahendragarh Deputy Commissioner's office. Within a month, three shops were closed.

But implementing the ban on the ground was more difficult. Men were still getting their liquor from neighbouring villages and from bootleggers and still returning home drunk.

Village women then formed different groups, patrolled the streets every evening and caught those found drinking. “We used to abuse and even assault these men,” said Ram Kali Devi, a victim of abuse, and a member of the group.

The following day, Roshani Devi and other women would visit the homes of those found drunk and tried to convince them not to drink. Some, like Sardar Singh, 60, a retired armyman, agreed to quit. Others, like Nirdhay Singh, 65, decided to cut down on their daily intake and consume liquor only at home. At the village chaupal (meeting place), many other men took the same pledge.

“The Haryana Excise Act and the Haryana Panchayati Raj Institutions Act empower panchayats to impose fines on those who drink in public,” Yadav told HT.

Taking a leaf out of the book of Kothal Khurd, voluntary women's groups in 20 other villages in Haryana have also formed committees to prevent men from drinking outside their homes.

These may be the first tiny sparks, but these women are convinced that these sparks will lit a fire that will soon turn into a revolution.

*(Hindustan Times, 03 June, 2009)*

## Tripura women set to play vital role in local bodies

Even as the nation debates the women's reservation bill, women in Tripura are getting ready to stand up and be counted in elections to local self-government bodies next month. Political parties across the board are positive about nominating women candidates for the three-tier panchayat polls July 20.

Congress leader Ratan Lal Nath said: "Yes, our party is already in the process of nominating more women now than in the previous panchayat election." "We shall try our best to field maximum number of tribal women and women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and other backward communities," Nath added.

The ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) has also announced the nomination of more women candidates this time. "Success of women-run panchayats is excellent. Many women panchayat representatives have also got awards for their remarkable performance in running the local self-government bodies," said CPI-M spokesman Gautam Das.

The government has reserved 1,900 of the 5,676 seats in the three-tier panchayat system for women. "More than 33 percent of the 5,676 seats in the gram panchayats, panchayat samitis and zilla parishads are reserved for women, including women belonging to tribes and the Scheduled Castes," said Y P Singh, Tripura's state election commissioner.

Social activist Fulan Bhattacharjee said: "Although women in the northeastern state of Tripura have been active in politics during the past several decades, institutional arrangement for their active participation in the political process, development activities and in policy formulation has been done with the election of several hundred women to local self-government bodies."

A senior official of the panchayat department said: "To develop their skill and expertise, the Guwahati-based National Institute of Public Co-operation and Child development (NIPCCD) had provided orientation training to several hundred elected representatives of rural bodies in Tripura."

The one-and-a-half-month-long election process would begin with the issuance of the statutory notification June 22. For the first time, photo identity cards would be made compulsory for voters when they exercise their franchise. "Instead of electronic voting machines (EVM), the traditional method of voting through ballot papers and ballot boxes would be used in the politically important elections to 511 gram panchayats, 23 panchayat samities and four zilla parishads," state election commissioner Singh said.

*(Hindustan Times, 20 June, 2009)*

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## 100 days guaranteed employment assured

LUDHIANA: To ensure that a majority of people could avail benefits of schemes, Jagpal Singh Sandhu, financial commissioner, development, has directed all officers to implement the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) Scheme and in an effective way. Sandhu was addressing a meeting of development officers at the Circuit House here on Sunday. He directed the officials to successfully implement NREGA scheme in the district.

Mr. Sandhu said, "NREGA was enacted to guarantee 100 days employment to adult members of any rural household, who are willing to do unskilled manual work at a statutory minimum wage." He said, under the programme, the government would provide 100 days guaranteed employment to one person of every family, registered under the programme, through the village panchayat.

He said as per the revised rates, a labourer will now get Rs 123 per day. "An applicant will be provided unemployment wages if he does not get a job even after 15 days of applying for it," he said.

These wages, too, would be borne by the government, Sandhu said. He further informed that chief minister Parkash Singh Badal had issued directives for the successful implementation of the scheme in Punjab.

Sandhu said to implement the scheme, the deputy commissioner would be appointed as the district project coordinator and SDM as the deputy project coordinator.

He said SDMs and BDPOs would be responsible to implement this scheme. "BDPOs should get their casual leaves approved from the SDMs concerned and get permission to leave the station headquarters in the future, he said.

Sandhu said stern action would be taken against erring officers who showed negligence in implementing the scheme. He said the forest department would also provide 40 lakh saplings to be planted in villages.

"Under the NREGA scheme, funds of Rs 113 crore were received last year, out of which, Rs 70 crore have been spent and the remaining Rs 43 crore will be spent this year," he said.

Singh exhorted the officers to highlight the benefits of these centrally-sponsored development schemes in rural areas so that beneficiaries could avail its benefits.

*(The Times of India, July 6, 2009, times)*

## Rural job scheme will be a winner with more funds

BANGALORE: Higher allocation of funds for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

(NREGS) in the Union budget is just what the doctor ordered for Karnataka, where farmers and labourers

are in distress. The Centre on Monday hiked the allocation for its flagship rural job scheme by 144%, earmarking Rs 39,000 crore.

Like elsewhere in the country, NREGS is being implemented in Karnataka from 2006 to ensure livelihood and food security by providing unskilled work to people through the creation of sustainable assets. "With higher allocation in the budget, I think we can effectively implement the scheme across the state," said rural development and panchayat raj minister Shobha Karandlaje.

The state government has reason to be optimistic. It had recently sent a proposal to the Centre to increase wages under NREGS from Rs 75 a day to Rs 96. But now, the budget allocates wages of Rs 100 a day to rural households in convergence with other schemes, to increase productivity of assets and resources under NREGA.

"We welcome the increase though we are skeptical about how many districts from our state will be included under this scheme, as the budget clearly specifies that a total of 115 pilot districts have been

selected for such convergence in the first stage," Shobha said. Terming NREGS as a promising project, she said it has been going on for the past three years and around Rs 350 crore has been spent on it in the past year.

"We are waiting for details of the measures and convergence guidelines to be formulated by the ministry of rural development before we say anything," the minister said, adding that the scheme is a big success in Dakshina Kannada district, where it is being implemented with help from Shri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project.

However, official sources said the state should look to streamline the scheme's implementation rather than worry about fund allocation. "The NREGS is not seeing much success in Karnataka as the scheme is being implemented at snail's pace through panchayati raj institutions, which are playing an important role in planning and executing this flagship programme," said a senior officer, overseeing the project implementation in Karnataka.

*(The Times of India, July 8, 2009)*

### **Rs. 100 cr. for NREGA schemes in Shimoga**

SHIMOGA: President of the Shimoga Zilla Panchayat in Karnataka Ashok Murthy said here on Thursday that the zilla panchayat had earmarked Rs. 100 crore for implementing schemes under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the district in the current year.

Speaking after inaugurating a one-day workshop for officers and elected representatives on implementation of the schemes, he said that each gram panchayat would get Rs. 50 lakh for effective implementation of schemes under NREGA.

He said that gram panchayats authorities should take decision on schemes to be undertaken in their villages. Stress should be laid on taking up flood damage relief

works and planting of saplings in the next two months, he said.

Mr. Murthy said that schemes under NREGA were being implemented in the district on priority. Loopholes in their implementation could be set right through discussions at taluk level, he said.

The main aim of the programme was to prevent migration of rural people to urban areas in search of jobs, he said. Vice-president of taluk panchayat Shanmukhappa presided over the programme.

*(The Hindu, July 17, 2009)*

## Centre asks states to ensure timely payment to NREGA workers

NEW DELHI: Taking cognisance of reports about delay in payment of wages to NREGA workers, the Centre has asked states to remove the "bottlenecks" for ensuring timely payment to the beneficiaries.

Ministry of Rural Development has asked chief secretaries of the states to inform about the remedial measures taken by them to ensure timely payment of wages to NREGA workers, an official said.

"There have been reports from various quarters about delay in payment of wages to NREGA workers in various states. The Ministry has requested state governments to look into the issues and take measures to remove the bottlenecks for ensuring timely payment of wages," he said.

The ministry has already enhanced the limit of allocation on administrative expenditure from four per cent to six per cent to ensure speedy distribution

of wages and was in regular touch with the Ministry of Finance, the official added.

As per the NREG Act, payment of wages to NREGA workers should be made within a fortnight of the work done and in case, it is delayed, the state government concerned will have to pay a compensation to the worker in accordance with Payment of Wages Act, 1936.

In some cases, the payments of wages were delayed due to faulty handling of muster rolls and shortage of staff at block and Gram panchayat.

Unlike past, NREGA workers are now being paid through their accounts in banks and post offices and sometimes the time taken in completing the transactions also results in the delay of payment.

*(The Times of India, July 24, 2009)*

## Middlemen in NREGA

VARANASI: The middlemen have found their role even in the works of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The case of Pappu Musahar is sufficient to make it confirm. This labourer of Ayar village in Harahua block told the reporters on Tuesday that he got his job card under NREGA on March 25, 2008. He alleged that after getting the card he worked for nine days against the payment of Rs 2000. However, at the time of payment, the gram pradhan collected Rs 1750 and deposited Rs 250 to open his account with Kashi Gramin Bank.

He alleged that the gram pradhan took his job card and pass book of the bank in possession. Even after several visits to the gram pradhan's place, his payments were not made. He continued working for 43 days. He claimed that the gram pradhan also added works of 37 days in his name, despite the fact that he did not work on those days. He alleged that against it the gram pradhan withdrawn Rs 3700 from the bank and handed over Rs 600 to him.

Pappu said that to get his job card and pass book back, he met the district magistrate on the occasion of Tehsil Diwas on July 8 and also reported the matter to rural development minister through post on July 10 but of no use. He still hasn't received his job card and bank pass book.

Pappu alleged that due to fear of getting exposed, the gram pradhan pressurized him to withdraw his complaint.

Speaking on the occasion, Shruti of Savitri Bai Phooley Mahila Panchayat, said that she also forwarded the case of Pappu Musahar to the additional commissioner rural development, chief minister and divisional commissioner. She said that her panchayat had also requested the officials to conduct social auditing at Ayar and other villages of this block as several other beneficiaries of NREGA were being victimized like Pappu Musahar.

*(The Times of India, August 5, 2009)*

## **NREGS wage to be Rs 100 in September**

**M Gunasekaran**

CHENNAI: The proposed wage hike from Rs 80 to Rs 100 a day under the UPA government's flagship programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, will come into force in Tamil Nadu by September.

According to official sources, the state labour department has issued a preliminary notification on June 30 under the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, to revise the wages for employment in agriculture and works allied to agriculture. The government will issue a final notification after a mandatory period of two months from the date of notification to enable the receipt of objections if any.

K Ashok Vardhan Shetty, rural development secretary, told *The Times of India* that once the final notification was issued, the revised rates would be implemented for the NREGS, hopefully, in a couple of weeks. The government revised the minimum wages three years ago.

As per the proposed revision, the minimum daily wage for men will be Rs 100 a day for six hours of work and Rs 85 for women for five hours of work for those engaged in harvest of paddy and other crops, besides other agricultural operations like trimming bunds and fields, poultry farming, dairy farming and climbing trees.

In a measure to ensure participation of various sections of society under NREGS and boost their participation, the authorities have asked panchayat

presidents, who are entrusted with the work of disbursing wages, to pay a transportation allowance of Rs 10 a day, if the distance between their residence and work site exceeds five km.

Lauding the scheme as "really a boon" for the farmers and agricultural workers in drought-hit areas, CPM-backed Tamil Nadu farmers' association general secretary K Balakrishnan felt that there was still scope for improvement and optimal implementation. The scheme has come as a solace not only for agriculture workers, but also for the small and marginal farmers hit by monsoon failure, he said.

However, Balakrishnan complained that the daily target of work fixed by the officials to get full wages was not a realistic and humanly possible one. "In Tamil Nadu, a worker has to excavate earth in normal soil not less than 66 cubic ft a day to get the full wage, whereas it is only 33 cubic ft in Karnataka. The authorities should be realistic and flexible in fixing work targets."

Acknowledging that there was no engagement of contractors or machines, the CPM leader said the authorities could do wonders and alter the landscape of rural TN through the scheme, if they took up works to create new ponds to conserve water in dry lands. Balakrishnan also emphasised the need for setting up social auditing of the scheme.

*(The Times of India, September 1, 2009)*

## **Panchati raj in state needs real devolution of power**

JAIPUR: Despite the panchayati raj system celebrating its golden jubilee this year, very little has changed at the ground level and the real power continues to be in the hands of the bureaucracy, zilla pramukhs and pradahans of panchayat samitis complained at a meeting in Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Institute here on Wednesday. They called for a real devolution of powers to make the system functional

as at present the panchayati raj institutions were acting merely as rubber stamps.

The people's representatives expressed their frustration with the system. They pointed out that the 73rd and 74th amendment made provision for transfer of 29 subjects to the gram panchayats, but this has not materialised. At presently, panchayati raj is working



only on paper and not in spirit. The panchayat samitis and zilla prishads have been degraded as just approving bodies which have no control over the work executed in their name, said Ridkaran Chaudhary, pradhan of Jayal in Nagaur district.

Sujangarh pradhan Puram Godara demanded elementary education be transferred to the panchayats to make the system effective. This would help to check absentee teachers and manage the mid-day meal scheme in a better way.

Zilla pramukh, Barmer, Madan Kaur demanded that at present one gram sevak working for three to four gram panchayats and gram sevaks get an excuse for bunking work. Regular staff and functional autonomy is the need of the hour, she pointed out.

The participants pointed out that if the present system continues, it will be difficult to find candidates to fight elections for the panchayat bodies over the years.

The grassroot level functionaries have no allowances and salaries. How could they discharge their responsibilities asked Kanyalal Dhakar, Bhilwara zilla pramukh. The representatives were given only nominal money for the meeting of the samits, which is highly inadequate, he pointed out.

To an open discussion on NREGS, they pointed out that the corruption and malpractices are on the rise since NREGS is managed mainly by the contract workers, the administrative control over them is very weak. Their commitment to the job is very low and they have little fear of punitive action, said the panchayat raj representatives.

Panchayati raj and rural development minister Bharat Singh assured the zilla pramukhs and pradhans that their suggestions would be given a concrete shape before the elections at the end of this year. He promised radical changes to make panchayati raj an effective tool for development in the villages.

*(The Times of India, 18 September, 2009)*

### **Panchayat act amendment will empower secretaries**

PANAJI: If a panchayat fails to implement an order passed by any authority in an appeal filed before it by citizens or others, the panchayat secretary will be empowered to execute them in the future.

This is the crux of an amendment sought to be made to the Goa Panchayat Raj Act, by a bill introduced in the legislative assembly on Wednesday.

The orders will have to be implemented within the deadline given and in case the higher authorities have not specified any time limit for the execution of the order, then the secretary will have to enforce it within a month from the date of the order or direction being issued.

The amendment was recommended by the reconstituted select committee in its report on the controversial Goa Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2009 which sought to give powers to bureaucrats instead of elected panchayat representatives.

After the introduction of the bill in the house in February this year, and opposition by some legislators, it had been referred to the select committee.

The amendment had also been opposed by some panchayats who alleged that it would lead to a further dilution of the negligible powers entrusted to the village panchayats. The panchayat ministry had clarified and assured the select committee, headed by panchayat minister Manohar Azgaonkar, that the secretary would step in to enforce the orders only if the panchayat failed to do so.

It had been argued by opponents of the bill that the existing section 47A (i), (ii) and (iii) in the Act had adequate provisions under which aggrieved citizens can obtain justice. However, the panchayat ministry had argued that panchayats often drag their feet in executing orders passed by higher authorities leading to multiplicity of litigation and forcing citizens to approach the ministry for justice several times.

At a people's consultation on the proposed amendment empowering bureaucrats, various speakers had opposed the amendment. Centre for Panchayati Raj (Peaceful Society) had argued that the proposed amendment will constitute a parallel authority in village panchayats, which will not be accountable to constitutionally elected representatives and the gram sabha, which is in contravention of the

spirit of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution. The panel has also recommended a few other changes in its report, which was tabled in the assembly on Monday, suggesting that the bill may be passed incorporating these changes.

*(The Times of India, July 24, 2009)*

### **Nitish Kumar to revamp case disposal processes in panchayat system** **Shoumojit Banerjee**

Patna: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar said on Saturday steps would be taken to facilitate speedy settlement of disputes at the panchayat level and promised to radically alter the case disposal processes within the panchayat system.

Inaugurating a three-day training workshop for panchayat officials from Patna district, Mr. Kumar said several "Gram Kachaharys" (Village Law Courts) would be established across the State.

Article 90 of the Bihar Panchayati Raj Legislature of 2006 provides for the establishment of a "Gram Kachahary" in every panchayat. "It is a challenge, not only for you people to deliver quick justice but also for me and I readily accept it," Mr. Kumar said. Mr. Kumar unfolded his vision of establishing a "Panchayati Bhavan" in every district, which would act as a one-stop centre, disseminating information. It would also function as a rest house.

"The building will act as a model. There, the villagers can make caste certificates, know the price of crops, get information about the weather all under one roof," said Mr. Kumar.

He said it was about time that village authorities were granted "a solid place" where books and records of cases could be safely housed. Arrangements would be made for provision of stationery and furniture. He said each building would be built at a cost of Rs. 50

lakh and would be earthquake proof and flood resistant.

He made it mandatory for the panchayati officer to stay in that building and remain accessible to the villagers at all times. Mr. Kumar said his "ultimate aim was to establish a panchayati government on the lines of the Central and State government and the panchayat system would complement law disposal bodies at the State level."

Home Secretary Afzal Amanullah said all cases at the panchayat level would be given a deadline to be resolved within six weeks. Additional Director-General (Vigilance) Neelmani said the law courts would act jointly with the police, and the village law officer would dispense justice under Section 106 of the Panchayati Raj Act.

The officer, however, would not have the powers to jail a person. "The thrust is on dispute resolution. We want to reduce the waiting period for the villager by settling the issue there and then instead of dragging it to the court which would leave a large hole in his pocket," said Mr. Neelmani.

Hari Prasad Sah, Minister of Panchayat Raj, Backward Class & Extremely Backward Class Welfare, was present. Health Minister Nand Kishore Yadav was the chief guest.

*(The Hindu July 6, 2009)*

## **Panchayats to power new literacy mission**

### **Anubhuti Vishnoi**

New Delhi: Village panchayats are set to play a key role in the soon-to-be launched National Mission for Female Literacy. With the view that a panchayat is best positioned to identify illiterates among women, register them as learners and also assign them educators, the Human Resource Development (HRD) Ministry has also set a target of making 300 women literate for each panchayat.

That apart, procuring teaching-learning material, supervision of literacy classes, logistical support for national level test ensuring honorarium for teachers post-evaluation and setting up of a Jan Shikshan Kendra for continuing education are all tasks that could go to the panchayat, which will be expected to have on board elected women representatives, female teachers, anganwadi workers among others.

The restructured mission will be launched on September 8 this year. The panchayat-based campaign, the Ministry feels, will help ensure total female literacy in rural areas in another five years. The new scheme will also focus considerably on improving the emoluments for educators.

With women literacy level at a low 54 per cent vis-a-vis the 75 per cent male literacy rates as revealed in the 2001 census, the HRD Ministry is restructuring the entire National Literacy Mission (NLM), formulating new schemes with a focus on improving female literacy levels. It has also asked all state

governments to close down all existing adult education and NLM programmes by the month-end.

While NLM focused on volunteer-based teaching, the new scheme plans to institute incentives for educators with 100 per cent accountability for performance — for each adult made literate, the educator would get a Rs 500 honorarium. The educators, to be identified by the panchayat, would be a high school pass out in rural areas while tribal areas could appoint a resident instructor.

Unlike the vertical and highly centralised set-up in NLM, the new scheme will rope in local schools and teachers as ‘collaborators’ to provide academic support at the village level. Teachers will be asked to motivate non-literate parents to enroll as learners and motivate educated youth to help as educators or double up as teachers in literacy classes. Annual evaluation of adult learners would be held and that would decide the honorarium payable to the educator.

The strategy for urban areas would be different with ample help from actors, NGOs and social groups, said sources. The focus area of the new scheme would be districts with female literacy of 50 per cent or lower and special attention to disadvantaged sections like the SCs, STs, Minorities, backward groups, low literacy states and tribal areas. As many as 365 such districts have been identified for the purpose.

*(The Indian Express, August 06, 2009)*

## **Revamped literacy mission to focus on educating women**

NEW DELHI: The HRD ministry is not only renaming the National Literacy Mission as National Women's Literacy Mission but is also making substantial changes in the definition of literacy with specific focus on achieving 80% literacy for women by the end of the 11th Plan.

With a new slogan -- Literate India -- the mission will be launched next month in 365 districts. It would be

run in active participation with the state governments unlike in the past when it was run directly by the Centre through different implementation agencies at the district level.

Chairing a meeting of the National Literacy Mission Authority Council on Thursday, HRD minister Kapil Sibal said the government has decided to "tweak" the NLMA to focus on women and the mission would be

launched in those districts where the female literacy level is below 50%. "We are structurally changing the mission and adopting new strategies. We have decided to implement the new scheme with the help of panchayati raj institutions. We aim to bring the country's literacy level to 80% by 2017," he said.

Sibal said that Adult Education Centres would be set up at the Gram Panchayat level which would be the unit for the programme's implementation. The Panchayat will work in tandem with the community to implement the programme.

Under the mission, the government aims to educate 70 million adults, out of which 60 million would be women. Sibal said under the 11th Plan (which will end in 2012), the mission has been allocated Rs 6,000 crore. The NLMA has spent Rs 2,800 crore since its inception in 1988.

Sibal said there is a 21% gap between the literacy levels of men and women. This is "wide". Seven states alone account for 70% of illiterate people in the country.

He, however, refused to name the states which are lagging behind the overall national literacy level

saying, "I don't want to make headlines." According to the 2001 census, the states are: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

While the national literacy level is 64%, the male literacy level is 75% and the female level is 54%.

Sibal said the definition of literacy, which was so far just self-reliance in reading, writing and arithmetic, would be redefined and people taught to acquire skills to improve their economic status and general well-being. He said a curriculum framework for adult literacy would be developed with adequate reflection of locally relevant issues and aspects.

To ensure uniformly high standards, all the materials for basic education, equivalency and life-long learning would be quality-assured.

He said committees at the district, block and panchayat levels would be set up to monitor the implementation of the programme. Besides an efficient MIS system, concurrent monitoring systems would be put in place for field validation.

(The Times of India, 23 August 2009)

## **Women are more effective**

BANGALORE: When Right to Livelihood awardee and social activist Ruth Manorama talks about the proposed Bill to enhance women's reservation to 50% in gram panchayats, it is with an air of victory.

After having been a part of the struggle to make the Indian government realize the need for women in legislation, Ruth certainly has something to cheer about. This was evident on Thursday when she spoke about the issue in the Kannada Sahitya Parishat.

"In the 15 years of struggle demanding reservation for women at various levels in politics, there has not been a single incident of violence, bus-burning or damage to public and private properties. This is the woman of modern India who stands up for democratic values

and yet conquers what she wants," Ruth said with pride.

The proposed Bill to give 50% reservation to women at the panchayat level is the result of a sustained non-violent campaign.

According to her, women who work at different levels of decentralized administration are less corrupt, more efficient and effective than their male colleagues.

"The women members not only work hard, but also care for society, the environment and community members. So what if she is assisted by her husband, brother or father? Look at it positively. At some point, she is protected by her own family members," Ruth said.

The talk was organized by the Forum for Phenomena. Welcoming the move, former minister P G R Sindhia, also the forum's patron, said the Bill should be debated and approved by the legislature as soon as

possible, as constitutional amendment is a long process.

*(The Times of India, September 12, 2009)*

## **Quota for women in panchayats to be raised to 50%**

NEW DELHI: The country seems set to have an army of women politicians. UPA government may have failed to deliver on its promise of 33% reservation for women in legislatures within 100 days but it has kept its word on empowerment at the grassroots with the Union Cabinet on Thursday clearing a proposal to increase reservation for women to 50% in panchayats.

The proposal aims to amend Article 243D of the Constitution that currently provides for 33% reservation for women in panchayats. This is proposed to be increased to 50%. The "women only" seats in panchayats are rotated.

States where 50% women's quota is already in force has boosted their status. In Bihar, it has seen the spouses of women heads of panchayats styling themselves as 'mukhiyapatis' in a symbolic yet significant role reversal.

Panchayats are expected to serve as nurseries for women leaders, preparing them for tasks they may have to shoulder in case the addiction for politics endures.

It was during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as PM that the idea of decentralising power and empowering women at the grassroots was mooted. The one-third reservation for women in panchayats came through the 73rd constitutional amendment during PV Narasimha Rao's tenure as PM.

The move will at one stroke boost the number of women politicians at the grassroots as the experience of Bihar -- the first state to reserve half of the panchayat seats for women -- shows -- making the administration more gender-sensitive.

Taking the lead in women empowerment, five states - Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya

Pradesh and Chhattisgarh -- already have 50% reservation for women as states have the power to bring in amendments in their state laws to increase women's representation up to 50%.

Rajasthan has also announced 50% reservation that will be implemented in the next panchayat election in early 2010. Kerala, too, has announced 50% reservation for women in panchayats and other local bodies.

In Uttarakhand, women have an overwhelming 55% representation in panchayats as many of them contested even from non-reserved seats and won. But the state works through the UP Panchayat Act and is yet to have its own law.

With the proposed constitutional amendment, the number of elected women's representatives at the grassroots level is expected to rise to more than 14 lakh. At present, women account for 36.87% of the total 28.1 lakh elected panchayat representatives.

I&B minister Ambika Soni said after the Union Cabinet meeting that a proposal to have 50% quota for women in urban local bodies is likely to be taken up later. Panchayati raj minister CP Joshi called Thursday's decision as historic saying it would take empowerment of women to another level.

All India Democratic Women Association general secretary Sudha Sundararaman said, "This will facilitate increased participation of women in decision making and strengthen the democratic process. But this measure must be followed up with the passage of the women's reservation Bill in Parliament."

*(The Times of India, Aug 29, 2009)*

## **50% quota in panchayats: Activists concerned**

**Samarpita Banerjee,**

PUNE: While women activists across the city lauded the government's decision to amend Article 243(D) of the Constitution to enhance reservation for women in panchayats to 50 per cent, they voiced their concern about the feasibility of this decision and said that apart from just increasing the reservation, a lot more needs to be done.

Usha Wagh, an activist, said that the decision should have been taken a long time back. "It is only natural justice. We need equal representation. This surely is the beginning and this day will go down as the birthday of women's political participation in India," she said.

Stressing the need to train women for politics at a basic level, Wagh added, "Usually, most seats at the panchayat level are taken by wives, sisters and daughters of men who are already in power. So these women just become a way to multiply these men's power."

Delving deeper into the matter, Varsha Deshpande, a prominent women's activist and an advocate, said, "I am happy that the one-third reservation has been increased to 50%. But till a positive atmosphere for women to realise and hone their skills in politics is achieved, this amendment will fail to have the desired effect. There has to be a procedure to ensure that not just women from political families but others also enter the field."

Narrating an incident about a woman sarpanch of a lower class who was not allowed to hoist a flag on August 15, this year, Deshpande said, "Our society is dominated by men and in rural areas, discrimination on the basis of caste is still prevalent. Till these social prejudices are not buried, no amendment can be of any help."

Roopa Saha, a Kolhapur-based women's activist and the president of Dilasa an organisation working for the welfare of women, said, "There are many women who just because they are uneducated do not get the due recognition they deserve as members of panchayat. These women are often not allowed to speak during panchayat meetings as men say that they are not qualified enough. Hence, I appeal to the non-governmental organisations to come forward and train such women. Since they are uneducated, they need a basic knowledge of how the panchayat works and what are the responsibility that she, as a members, needs to shoulder."

However, Kiran Moghe, president of All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), said, "I don't think it is just women who need to be trained. India has had women's reservation for almost 20 years now and the number of women who are completely new to it are very few. I would say that if there is any training at all, it should be for every elected representative as women today are adequately capable to take up responsibilities."

*(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)*

## **Kerala gives 50% quota for women in panchayat**

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Kerala assembly on Wednesday passed two bills reserving 50% seats in local bodies and panchayats for women.

The provisions of Kerala Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Bill 2009 and Kerala Municipality (Amendment) Bill 2009 would be implemented from the next panchayat and civic polls in the state.

Based on the recommendation of the liaison committee of the ruling LDF, the cabinet had earlier approved the amendment to the Panchayatiraj and Municipality Act to provide the reservation. As of now, 33.33% seats in the state's local bodies are reserved for women. Kerala is only the sixth state to have such a law after Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

*(The Times of India, 18 September, 2009)*

## **Women leaders as crusaders for rural development**

**Radheshyam Jadhav**

PUNE: With the UPA proposing 50 per cent reservation for women in panchayats, the govt is offering women in rural areas an enhanced role in village affairs as well as adding to their might in fighting sexual bias.

So far, the work done by women panchayat members has been impressive. This is particularly true of the state. Based on local needs, rural women working in panchayats in Maharashtra are engaged in developing sustainable development paradigms that have emerged as alternatives to the dominant development models.

Rainwater harvesting systems, waste water management, change in land use patterns, use of natural fertilisers for farming, setting up of small businesses and cottage industries, formation of self-help groups and use of solar energy these are some of the projects women sarpanches have implemented in their villages.

Primary education and women and child healthcare, among the most neglected issues in villages, have also been focussed on. When women took the reins as village heads, they gave utmost priority to establishing primary health centres and also launched special drives to reduce child mortality rates.

"Our men never considered these issues important. But we women were sufferers and when we got a chance to improve the situation, we were determined to bring about a change," says Rutuja Jalgaonkar, former sarpanch of Jalgaon village in Konkan.

Chhaya Kamble, a Dalit farm labourer who became head of Malwadi village in Sangli district, successfully initiated a sanitation movement in her village despite staggering odds. Malwadi became the first village in the state where every household has toilet facilities. Hundreds of women sarpanches, especially in south Maharashtra, similarly initiated sanitation movements in their villages. As a result, the open defecation-free campaign has gained momentum today in the state.

Other sarpanches, like the late Parvati Mali of Kolhapur, undertook campaigns against illicit liquor which later spread across the state. This led the government to enact a law where gram sabhas (village parliaments) were empowered to close down not only illicit but licensed liquor shops as well.

"Women have proven their capacity as leaders. Even in domestic life, it is women who shoulder a majority of the responsibilities. As a woman who understands the needs of her family, she is sensitive to those of the people from her village as well. And, since women are not involved in power politics like most of their male counterparts, they can bring about a major change on the ground. Despite being chained by various hurdles, women leaders have shown the way for bringing about development," Gayatri Devi Pant Pratinidhi, former president of the Satara zilla parishad, stressed.

*(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)*

## **Three Bhagalpur women awarded for remarkable literacy campaign**

**Avijit Biswas**

Bhagalpur (Bihar): Three women from *mahadalit* community have proved that adversities in life are never a barrier for people with strong determination. Had it been otherwise Krishna Devi, Munni Devi and Sunita Devi would not have turned icons of literacy campaign in Bhagalpur.

The three women, who braved odds to attain their

objective, were awarded by the President of India on the occasion of International Literacy Day on Tuesday.

For Munni Devi, who lives with her family members in a makeshift hutment along a railway track at Sabour, it was difficult to become literate. Her family earns livelihood by making hand fans from bamboo.

Unable to read or write in the past, she said she had to convince her family members and neighbours hard to let her join the literacy centre.

Munni said in her effort to become literate she was assisted immensely by Alka Mamta, a volunteer of literacy campaign who had received award from chief minister in the past for her contribution in promoting literacy drive here. A literate Munni is now motivating women from extremely underprivileged section of the society to join the literacy drive.

Krishna Devi, who was elected pramukh of Sabour block in 2006, said she was never comfortable in discharging her duties because of her inability to read or write. "My elder son used to help me in paper work," she said. Krishna, who decided to join the literacy centre to discharge her duties in an effective manner, had to convince the people in her locality first. A neo literate Krishna is now not only motivating the people to become literate, but has also

offered the rooftop of her house for running literacy classes.

Sunita Devi, a literary campaign volunteer of Saino panchayat in Jagdispur block, is known as 'cycle wali didi' in the area. Sunita, whose husband is a handcart puller, said she had to muster courage for peddling through village lanes and by lanes for promoting literacy campaign in the area. She was probably the first woman from her village to take to cycling for achieving her goal. Herself a matriculate, Sunita, apart from championing the cause of literacy, is also associated with pulse polio immunisation drive in the area.

Sailendra Kumar Ghosh, secretary of the district literacy committee, said state resource centre for literacy campaign had forwarded the names of the three women for the President's award in recognition to their contribution in promoting literacy campaign.

*(The Hindustan Times, September 9, 2009)*

### **Women panchayat chiefs sensitised to their rights**

CHENNAI: Women panchayat presidents in the State, who have been denied free exercise of their powers, were made aware of their rights at a two-day workshop on 'Gender Justice for Women Panchayat Presidents' which began here on Thursday.

Jesurethinam, Director, Legal Aid to Women Trust (LAW Trust), said when it comes to protecting the village land or a natural resource the panchayat presidents were unable to take any action against violators. K. Krishnaveni, Co-ordinator, Human Rights Advocacy and Research Foundation (HRF), said even after quietly withdrawing the powers of panchayat president through government orders or circulars, the information about it was not informed or

communicated to them. So in many issues these women were unable to take a proper decision, she pointed out. V. Geetha, Social Activist and Writer, said the women presidents were under pressure from the community. They should realise their financial powers and should not become puppet in the hands of ruling parties in the State.

The workshop is being jointly organised by HRF, LAW Trust and Society for Integrated Rural Development.

*(The Hindu, September 25, 2009)*

### **Caste panchayats, the bane of villagers**

**Palak Nandi**

Jaipur: If the villages in neighbouring Haryana are often governed on the diktats of khap panchayats, the situation in the desert state is much worse. The khap panchayats in the state are among the several streams

of jati (caste) panchayats, most of which have only strengthened over the years and have more than a little say in the lives of their community members.



In fact, the existence of caste panchayats in a state buckling under a stringent caste system and social hierarchy is hardly a surprise. But what is shocking is their barbaric approach to situations arising in the society or personal lives of community members.

Members of khap panchayats are not the only ones playing the role of watchdogs for their community in Rajasthan. Rather, almost every caste in the state, from Rajputs to Brahmins and Gujjars to Bawarias, have their panchayats at village levels and even in the cities, all of whom ensure that the norms are followed.

Blame it on the uneven urbanisation, lack of industrialisation or simply the cold nexus between the castes and the political parties, the caste panchayats have only gained more strength over the years. They are the most powerful in central Rajasthan and in the eastern belt. Contempt of the orders results in "huka pani bandh" (social boycott and providing no water and food) and also vigorous punishments like slashing, beating and even rape and honour killing.

"We receive several complaints of women being beaten up publicly, being stripped or couples and families ostracised in their areas. Most cases go unreported because of the fear of the caste leaders," says Kavita Srivastava, general secretary, PUCL Rajasthan.

Through caste panchayats the community elders ensure that the norms are followed -- all in the name of purifying the society.

"The jati panchayats are run on the 'purity pollution' principle which helps them preserve their dominance in the society. The element of purity in a society and allows the caste panchayats to act dictatorially," says Dr Rajesh Gupta, head of the sociology department at Rajasthan University. In Rajasthan, the caste panchayats are not only common among relatively less educated castes like the Gujjars or Jats but are

prevalent in well off castes like Rajputs and Brahmins. A caste panchayat often delivers barbaric judgments and in most cases those at the receiving end are women. "It is the failure of the government which has neither been able to control discrimination nor ensure the rule of law. The main reasons that the caste panchayats have flourished are the divisive education system that we follow and the political parties which view the castes as vote-banks and hence refrain from reacting to any barbaric incident," explains Gupta.

For the members of the community, the verdicts of the panchayats can neither be ignored nor disregarded. Despite the youth of the community disagreeing to several of them, there is nothing much they can do. "It is transferred to us from ancestors that panchayats are the final authority," said Shiv Kumar Choudhary, member of Yuva Jat Sabha.

Son of a prominent member of a khap panchayat in Alwar says, "I remember when I informed my family about wanting to marry a girl from my village, whose gotra was same as ours. My father hit me with a stick and got me married within a week to a girl of his choice. When he failed to understand his son's feelings, how can he ever understand what a stranger's feelings are?" Adds his friend, "Arguing with the panch only means inviting trouble for you and your family. It is best to keep quiet."

However, not all have lost hope. "We have done our best to make people understand that there is only one law in the country. Only better awareness and education can take them to the right path," said advocate Kishan Singh Gujjar, who campaigns against mritu bhoj (an evil tradition in which a feast is given on the death of a person by the family of the dead person).

*(The Times of India, September 18, 2009)*

## **Gruesome rulings of caste panchayats** **Kshitiz Gaur**

AJMER: There are over 250 temples of Kul Devis in Pushkar alone, where the caste (jati) panchayats meet. They often witness the gruesome and conservative

rulings of these panchayats'. The community leaders claim that not obeying the tyrannous verdicts of panchayats means going against religion.

Central Rajasthan, including Ajmer, Bhilwara, Nagaur and Tonk the major part of Rawat, is inhabited by Gujjars, Kumawats Nayak, Jats, Suthars, Snansis, Kanjars, Chamars and Lohars.

In Rawat society panchayats play a major role in organising child marriages during Aakha Teej. "Once the panchayat decides then the family has to obey the orders and if they do not the child will never be allowed to marry within their society," said Ratan Singh Rawat of Makhupura. There are cases when the families have disobeyed the child marriage orders the

community banned the family from participating in social functions.

In Kumawats the nathe pratha' is prevalent where the panchayat decides whom a man or a woman can cohabit with. Once the orders are passed by the panchayat both families have to obey. "This is the social method to avoid divorce or widowhood within society and the young man and woman can live their life within society. It also helps to stop prostitution within society," a member of the panchayat' claimed.

*(The Times of India, September 18, 2009)*

## **Khap panchayats seek legal claws**

**Divya A**

NEW DELHI: Irked at being equated with the Taliban and kangaroo courts, khap panchayats in Haryana are now determined to get some legal sanction. Soon, they will draw up a set of recommendations for making "suitable" amendments to the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) at the state level so that their rulings become valid under law.

Khaps are traditional area-based community organizations whose rulings have no legal sanction. In keeping with tradition, khap panchayats oppose marriages within the same 'gotra' (lineage) and are known to have meted out harsh punishments to "erring" young couples.

At a two-day meeting in Rohtak that ended on Sunday, the Sarv Khap Panchayat, a conglomerate of various khaps, decided to set up a core committee to suggest amendments to the Act to disallow same-gotra and same-village marriages as per Jat tradition.

Lt Col (retd) Chander Singh Dalal, an advocate in Rohtak who organized the "seminar", said: "After elections, I plan to send the draft recommendations to each of the 90 MLAs and persuade them to bring a Bill in the assembly. I am sure it won't be opposed. Once the amendments are brought in, there'll be no place for dispute."

Justice (retd) Devi Singh Teotia, a former judge of the Punjab & Haryana HC, who actively participated in

the Sarv Khap Panchayat, said: Khap leaders are keepers of Jat tradition and they have lately been facing flak for it. If the amendments come through, there will be no more clashes between tradition and the law, and they (the khap leaders) won't be maligned.

He said the amendments will be sought at the state level, so that they apply to any marriage taking place in Haryana. One of the sections of the Hindu Marriage Act says that you can't marry your brother or sister, unless custom permits. This exception clause was added for some south Indian customs where sibling marriages are allowed under extreme circumstances. Since Jat custom doesn't permit marriage within the same gotra and in the gotra of one's parents, we can seek a similar clause.

Similarly, certain other sections need small alterations, he said. The meeting, attended by more than 150 khap leaders besides intellectuals, doctors and social activists from the community, also debated ways to improve the khap's image in the media. Teotia said he suggested that a handful of educated people from the community should be nominated to assist khap leaders in taking decisions and help them in media management.

*(The Times of India, 9 September 2009)*

## **Panchayats to compile biodiversity registers**

KOZHIKODE: Olavanna gram panchayat in Kerala, which was taken up as a pilot project for preparing a people's biodiversity register in the district, is expected to formally declare the completion of its register on September 30.

The panchayat, which started work on the registry in May 2009, has completed 75 per cent of the work. One panchayat each from all districts has been chosen for implementing the pilot project for preparing biodiversity register by the Kerala State Biodiversity Board.

The importance of preparing biodiversity register was highlighted at a one-day workshop for grama panchayat presidents and secretaries here on Thursday. District panchayat president K.P. Kunhammed Kutty inaugurated the workshop. Deputy director of panchayats N. Suraj presided. District coordinator of the Board M.K. Sreekumar, district secretary of the Kerala grama panchayat association and Darshanam Samskarika Vedi representative M.A. Johnson also spoke.

### **Mandatory**

Every gram panchayat, municipality and corporation will have to prepare the biodiversity register. The authority of the biodiversity will be wrested in the respective local body. This is ensured in the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 and Biological Diversity Rules, 2004.

As per these legislations, each grama panchayat, municipality and corporation will have to form a Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC). The BMCs will comprise the president (president of the respective local body) and secretary (secretary of the local body).

There will be six other members who will be nominated by the panchayat committee. They could be an agricultural representative, Collectors\traders of non-timber forest produces, fishermen, 'nattu vaidyans,' organisations using biodiversity, social workers, teachers and researchers. Two of the members should be women and one should belong to the Scheduled Caste\Scheduled Tribe community.

The members should be those residing in the panchayat area and should be included in the voters list of the panchayat. Panchayat members cannot be members of the BMC. Officials of the Forest and Wildlife Department, Agriculture Department, Animal Husbandry Department, Health Department, Fisheries Department, Education Department and research institutions will be special invitees on these committees. The local MLA and MP will be invitees to the meetings of the BMCs.

The Kuruvattoor grama panchayat in the district has been selected for the next phase of the programme for preparation of biodiversity. A BMC has been formed in the panchayat and the next step was to form ward-level committees.

P.K. Mohanan, senior programme coordinator of the Board, said most of the local bodies were not showing much interest in preparing the registers. However, local bodies in Malabar area were an exception. He said the local bodies should show an active interest in the preparation of this register, as it was important for the future generation.

Representatives from 70 out of the 78 gram panchayats in the district participated in the workshop.

*(The Hindu, August 28, 2009)*

## **Panchayat's initiative towards cleaner environment**

**M. Srinivas**

HYDERABAD: It's picture perfect. Imagine living in a lush green environment away from the hustle-bustle of the city with the sounds of traffic virtually non-existent. You wake up to the chirping of birds and the

rising Sun over the lake and go for a walk in a pollution-free environment, all making every moment of life worth living.

A stroll into the lanes and by-lanes of Pragathinagar Colony, beyond Kukatpally and opposite Shamshiguda Lake, there's greenery all around, well laid roads and streetlights. From garbage collection to maintenance of parks, roads and streetlights and religious activities, this gram panchayat is a model.

### **No polythene covers**

The ban on using polythene covers, sale of 'gutka', soft drinks with chemicals and a penalty for felling trees enables Pragathinagar to be environmentally-safe. A series of meetings with shopkeepers urging them not to use plastic carry bags yielded positive results and the gram panchayat also gave cloth bags to the residents to use while shopping. Every household has been given two dustbins for garbage collection, one each for the biodegradable and the non-biodegradable waste. The biodegradable waste is collected in a tractor everyday for vermi-compost. Tea vendors have been asked to use paper glasses and plates for serving tea and snacks.

Planting of two saplings in every house is mandatory. "The penalty for chopping trees is Rs.10,000 and it is refunded if the owner plants a sapling. Special teams supervise works all the time," explains Deputy Sarpanch Ch. Sudheer Reddy. Collection of taxes was also computerised to ensure transparency.

### **Security**

Apart from two beat constables from Dundigal police station, a dozen lathi-wielding private security personnel are on night duty and two during the day. Mr. Reddy says the ISO-certified colony was formed in 1992, across 850 acres by Allywn employees after bifurcating from Bachupally in Dundigal. Most of the employees purchased a 250-square yard plot for Rs. 80,000, that now cost Rs.70 lakh. The colony boasts of a swank community hall, swimming pool, gymnasium, tennis court, cricket ground, a park and an auditorium.

*(The Hindu, July 17, 2009)*

## **Wall built in Mahuva village to battle salinity ingress**

DUGERI (Bhavnagar district): This is a story of sweet success. To fight salinity ingress and save their crops, villagers of the 5,000-strong coastal village of Dugeri in Mahuva taluka of Bhavnagar district have constructed a wall to prevent rainwater from flowing into the sea.

This has led to formation of a rainwater reservoir across 172 hectares which will enable farmers grow three crops a year. What's most striking is that though the work was done under the Central government's rural employment guarantee scheme, more than 200 workers were living above the poverty line.

As a result of the wall, groundwater is being converted from saline to sweet. The soil wall, 300 metre in length, 20 ft in width and 6 feet in height, was built in two months. With this effort, the villagers are showing the way in water conservation and preventing environmental degradation.

The sarpanch and her husband also joint the effort to encourage others to follow suit. Says sarpanch Manju Shiyal, "It was to give dignity to the work and

highlight the importance of water conservation to improve agricultural productivity in the village."

"Farmers in the village have not been able to get good yields due to salinity ingress. It is an old problem. Land is fertile and if sweet groundwater is available, farmers can harvest three crops a year. We used the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) effectively in this effort," says Bharat Shiyal, husband of the sarpanch.

According to a gram panchayat official, this year 326 job cards were issued. "Of this, 200 cardholders are living above the poverty line and worked under NREGA just to make their farmlands fertile. This was the spirit in which villagers worked," he elaborates.

Farmers expect this water conservation effort to benefit nearly 1,400 acres of agricultural land. "It will help recharge groundwater as soon as the whole reservoir fills with water. Currently, around 200 people need to migrate for employment. This will soon stop as sweet groundwater will trigger agricultural activity throughout the year," says farmer

Mavji Bhaliya.

Getting fresh groundwater is more important than economic returns from employment under NREGA, says villager Sukha Bambhania. Villagers plan to

build more walls and do not want a single drop of fresh water to slip into the sea.

*(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)*

### **Involve tribals in forest management: Study**

PUNE: Unless viewed from the perspective of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), forest management and governance will prove to be detrimental to the forests and the life of tribal communities that share a symbiotic relationship with the forests. It is therefore, necessary to involve tribal people in the designing of forest management plans.

This recommendation was a part of a recently-released study conducted by the Maharashtra NTFP forum, a collective of seven organisations spread across the state, working for tribal rights, conservation and regeneration of forests and forest-based livelihoods.

Broadly speaking, NTFP are considered to be any commodity obtained from forests, including nuts, seeds, berries, medicinal plants, fuelwood, foliage, peat and fodder.

Organisations like Maharashtra Arogya Mandal (Pune), Lok Panchayat (Ahmednagar), ECONET (Pune), Gramin Samasya Mukti Trust (Yavatmal), Lok Paryay (Aurangabad), Navi Ummad (Nanded) and Srujan (Yavatmal), were a part of the study. ECONET facilitates the collective and is involved in extending human and institution development, legal and advocacy support.

The baseline study conducted in 14 districts of Maharashtra- Raigad, Thane, Nandurbar, Ratnagiri, Nashik, Ahmednagar, Pune, Satara, Aurangabad, Latur, Amravati, Kinwat-Nanded, Yavatmal and Gadchiroli - covered 1,400 families in 70 typical

tribal villages.

Village-level data was gathered to explore the overall situation and the percentage of communities dependent on NTFPs for their food, fodder, rituals and medical needs. Some of the families studied were the nomadic pastoralists and communities with life stock, keeping in mind grass/fodder as one of the main NTFPs.

Krishna Srinivasan, director, law and advocacy programme, ECONET, said NTFPs are the backbone of tribal existence as their culture, food and health security is dependent on them. He drew attention towards the challenge of addressing the alarming rate of alienation of tribal land under the garb of development projects like mining, dams, Special Economic Zones etc.

Executive trustee of ECONET Anuradha Krishna said, "The study could be utilised to claim community forest rights under the Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006) as it captures the interdependence of the tribals-forest relationship."

Social researcher and writer Milind Bokil, underlined the dire need to save forests and other natural wealth from the hands of political leadership and bureaucracy and restore them to the safe hands of tribal communities. "This will result in the democratisation of natural wealth," he remarked.

*(The Times of India, August 27, 2009)*

### **50 villages selected for overall development**

CHIKMAGALUR: Under Suvarna Grama Yojana, 50 villages have been selected for overall development.

The government has earmarked Rs 25 cr to implement this project.

Kantharaj, development wing deputy secretary, Zilla Panchayat, said survey work to enlist problems and facilities has been given to some NGOs and based on that report separate proposals of each selected village will be sent to the government.

He said, "This scheme is based on the project suggested by the then Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam, who envisaged Providing Urban Facilities in Rural Areas (PURA). All selected villages should be provided good roads, potable drinking water, health facilities, drainages, employment training to the

youths, agriculture, sericulture and horticultural crops development and total sanitation.

He said in the first phase, seven villages in Chikmagalur taluk, 13 villages in Kadur taluk, four villages in Koppa taluk, five villages each in Narasimharajapura and Sringeri taluks, eight villages in Muderegere and four in Tarikere taluks have been identified.

*(The Times of India, August 5, 2009)*

### **“Panchayats should sensitise people to human rights”**

KARUR: Conscientious people, who behave with others as they expect others to behave with them, are guardian angels of human rights.

It is essential that human rights should be valued in as much as we value human lives, District Collector, J. Uma Maheswari said here recently. Addressing a training session on human rights for panchayat leaders, SHG federation leaders and NGOs, organized by the COODU Trust and National Human Rights Commission, Dr. Uma Maheswari pointed out that the zeal with which we pursue rights should be commensurate to the duties we discharge as law abiding citizens.

Living harmoniously with mutual admiration and respect displaying exemplary human considerations could help create a congenial atmosphere, she said. Elected representatives in panchayats, self - help groups, women and voluntary organizations that work with the people at the grass roots could help sensitise people on human rights, she said.

Superintendent of Police, R. Dhinakaran inaugurated the session while Executive Director of People's Watch, Tamil Nadu, Henry Tiphagne, delivered the keynote address. Project Officer, Mahalir Thittam, S. Ayyaru, Director, CCODU Trust, S. Jagadeesan, and Coordinator, D. Sathasivam spoke as well.

#### **Technical session**

In the technical session, Lucy Zavier of Dindigul spoke on women's rights, while Panneerselvam held forth on human rights for marginalized groups and advocate Martin of Tiruchi spoke on the role of non-governmental organisations. State Coordinator of the People's Watch, G. Ganesan spoke on the Right to Education and Information Act.

#### **Interactive session**

Representatives of SHGs, panchayat leaders and voluntary organizations had an interactive session that generated lively debate and experience sharing.

*(The Hindu, September 11, 2009)*

### **SEMCOM students to make Anand villagers computer literate**

VADODARA/ANAND: Locals of about 20 villages in Anand district will be imparted basic computer skills, thanks to a unique mission on which students of Vallabh Vidyanagar-based SEMCOM college will embark from next month.

To celebrate golden jubilee of Gujarat, starting from October 1, 60 students from the college will camp in villages under project Gramyatra' (Homestay for Homeliness) for a period of three days. Under this programme, they will not only try and understand problems faced by villagers, but will also teach

villagers basic computer skills through a six-hour module designed by them.

While the initial plan is to make around 125 villagers computer literate, the college plans to involve all its 1,200 students in this activity.

Anand district development officer (DDO) Rahul Gupta has already conducted a half-day training programme for students at the college to orient them about life in villages. Taluka development officers (TDOs) in the district and sarpanch of respective villages, too, will be arranging logistic support for students, who in batches of three each, will camp in villages.

"Students from affluent class and cities have no idea about life in villages. Also, today's pedagogy doesn't sensitise students towards fellow citizens. Through this project, they will be able to get firsthand experience and exposure," says SEMCOM director Dr Nikhil Zaveri, adding that not restricting to

villages in Anand district, the college plans to take the project further to villages of neighbouring Kheda district and later to other districts of Gujarat.

Knowledge management of the experience gained by participating students will be used to prepare a comprehensive village development plan, which will be submitted to government agencies.

The students in consultation with professor Sarvesh Trivedi have designed the computer skill module, which is part of SEMCOM's social outreach cell initiative.

"Fortunately, most panchayat offices in these villages are equipped with computers. At the same time, our students, too, will carry laptops, so that villagers get a feel of latest technologies," Zaveri adds.

*(The Times of India, September 23, 2009)*

## **Government to Centre: no panchayat Act for Delhi**

**New Delhi :** The Delhi government will soon approach the Centre for removing Delhi from the ambit of the Panchayati Raj Act, otherwise applicable in all parts of the country. According to officials in the Delhi government, the 342 villages in the Capital are governed by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, so panchayats are not needed anymore.

"We will soon write to the Panchayati Ministry for its approval in this regard. There are no panchayats left, and after 1983 we have not had any panchayat elections, as councillors are elected the representatives of the city's villages," Chief Secretary Rakesh Mehta said.

This move was precipitated by the filing of a PIL, where the petitioner had questioned the efficacy of the Panchayati Raj Act in the absence of panchayats. According to government officials, the last panchayat elections in the Capital were held in 1983.

"After that, the government has not legally accepted any panchayat in any village. But the Act has certain

provisions that are applicable still and may pose legal problems for the state government. If the panchayats are redundant in the Capital, we might as well do away with the Act," an official said.

The last panchayat elections were held a few years before Rajiv Gandhi introduced the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, under which Panchayati Raj was made a law. While the existing panchayats were dissolved by the Delhi Lieutenant-Governor in 1989, villages have been appointing their own panchayats through an internal election.

"People usually appoint their own leaders, who are mainly the elders of the village but these panchayats have no legal sanctity. The issues discussed in these usually pertain to community matters and issues that need to be brought to the notice of the elected members," DPCC general secretary Naresh Kumar said.

*(The Indian Express, August 21, 2009)*

## **49 villages up in arms over civic merger**

### **Sandhya Nair**

MUMBAI: The 49 villages included in the newly formed Vasai Virar Municipal Corporation (VVMC) without their consent, are now in the process of approaching the court for reprieve. The villagers have also planned to take their protest to the Mumbai-Ahmedabad National Highway.

The VVMC was formed by the state government through a notification dated July 3, 2009, with the merger of four municipal councils of Vasai, Navghar-Manikpur, Nalasopara, Virar and 53 villages. However, 49 village panchayats had voted against their inclusion in the corporation.

"It is a violation of the 73rd and 74th amendments of Article 243 of the Indian Constitution, which give the decisive authority to Panchayati Raj institutions for their own development. We are in the process of moving the court against the decision," said Vijay Machado, president of the Swabhimani Vasaikar Sanghatna, which has been spearheading the agitation.

49 villages took the unanimous decision of staying away from urbanisation because of the fear of getting trapped in a concrete jungle and the destruction of the greenery around Vasai-Virar, said Machado. The four villages that have consented to being part of the corporation are located close to the urban areas and couldn't resist the uncontrolled development, he added. Over 12,000 villagers had signed individual protest papers against inclusion in the corporation but none were called for a hearing when the decision was taken, he pointed out.

After Sunday's protest that saw over 15,000 people come out on to the streets, the villagers are intensifying their agitation further. On August 7, villagers will organise a rasta roko on the national highway and across the Vasai taluka. It will be followed by an indefinite hunger strike. In addition, beginning August 1, villagers including the dissolved sarpanchs and gram panchayat members will go on a hunger strike, sitting in a chain formation.

Not only were the villagers kept in the dark about their inclusion, the calculation of population density required for the formation of the Mahanagarpalika was also wrong, 'alleged' Marvel Tuscano of the Nirbhay Jan Manch. According to the 2001 census, population growth in rural areas was five persons per hectare. In urban areas, it was 124 persons per hectare. Now in 2009, this rate might not be less than 250 persons per hectare in the urban sector. Also the growth rate in rural areas is below 10% and in urban area it is up to 172 to 236 %, added Tuscano.

One of the major reasons for protest is also the discontinuation of benefits of Panchayat Raj from the central government. Adivasis form a large part of the population in Vasai-Virar and they depend on various government schemes for survival. They will be deprived of their livelihood, said K K Prakashan, of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), which has also been fighting to save the green belt of the region. Over 40% of the villagers are into fishing and farming activities, he added.

*(Times of India, 31 July 2009)*

## **Gujarat villagers to boycott panchayats**

### **Amrita Didyala**

**Ahmedabad :** In a severe indictment of the functioning of the panchayat system here, gram panchayats in at least 62 villages in the Sihor taluka of Bhavanagar district are facing a possibility of a boycott by villagers in protest against their poor performance. The panchayats have drawn the ire of

the villagers for failing to act on development resolutions passed more than two years ago.

"Over 62 villages in our taluka have been facing a similar situation where resolutions have been lying at either the Mamlatdar's office or at the Taluka Vikas



Adhikari office for over two to three years,” says Savita J Rathore, Sarpanch of Kantodiya. “Most of the decisions related to BPL and Antodaya ration cards remain unaddressed in the process, which is infuriating villagers,” said a panchayat member from Ambla village.

In a similar incident last month, 58 gram panchayats across Anjar and Gandhidham talukas of Kutch district had refused to convene gram sabhas in their areas labelling it as a futile exercise in view of most resolutions lying unimplemented. The villagers had formed the ‘Anjar Gandhidham Gram Panchayat Pratinidhi Manch (AGGPPM)’ and under its aegis submitted a memorandum to the Taluka Development Officers of Anjar and Gandhidham.

While the government has received no official complaint from these villages, the authorities indicate

that similar problems at the village-level had happened in the past too, but such collective action by villagers was clearly a first. State Development Commissioner Vipul Mitra said, “Villages have aired grievances about the performance of the panchayats, but such panchayats form a minuscule part of the over 1,30,000 gram panchayats. They had never indicated a system failure; there were village-specific isolated cases.” He said that he would have to study the current situation before commenting on it.

Bhavnagar District Development Officer D P Joshi said, “This is the first time that a collective undercurrent of resentment has been brought to our notice and we will try to solve the issue.”

*(The Indian Express, September 24, 2009)*

### **‘Panchayat chief not presenting village accounts’**

Tirupur: A group of residents of K. Krishnapuram village urged Collector C. Samayamoorthy to look into the village accounts.

They said that the panchayat president had not been presenting the accounts at the gram sabha meetings over the last few months despite the opposition from the public. They represented their grievances to Mr. Samayamoorthy during the grievances meeting organised by the district administration at the Collectorate here on Monday. They also alleged that the (panchayat) administration was not implementing infrastructure development projects to commensurate with the increasing needs of the population.

#### **Roads in bad shape**

The arterial roads at Kamanacikenpalayam and Krishnapuram were in a bad shape for long and new sanitary complexes had not come up for the last few years, the villagers said. Another group of people from Uppilipalayam submitted a memorandum to the Collector seeking his intervention to stop the activities of some people, who, according to them,

had been indulging in conversion.

#### **Conversion**

Uneasy moments prevailed on the Collectorate premises for a few minutes when some students from Uppilipalayam tried to ‘forfeit’ their text books to the Collector to register their protest against the alleged religious conversion propaganda in their hamlet. The crowd dispersed following assurance from the revenue officials that the matter would be investigated.

#### **Inquiry**

Members of Nallur Consumers Welfare Council (NCWC) requested the Collector to conduct an inquiry into the incident in which a real estate company swindled money of investors to the tune of Rs 7.5 crore. N. Shanmugasundaram, president of the NCWC, said the real estate firm took cash from the investors in instalments over 40 months for purchasing ‘non-existent’ plots.

*(The Hindu, August 11, 2009)*

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## Realising Gandhi's swaraj dreams

*Rangan Dutta\**

THE usual official response to the technological empowerment of local self-government institution in the North-east is that it is a non-issue because the panchayat raj institutions, reorganised and strengthened under the Assam Panchayat Act 1994, in conformity with the historic 73rd amendment to the Constitution, made it obligatory for the local bodies in most states to abide by the three Fs — funds, functions and functionaries. At the district panchayat level, the state departments are responsible for 29 development subjects which have been transferred to panchayats under the 11th Schedule and function with varying degrees of accountability to the chairman of the zilla parishad.

The 11th Finance Commission provided Rs 8,000 crore for panchayati raj and the 12th Finance Commission raised this to Rs 20,000 crore and passed it on to the state budget for transfer to panchayats. Moreover, the state finance commissions, set up under the 73rd Amendment, had awarded a scheme of sharing a state's revenues with the panchayats and also "devolved" to them some tax-raising powers such as those on pumps and tractors, fees for use of common resources like grazing land, local markets, house tax, etc.

No doubt, these "devolutions" did not amount to a strong resource base because most states suffer from a continuing resources "crunch" and, therefore, transfers from the Central Finance Commission

Award remain the main source of funds for the panchayat raj institutions. A beginning has been made in the preparation of a district plan, albeit on a less ambitious scale, by merely adding up the district-level schemes under the "transferred" subjects. In Kerala, a remarkable effort to prepare a gram panchayat plan, with inputs from the gram sabha, a voluntary technical corps — a community-based expert group capable of giving people's needs the shape of a plan — has been successfully carried out. Though the real district plan outlining production functions, sectoral problems and institutional problems, a road map for all-round development with equity and justice is still to emerge as a kind of independent, home-grown people's plan, at least there are some thoughts and actions at the grassroots level, as in Kerala and some other states, pointing out the need for capacity building in a socio-economic development effort.

Panchayats are seen as not just elected constitutional bodies for political empowerment of women and the underprivileged in villages through "reservation" schemes but as instruments of development as well. However belatedly, the need for technology management back-up at the panchayat level is being recognised.

In this backdrop, if one examines the working of longstanding autonomous councils set up under the Sixth Schedule in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram and the tribal area specific councils in Manipur and

Assam, the conclusion is irresistible: these are primarily institutions for asserting “local identities” politically and not geared to deal with urgent issues of development with equity and environmental justice, so vital for sustainable development of these biodiversity-rich and ecologically-sensitive areas that fall under the jurisdiction of almost all these councils.

Nearly 50 per cent of India’s forest cover is in the North-east and a good part of it is in council areas. In the Sixth Schedule areas, forests, other than reserved ones, are a district council subject, but not “wildlife” because under the Constitution (Item 17A List III) it is a subject on which both the Centre and the state can legislate. Thus, an amendment to the Sixth Schedule is needed to enable the councils to play their due conservation roles effectively, especially because Manas National Park — a world heritage site – is situated within the Bodoland Territorial Council area. For this, the BTC forest department has to be suitably empowered and equipped with technical staff and other facilities.

As much is also true of other Sixth Schedule areas of Meghalaya and Mizoram and not merely concerning forests, but other sectors like water and hydropower development and mineral exploration reflected in divergent perceptions of the communities and the state and council authorities. This was amply brought out in the uranium mining controversy in Meghalaya and reports of environment damage due to the practice of scientific rat-hole mining of coal in the Jaintia Hills.

The functioning of these local self-government bodies in the North-east and elsewhere suggests the need to adopt a two-pronged approach to technological empowerment so essential for the formulation of district plans and implementation of subjects transferred to panchayat raj institutions and councils. First, transfer of department functionaries of the states to panchayat raj institutions should be “real” and not symbolic to reduce the level of administrative control of the departments to the minimum in the council areas, like those under the BTC which control 40

subjects. This process should be quick-maturing so as to result in the creation of council planning capacity.

There will no doubt be limitations in accountability because of financial and service rules that make state officials answerable to their departmental heads. Nevertheless, working arrangements can be made. In the autonomous councils, a similar coordinating mechanism for development projects can be attempted without creating separate departments. These initiatives will, no doubt, improve planning and implementation capacity.

However, a second, and potentially more effective answer, lies in creating societal capacity in science and technology by promoting the growth of capable voluntary organisations that are community-based and will draw expertise from science and technology institutions at the state and regional levels. In due course, these S&T-capable NGOs should be helped by the state and central agencies to develop a multi-disciplinary capacity to undertake field and adaptive research to identify local issues. A network of such NGOs will put in place the capacity to evaluate schemes, suggest location-specific problems and even solutions and help local bodies to prepare village plans to eventually derive a district plan. The perceptions of such NGOs, when incorporated in the district or council plan, will transform planning from an official desk-oriented activity to participatory planning in the true sense, converting community needs into projects and facilitating participation in appraisal and evaluation.

Implicit in Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of Hind Swaraj was technological self-reliance for the rural community. The steps suggested above may help us to realise his dreams.

*\*The author, a retired Assam-Meghalaya cadre IAS officer, is a Scientific Consultant in the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Govt. of India.*

*(The Statesman, 6 December 2009)*

## Make NREGA new

*Ashwani Kumar*

Much of the public imagination on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has been focussed on stories of corruption and conspiracy theories, with most public policymakers still debating over the merit of entitlement vs direct cash transfer, I would like to raise the stakes, perhaps a little audaciously. The truth is that the fate of NREGA and democracy in India are intertwined. In fact, NREGA is locked in an eccentric paradox: its promise to secure rural livelihood is embedded in the decentralisation of state power, but its implementation is unfortunately driven by a multilayered, centralised, bureaucratic mode of governance.

Take one example. Section 16(3) & (4) of the act clearly states that “every Gram Panchayat shall prepare a development plan” but the strangulating hold of district programme coordinators in the name of scrutinising the adequacy of works has suffocated the spirit of Panchayati Raj. The resurgence of an imperial bureaucracy, one that treats every Gram Panchayat as a den of vices and views every sarpanch as suspect, is hampering the NREGA’s success. Consider the bureaucratic impunity granted by the act. In the era of widening and deepening of democracy in India, Section 30 of the act boldly states that “no suit, prosecution, or other legal proceedings shall lie against the District Programme Coordinator, Programme Officer or any other person who is deemed to be a public servant.” For stark, ironic contrast, read Section 25, which states, “whoever contravenes the provisions of the act shall on conviction be liable to a fine which may extend to one thousand rupees”!

It is no surprise that almost no one in the bureaucracy, including bank and post office staff is hauled up for delayed payment or non-payment of employment allowances or cases of fraud. Check the status of complaints compiled by the rural development ministry. Mostly, replies are awaited for want of action taken by state governments. In short, NREGA

suffers from a governance deficit and not from a resource deficit or lack of ideological commitment. (This doesn’t mean, of course, that NREGA has failed or it needs to be replaced.)

With the reconstitution of the Central Employment Guarantee Council, the time has come to infuse new life into the scheme. Its first task should be to develop a durable and robust mechanism of decreasing bureaucratic control over procedural aspects of implementation and monitoring. This can be done by setting up a NREGA Mission, in which civil society actors could play a significant role. Next, we must strictly follow the provisions of NREGA with regard to the autonomy of Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats in planning, implementation and social auditing. Bureaucratic Rip Van Winkles must wake from their self-induced slumber and re-imagine the implementation of NREGA by genuinely devolving funds, functions and functionaries. In this context, the recent declaration of 2009-10 as the year of the Gram Sabha by the Panchayati Raj ministry is a recognition of the institution’s growing importance as a genuine deliberative and participatory space.

Next, we need to move away from surrogate and ad hoc solutions by vigorous and timely implementation of the District Ombudsman provided for by section 27(1) of the act for grievance redressal and ensuring disciplinary and punitive action against erring persons in a time-bound manner. Selected through public verification among persons of standing and integrity with at least twenty years experience in public administration, law, academics, social work or management, ombudsmen are expected to be independent of central or state governments. Armed with powers to initiate proceedings suo motu within his/her jurisdiction, ombudsmen has the potential to consolidate NREGA in a big way.

One of the long-lasting multiplier effects of the NREGA is new, fast-evolving architecture for

financial inclusion in rural India. Yes, bank and post-office accounts too can be manipulated, and we have not solved the dilemmas of delays in payments; but this should not deter us from deepening the banking in rural India. Since opening branches in all rural locations is difficult, we need to use what is called the Business Correspondent Model — where individuals act as agents for banks — prudently. We should consider examining and extending bank correspondents and facilitators. In a joint initiative with the State Bank of India, the Orissa government has recently decided to cover all the state's Gram Panchayats through correspondents. This also

requires the participation of women in banking activities in the villages; I am hopeful that it is the women who would be ultimately “game changers”. The success of NREGA lies in this transition from inertia to activism, despair to hope, tradition to innovation.

*The writer teaches at the Tata Institute of Social Science in Mumbai and is a member of the Central Employment Guarantee Council.*

*(The Indian Express, 9 October 2009)*

### **NREGS social audit issue turning into people's movement**

JAIPUR: Call it people's mistrust in the motive of the government or simply their desire to see the logical conclusion to the social audits, the issue of large-scale corruption in NREGS is on the threshold of becoming a people's movement in the state.

Despite repeated assurances from chief minister Ashok Gehlot to look into the graft cases and nail the corrupt, more than 1,000 persons from various fields across the state, including well-known social activists, will take to the streets in the state capital on December 15.

The rally would be demanding transparency in NREGS and action against all those found misappropriating funds during the social audit of the scheme at Bhilwara.

The rally will begin from Saheed Smarak and end at Civil Lines crossings where it will culminate into a massive public meeting. The rally would be led by prominent social activists like Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh of Rozgar Evam Suchna Ke Adhikar Abhiyan and other social organisations.

Most of these organisations are involved in the social audits of NREGS work in many parts of the state when the high court put a stay on it after a PIL was filed. However, what irked these organisations is that though the government was quick to pass an order

terminating all social audits after the stay order, it refused to fix a date for its resumption.

What the organisations fear that the court order might just be used by the government as a tool to put curtains on the audit, which has been seeing a lot of turmoil in the state with the gram panchayats protesting against it. "With the panchayat elections round the corner, the government would not like to annoy the local leaders as that would upset the ruling party's calculations," they feel.

The rally would also protest the treatment meted out to many of those involved in the audit at villages and demand action against those responsible. While many of them were threatened with life, others were even beaten up and chased away by villagers.

"There is a big gap between what the government is saying and what it is doing. After what has happened, the social audit has become a joke. People in villages think that they can do anything and get away with it. If the government doesn't take any concrete step now, it will put a question mark on the scheme itself," says Dey.

The organisations have demanded that the government realigns the scheme in such a way that it becomes mandatory to make online for everybody to see all the work and the expenses incurred by the

panchayats, else no money should be given to them.

They have also demanded to make it mandatory for the panchayats to procure materials only from those firms that are registered under sales tax rules so as to do away the system of making payments on kachcha' bills, which is the foremost reason for misappropriation of funds.

The other demands include putting up display boards at all work sites with details of the scheme and the

payments made written/pasted on them for the sake of the workers and all concerned.

Meanwhile, the government met representatives of the organisations and assured them of its will to carry on the audits but sought some more time. But with the issue becoming a people's movement now, the government would have to address it before it is too late.

*(The Times of India, 14 December 2009)*

## **The system strikes back**

*Vidya Subrahmaniam*

To understand why civil society participation in the social audit of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in Rajasthan raised the hackles of a swath of people, among them gram panchayat staff, politicians and bureaucrats, it is necessary to rewind to the October 2009 Bhilwara social audit which was conducted jointly by civil society and the Rajasthan government.

The induction of civil society members into the official NREGS social audit brought experience to the audit teams but, more importantly, it made the oversight process transparent and accountable.

The effect of this was dramatically visible post-Bhilwara. When the audit teams compiled the results of the 10-day-long exercise, they were stunned by the extent of corruption that came to the fore, especially in the purchase of material for civil works under NREGS. Bhilwara had been audited before along with other Rajasthan districts. But these were paper exercises that revealed few lapses, and did not in anyway threaten the tranquil world of the sarpanchs, engineers and Block Development Officers. Bhilwara-2009, on the other hand, invited a swift and strong backlash, and the government backed off realising it had stepped into a quagmire of stealth and corruption.

The Bhilwara audit teams, which examined bills and vouchers relating to material purchases in 11 of Rajasthan's over 9,000 gram panchayats,

conservatively estimated diversion of NREGS funds in the inspected village panchayats at Rs. 1.5 crore (about Rs. 12 lakh per gram panchayat). The sample size may have been too small to allow extrapolation for the more than 9,000 gram panchayats, but it nonetheless gave a fair picture of the overall volume of potential corruption under NREGS — anything between Rs. 800 crore and Rs. 1,000 crore a year. The allocation of NREGS funds for Rajasthan for the year 2009-2010 was Rs. 9,525 crore, up from Rs. 6,175 crore the previous year. This was to be split in the ratio 60-40 between labour wages and material costs.

The plain meaning of this was that roughly a third of the funds allocated for material purchases was being used to line the pockets of a long chain of people — from the sarpanchs, gram sevaks and sachivs (secretaries) at the lowest rung through civil engineers, accountants, contractors, dealers and suppliers to BDOs, going right up to the District Collector in a few cases.

Naturally, a fuller audit held out the threat of bringing down this cosy nexus. The Bhilwara exercise unearthed two sets of irregularities. The padayatris reported back fudged muster rolls, missing job cards, delayed and partial payment of wages as well as the use of machines to displace labour. The auditors in the 11 gram panchayats found a recurring pattern of fake and hand-written bills, exaggerated claims, use of substandard material, and payment by cash or bearer cheque.

The fund diversion was intriguing in the context of a series of Government Orders issued to panchayats and District Collectors advising strict compliance of norms for the purchase of material for projects under Rural Development and NREGS — among them sourcing of supplies only through registered firms, inviting open tender for purchases, ensuring that the dealer possessed a tax compliance certificate from the commercial tax department, and ensuring further that only bills bearing sales tax registration details were accepted for payment.

A GO dated February 16, 2007 reiterated the norms and regretted the heavy loss to the exchequer due to the flouting of norms by the gram panchayats and panchayat samitis. A second GO, dated June 18, 2007, brought the discomfiting results of previous social audits (done again by Aruna Roy and her team) to the attention of District Collectors, noting that these had revealed continued submission of *kaccha* (unofficial) bills by gram panchayats. The GO instructed the Collectors to keep a strict watch on the quantity and quality of material supplies going into NREGS works. It also asked them to ensure that payments were made only to registered, bonafide firms.

### ***GOs unheeded***

A whole two years later, the Bhilwara social audit would discover that the GOs went unheeded. In the event, Bhilwara-2009 threw up a curious situation. The coming into record of phony bills brought the commercial tax authorities into the picture. Queries went out to suppliers who had received payment for material sold to the gram panchayats. On the one hand, the fake bill trail led to sarpanchs, engineers, BDOs and politicians. On the other, firms were asked to produce Value Added Tax-paid bills, which opened a can of worms. VAT evasion being easy to detect, the entire supply chain stood to be exposed, setting off panic among sarpanchs, politicians, bureaucrats and manufacturers, who collectively decided to challenge the government on its move to extend the Bhilwara model of civil society-government social audit to the whole of Rajasthan.

With protests mounting, the State government altered the norms it had itself held sacred in letter after letter.

It instructed District Collectors to sanction payments even on *kaccha* bills provided the material supplied was fully utilised and was of assured quality. More startlingly, the GO dated November 10, 2009 announced VAT deduction at source for sanctioned payments. This was an incredible case of a government accepting the legal validity of *kaccha* bills.

The government had no justification for letting the offenders off the hook given the extent of fraud uncovered in Bhilwara. Moreover, feedback from the now abandoned November-December, 2009 audit programmes, and an inspection done by the government itself would strongly corroborate the Bhilwara findings.

The Rajasthan government undertook to carry out an inspection of NREGS works in the Soniana gram panchayat in Chittorgarh district essentially to appease the social activists who were upset by the suspension of the November-December audits. Filed as recently as December 6, 2009, the inspection report established pervasive irregularities in inviting tenders as well as the absence of technical sanction for most civil works. But this was nothing compared to the fact that over the years the gram panchayat had gradually edged out the labour component from NREGS, seriously undermining the very premise of the job guarantee programme.

The Soniana panchayat's fund utilisation for 2009-2010 showed that a mere 10 per cent of the allocated Rs. 3.81 crore had gone towards labour wages as against the mandated 60 per cent. The funds drawn by the panchayat increased every year, from Rs. 22.70 lakh in 2007-2008 to Rs. 3.81 crore in 2009-2010. And progressively the proportion spent on labour wages decreased, from 67 per cent in 2007-2008 to a shocking 10 per cent in the current year. This led to one of two obvious conclusions: Either poor people needing employment were being defrauded or money was flowing to a panchayat that did not seem to need employment.

The government also had feedback from a few gram panchayats where the audit work had made some



progress despite the protest. In the Sapotra gram panchayat in Karauli district, auditors established work measurement irregularities amounting to a total of Rs. 17.52 lakh.

These revelations coupled with the Bhilwara findings made a persuasive case for civil society participation in NREGS social audit. However, instead of standing firm, the government bought into the argument of the protestors that Aruna Roy and others were busybodies who had appropriated the rights and duties of the gram sabha. In support of their claim, the protestors cited a set of amendments introduced to NREGA in December 2008. Clause 13(B) (iii) of the amendments states that social audit will be done by the gram sabha which will elect from itself a Social Audit Committee of workers experienced in NREGA work. On the basis of this they also obtained two court stays against the inclusion of social activists in social audit.

And yet the same amendments also establish the public's rights in NREGS social audit in the following respects: to inspect all relevant documents, including complete files; to submit any information; and to attend, observe and participate in the audit without intervening in its proceedings. Ms Roy is at pains to point that the activists at no point took the audit into their own hands, but that they were officially inducted by the government and went into the panchayats as part of a government team.

### ***Basic principle***

There is also the basic principle of audit which is that it must be done by a people external to the works being audited. To invest this right exclusively in the gram sabhas is to make them at once jury, judge and

executioner. Forget the NGOs, the Rajasthan government said as much in a note it addressed to District Collectors. Dated April 2, 2009, the note points out that in a large number of cases social audit forums are constituted, not by the gram sabha but by the sarpanch, who packs it with his/her spouse and other relatives. The note goes on to say, "it is a fact that wherever NGOs have conducted audit in open hearings, a large number of irregularities were found. As compared to that, the irregularities detected in social audit by forums are negligible and put a question mark on their credibility."

The government had enough and more evidence to make a strong case before the courts for civil society participation in social audit. Instead it suspended the audits — without being asked to do so.

It is now widely accepted that in many parts of the country, NREGS has emerged as a lifeline for the rural poor. It has had a cascading effect, raising wage levels even in the private sector. The biggest threat to the job guarantee programme was always control of the funds by a corrupt elite. Statutory social audit was a radical and innovative feature of the Act; it introduced the concept of vigilance to opaque and non-accountable systems.

The battle being fought in the panchayats, streets, offices, and courts of Rajasthan is therefore not just about social audit. It is about who will have control over the funds and priorities of the world's largest guaranteed programme to fight poverty and generate employment — one that has the power to change the complexion of rural India.

*(The Hindu, 17 December 2009)*

## **NREGS helps villagers build road to happiness**

***Sibabrata Champatiray***

BHUBANESWAR: For Mamuni Behera, a college student attending classes was once a nightmare. Not that she hated studies but it due the fact that she had to walk for few kms from house in Seulakunda village

to reach Chandanpur canal embankment where she would board a bus to Bhubaneswar.

It is not that Mamuni's family could not afford a

bicycle. Having or not having a bicycle for moving to and fro of Seulakunda village under Balipatna block hardly mattered as the lone road to the village was just a footway, not suitable even for bicycles let alone motorcycles. The situation was worse during the monsoon.

But things have changed. Mamuni now-a-days happily pedals directly to her college. The approach road to her village has been transformed into a 20 feet-wide road, the construction work completed just a month ago.

The improvement of road, as well as the positive change in the lives of the villagers is attributed to National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Quite interestingly, a majority of the villagers are daily wagers, who work in various construction sites in Bhubaneswar. However, their village was devoid of communication, which was fulfilled under the flagship poverty-alleviation programme.

Officials of Khurda district administration, who are involved with the implementation of the scheme, pointed out that the villagers though were facing trouble with the lack of a good road, never bothered since they were earning more at the private construction works than the NREGA work. However, when they were motivated and made to realise that tiny contribution on their part would usher in a lasting

positive change to the village, they understood, appreciated and actively participated. No wonder, the 20-feet and about one km long road was completed just within two weeks.

“The road work started on 24 October and was finished by 8 November this year. With a cost of Rs 1 lakh, we could create 733 person days and were able to finish the work” said DRDA project director Mr Manoranjan Patnaik.

Seulakunda village is not just an isolated case, in fact, scores of villages have started tasting the benefits of scheme. Balugaon and Banpur areas, which were known for large-scale migration to other states, are also showing good response in executing the NREGS project work, thus considerably mitigating the migration rate, he claimed. Khurda district which could spend about 35 per cent of the total allocation in previous years, has been able to spend more than 68 per cent of the received funds till date this fiscal.

Of the 11,508 persons applied for work, as many as 10,640 have been provided with work this year; while 1,66,470 man-days have been created. A total of 19,784 bank/post office accounts have been opened for wage payment. Similarly, social audits have been conducted in 140 gram panchayats of the total 168 GPs in the district, official sources maintained.

*(The Statesman, 18December 2009)*

## **NREGS corruption: Villagers threatened for protesting**

JAIPUR: Call an urge to plunge into the controversial or simply the need to set the records straight. But for three villagers of the Rampuramatoria gram panchayat in Hanumangarh who had raised their voice at the gram sabha on the on going anomalies in the NREGS at the village it was an experience that they will not forget.

For it not only a series of intimidation that followed but when three villagers arrived in Jaipur recently their family member Ram Pratap Matoria were beaten up as a warning that the same fate awaited them if

they opened their mouth to officials. Rajendra Matoria, Om Prakash Matoria and Raji Ram Matoria of the Rampuramatoria gram panchayat had been awaiting for the November 15 gram sabha when they wanted to vent their ire at the gross irregularities in the NREGA work.

"Not only the work that is being taken up under NREGA is shabbily done but there is a lot of anomaly in payments. And we felt the best forum to address this would be the gram sabha as all are welcomes to attend it," says Rajendra Matoria.

But even on their way to the sabha, according to the trio, the sarpanch had deployed about a 100 to 150 stick-wielding persons to ensure that no one speaks up against him.

"The moment we got up to speak we were intimidated, scolded and pushed. We tried to resist but were not allowed to open our mouth. And later when we came to Jaipur on personal work they thought we were here to complain and beat up our relatives," he adds.

"This is exactly the hype that has been created by the social audit. Even individuals are now standing up against corruption in NREGA. But more importantly

the point to be noted is that these three people are just simple villagers and they have all the right to ask question pertaining to schemes in their village but even they were made to keep quiet," says Nikhil Dey, an activist involved with the social audit of NREGA at Bhilwara.

"So it is not just a question of protests against the social audit being done by NGOs or by those outside the sabha, it is almost anyone who points out corruption in the scheme that is being targeted," he adds.

(The Times of India, 12 December 2009)

## **Assam to use biometric cards for wage disbursement under NREGA**

*Digambar Patowary*

Guwahati: The Assam Government has decided to use biometric card system, one of the latest tools of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for disbursement of wage under the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)'s scheme implementation. Thus, Assam would be the second state in the country after Andhra Pradesh to use biometric card system' for wage disbursement under NREGA implementation.

Assam Panchayat and Rural Development minister Chandan Brahma disclosed this here on Tuesday. According to him, in view of huge size of the NREGA programme it is necessary to make best use of latest Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the facility would help in ensuring effective implementation and proper management of the Programme but will also bring transparency and thereby credibility.

"Through this system the job card holders will be able to receive their money without hassle in their own Gaon Panchayat", said Brahma. The scheme would be operational from January next.

The Bio-Metric ATM is equipped with biometric sensor which has finger print authentications as a standard feature and it is possible for rural people to

use just thumb impression on a touch screen which will allow the beneficiaries to withdraw their week's wages. The ATM accepts fingerprint as the means of authentication instead of PIN numbers only as used by other ATMs.

Business correspondent of banks would be responsible for executing of the scheme in presence of head of Gaon Panchayat. The dept has tied up with State Bank of India, Axix Bank and Assam Gramin Vikas Bank (a rural bank) for issuing Biometric Card and disbursement of wages under NREGA scheme.

The state Govt. would have to pay 2 per cent service tax for implementation of the biometric card.

Brahma informed that the state Panchayat and Rural Development Dept. had issued 34 lakhs job cards among rural households. In the current financial year, up to October, 378.03 lakhs person days were created for implementation of various schemes of rural development under NREGA in Assam.

The dept has also decided to increase the daily wage rate of job cardholders under NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) from Rs 80 to Rs 100. it would be effective from December 2. Assam Panchayat and Rural Development minister Chandan

Brahma has announced this here on Tuesday.

Brahma claimed that the implementation of NREGA has improved over the years. "We spent Rs 950 crores on NREGA in the year 2008-09, for this year

Government of India has allotted Rs 1361 crore which we hope to spend within this fiscal year", added the Assam Panchayat & Rural Develop Minister.

*(Hindustan Times, 3 December 2009)*

### **NREGS funds to be transferred to panchayat account directly**

Lucknow : After receiving flak for corruption in implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), the state government has now decided to do away with the three-tier system to handle the NREGS funds.

On Friday, the state government passed an order stating that the funds would be directly transferred to the account of the gram panchayat, with the pradhan and the rozgar sewak being the combined signatory

authorities. The decision will come into effect from Monday. "Till date, there was always a delay in the wage payments as the funds were transferred quite late. Now, we expect that things will move faster since the districts will be monitoring the transactions," said Jairam Gupta, gram pradhan of Kalli village on the outskirts of Lucknow.

*(Indian Express, 16 November, 2009)*

### **NREGA spells hope for rural masses**

MOHALI: 'The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is an ambitious plan of the Central government aimed at changing the fate of rural masses by ensuring them economic security.'

This was stated by Sarabjit Kaur, BDO, while giving information on the performance of NREGA during the Bharat Nirman Public Information Campaign organized by the UT Press Information Bureau at Block Majri on Friday.

Kaur said NREGA not only ensured guarantee of 100-day employment in a year, but also provided social security.

People from poor families want to work under NREGA as employment avenues are available within the 5-km radius of their village.

She said women and scheduled caste families were preferred for jobs by the gram panchayat under the scheme.

Highlighting the performance of Block Majri, she said, "An amount of Rs 6.59 lakh has been sanctioned and a total 5,120 job cards were issued during 2009-10."

The work under NREGA includes drought proofing, afforestation, tree plantation, flood control and draining in water-logged areas, irrigation projects, land development, renovation of traditional water bodies, rural road connectivity, water conservation and water harvesting.

Highlighting the story of Fatehpur Sialbah village of the block, Kaur said out of 82 families, which were issued job cards, 55 managed to get employment. Also, Rs 3 lakh has been spent on road construction here.

However, the panchayat has demanded Rs.15 lakh to undertake more development works in the village.

*(The Times of India, 24 October 2009)*

## Women's MREGA participation urged

MALDA: The principal secretary of the panchayat and rural development department Mr MN Roy has asked other district officials to follow the Malda model to increase the participation of women labourers in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which has been renamed by the government as Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGEGA), after 2 October 2009.

In a recent video conference convened by Mr MN Roy with all districts officials, he asked the additional district programme coordinator (ADPC), Mr Kajal Banerjee about the key point to engage huge number of women labourers in the 100-days job programme.

According to Mr Banerjee, the selection of schemes had planned a key role to bring women labourers in different villages and the labour cost of a particular scheme was on an average 81 per cent where as the material cost was only 19 to 20 per cent in most cases.

The ADPC also explained that mostly male labourer dig out soil but the womenfolk carry the soil. The

ratio of labourers engagement was one man, who is digging out soil, is to three women, who are carrying the soil from one place to another for construction of a road.

The ADPC Mr Kajal Banerjee is also the additional executive officer of the Malda Zilla Parishad, said that at present the Malda district had been able to provide an average of 27 days of work to a family out of the 100-days where the state average is only 21 days.

To increase the average 100-days job, the district has planned to implement MGEGA following the new system where the 100-days programme will be implemented in private property belong to small and marginal farmers.

Small farmers (who have 7 acres land) and marginal farmers (who have 3 acres land) can easily seek help from the government for excavation, re-excavation, developing orchards in their lands through MGRGA.

*(The Statesman: 6 October 2009)*

## Himachal Government launches campaign to clean up plastic waste

*Gaurav Bisht*

Dharamsala: In a bid to emerge as leader in environment protection in the country, Himachal Pradesh government on Monday launched a statewide environment campaign from Dharamsala to remove plastic and polythene waste from hillsides, streets and scattered alongside the rivulets. State government announced to provide incentives to the citizens for collecting plastic waste.

Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal kicked off the week - long campaign "Polythene Hatao- Paryavaran Bachao" with flagging off a rally of students of ITI, who began with collection of plastic waste in and around their institute in Darhi, village three kilometers away from the main town. Chief Minister,

Prem Kumar Dhumal along with his cabinet colleagues initiated a plastic clean up drive from Mahant Panchayat, which is adjoining, to the main town.

Since there is no facility for garbage disposal, major portion of plastic waste is dumped in the nullahs in this panchayat, which has population exceeding 8,000 electorate. "We are trying to put in place a proper garbage disposal system. People have been asked to segregate the household waste" said Anurag Kumar Pardhan of Mahant Panchayat.

Prem Kumar Dhumal, while speaking at state level function organized at the community hall, appealed to

people to participate actively to make it a community driven drive. Elated over the public response on the first day of plastic clean up drive, Chief Minister expressed faith that the campaign will gain success due to people's participation. "It becomes duty of everyone of us to protect the environment" said Dhumal while he said that Himachal Pradesh had imposed complete ban on use of polythene bags in the first week of October.

Disclosing incentives will be given for collecting plastic waste, Chief Minister Dhumal said centers for collection of plastic and polythene waste that would be set up and collected waste would be used for tarring of roads, along with bitumen. Dhumal said that people would be paid for providing dried plastics waste at the collection centers. 'Now, one can earn from selling the plastic waste to government agencies involved in environment protection' Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal said.

Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal said the plastic waste will be used in cement plant kilns to produce electricity. He said that cement companies have shown interest and was ready to use the plastic waste in the plants.

On the occasion Dhumal sought support from people in making the state free from polythene. State government has identified 400 different sites for

dumping of debris and other waste material, to curtail spread of pollutants.

Chief Minister lauded the efforts of environment department for its initiative to protect the fragile economy of the state. Himachal Pradesh has set examples of environment protections for other states in country, said Dhumal hoping that outcome of the Shimla convention of Himalayan states on environment protection would be included in national mission. He said that the State had constituted the State Level Governing Council to oversee the environment protection activities. He announced opening of one Pollution Control Board Regional Office at Dharamshala for the benefit of the people. Highlighting the endeavors of his government in protecting environment, Dhumal said forestation drive launched by the government last year had remained successful. This year the state government is considering to plant about four crore trees of various species to increase the green cover.

Dhumal mentioned that large number of aromatic and medicinal plants was distributed to the public by the forest department, last year under Jan Sanjeevanai campaign. State government had tied up for marketing of herbs with Patanjli Yog Peeth of Swami Ramdev, which had offered to purchase entire produce of such medicinal herbs.

*(Hindustan Times, 22 December 2009)*

## **Terrific toilet training**

*Ejaz Kaiser*

Lundra (Chhattisgarh): Nanku Ram's nine-year old son Digham rarely misses school because of illness. And Uttara Bai's family has been free of chronic diarrhoea for a year, which is no rare feat for Purkela, a village of around 2000 people that boasted of just a handful of toilets three years ago.

### **They are not alone**

Lundra Block Medical Officer Dr Durga Prasad Shandilya told *Hindustan Times* that the water-borne and skin disease cases have halved in the tribal Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh.

UNICEF got independent research body Synovate to track disease prevalence in Lundra as part of a study. Synovate findings were no different from the health department data: there is a 50 per cent reduction in cases of dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria and skin diseases in Sarguja district. The reason: Tribals in Purkela village in Lundra block, about 400 km from Raipur, have adopted hygienic practices with a vengeance. For the first time ever, villagers such as Nanku and Uttara own a house with its very own toilet, which is no mean achievement in India where 60 per cent homes do not have a toilet.

Owning a house with a toilet has become a status symbol with many carrying boards at the door that read 'Shauchalaya yukt makaan'(A house with a toilet).

This is the result of a unique programme called Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC), which is run in partnership between different government departments such as education, panchayat, tribal welfare and women and child development. Apart from the emphasis on personal hygiene, the programme helps villagers maintain household hygiene, cleanliness near drinking water sources like hand-pumps or tube-wells, and manage waste.

The roads leading to villages of Purkela, Mahora or Jarhadih in Lundra block of Sarguja have been turned defecation-free zones, with village panchayats constituting a Toka-Taki Samiti (Intercepting Committee) to reprimand and then fine those who break the rules.

### **H for hygiene and health**

Shritika Nagesh (28), who had lost her ten-month-old daughter to dysentery in 2005, had become a nervous wreck worrying about her six-year-old daughter Prabha's frequent illnesses. "Since we installed a toilet and I started insisting on frequent hand washing, Prabha has transformed from a sickly to a healthy girl. She now rarely misses school," said the Jarhadih housewife.

Better health also transforms into higher literacy, especially among girls. "Ever since the school got separate toilets for boys and girls, the girls, whose parents were earlier hesitant to send them to schools, are regularly attending classes," said Bodham Ram, school headmaster at Jarhadih village.

Hygiene has been made part of the school curriculum. Students are taught personal grooming and asked to regularly cut their nails, groom their hair, wash their hands, maintain dental hygiene and wear clean clothes. "Students are given a hygiene education kit and evaluated each day on a ten-point on their appearance," said Sodhram, Jarhadih village panchayat secretary. "My teachers say personal

grooming will reduce the threat of illness, said Pushpi (11). Agrees Mikhu (9), a Class 3 student of middle school in Mahora village, a Nirmal Gram Puraskar recipient: "Personal hygiene has become a part of my life and I cannot imagine myself unclean." "Installing toilets in schools and hygiene education have been instrumental in persuading parents to follow healthy sanitary practices at home," said Baisram Dhakad, district programme coordinator in TSC.

"With water being provided through forced lift hand pumps, even anganwadi centres (child care centres) have come up with baby-friendly sanitation units. There, sharp fall in infections among children has pushed up attendance at schools," Lundra's education officer D.K. Gupta told HT.

### **How it started**

Getting villagers used to defecating in the country clean up their act wasn't easy. "The initial resistance to the sanitation campaign was overcome once we convinced them about the benefits," S.P. Singh, a campaign manager in Ambikapur, told HT. Incidents of villagers being bitten by snakes, poisonous insects or attacked by bears or elephants while defecating helped in convincing them, as did public messages through song and film shows.

Even elected representatives are now trying to get votes on the cleanliness bandwagon. "Impressed with diseases brought under control and behavioural change of people, the elected representatives have begun reaching out to officials seeking inclusion of their blocks for executing sanitation programme," said Bhim Singh of public health engineering department in Sarguja.

So successful is the campaign that 40 gram panchayats in Lundra won the President's Nirmal Gram Puraskar for 2008, and 22 have been selected for the award this year."

"Now there is competition among rural panchayats to ensure their villages is the cleanest," said Lundra MLA Ramdev Ram.

*(Hindustan Times, 21 November 2009)*

## Panchayat declared computer literate

KOTTAYAM: Veliyannur grama panchayat in Pala Assembly constituency has been declared total computer literate, the first grama panchayat to earn the distinction in the second phase of the Akshaya Programme. Making the declaration Revenue Minister K.P. Rajendran said the village has earned the distinction of first total computer literate panchayat not only in the district, but in the six districts that has come under the second phase of Akshaya programme. This includes Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha, Idukki, Palakkad and Wayand in addition to Kottayam.

P.J. Joseph, Minister for Public Works, inaugurated the district-level Malayalam computing project and the e-Krishi Project in the district on the occasion. Grama panchayat level e-payment project was inaugurated by Mons Joseph, MLA. K.M. Mani, MLA, presided over the function. Jose K. Mani, MP, District Collector Mini Antony, district panchayat president T.N. Rameshan and others spoke on the occasion.

*(The Hindu, 28 December 2009)*

## GUVNL power to panchayats: self-collection of electricity bills

**Vadodara :** The Gujarat Urja Vikas Nigam Limited (GUVNL) has decided to cover all village panchayats with a population of over 3,000 in a new scheme: members will be allowed to collect electricity bills by March.

The project has already been initiated in the state and a large number of villages have been covered under it. As per the scheme, instead of GUVNL staff, panchayat members will collect the money from the families in the village. For this, the panchayat will get Rs 7 per bill. The income generated from the activity will be used for village development.

“The aim is to bring in development in the villages by assigning them responsibility. This will also improve the bill collection ratio. We have realised that there is a difference between our staff collecting the bill amount and someone from the village doing the same. The panchayat members will certainly be more convincing than our staff,” GUVNL Chief Engineer (Technical) P A Shah told The Sunday Express.

He added, “Under PGVCL, we have the maximum number of panchayats and there are all chances that

the maximum bill collection will be from the same region.”

In Madhya Gujarat Vij Company Limited (MGVCL), there are about 2,800 village panchayats. Of these, 1,600 have already adopted this new concept.

“They are more than happy to collect the bill amount as they are getting Rs 7 for monthly collection and Rs 5 for bimonthly collection per bill. The money goes to the individual bill collector as well as the village panchayat and it would eventually be used for village development,” Shah said.

In Dakshin Gujarat Vij Company Limited (DGVCL), there are a total of 1,050 villages and the average revenue amounts to Rs 23 crore approximately. This estimate is excluding the industrial usage of electricity.

“Already 868 village panchayats have been trained to use computers and billing related software. They have already begun collection,” said an official at DGVCL.

*(Indian Express, 28 December 2009)*

## Bihar to issue ID cards to migrant workers

Patna: The Bihar government will register the names and personal information of the hundreds and

thousands of migrant workers from the state and issue them identity cards, an official said on Tuesday.



Vyasji Mishra, the principal secretary in the labour department, said migrant workers would have to get their names registered at the panchayat level.

"The panchayat will be involved in the registration of migrant workers before they leave their village to earn livelihood outside the state," he said.

Calling the move mandatory, he said the move was aimed at the safety and security of the workers. The government has been concerned over attacks on Bihar migrant workers in Maharashtra, Assam and Punjab.

*(Indian Express, 9 December 2009)*

## **Sarpanch catalyses change in villagers' attitude towards HIV/AIDS**

Kendrapara: Thanks to the role of the sarpanch of a remote gram panchayat in Kendrapara district, there has been a perceptible change in the mindset of villagers towards the HIV-positive.

Unlike the situation three years back, residents of Katanabania gram panchayat under Rajkanika tehsil now interact with the families of AIDS patients instead of ostracising them, the district wing officials of state AIDS Control Society informed and credited local sarpanch Mr Dhananjay Das for the turnaround.

Having a population of 12,000, as nearly 3,000 skilled labourers, mainly plumbers and carpenters from here have migrated to metros.

With some of these migrants having contracted the disease and transmitted to the family members, the gram panchayat recorded four AIDS deaths in past three years while six locals are now HIV/AIDS carriers.

"Though initially villagers used to keep safe distance from the carriers, there has been a perceptible change in people's mindset," Mr Das said.

"The attitude of people towards the first diagnosed AIDS patient Sarat Mallick from our village deeply rankled me. After Mallick died in 2006, I made up my mind to take up the cause of AIDS carriers and spread awareness," Mr Das recalled.

"After my election as sarpanch, the members of local club Sahyog were mobilised and they did a lot in dispelling the misconception. Now at every panchayat meeting, the problems faced by HIV/AIDS carriers are taken up and measures suggested," Mr Das said.

All the patients from the gram panchayat area are covered under the Madhubabu monthly pension. "They have also been given monthly ration like rice under gratuitous relief scheme," he said. With the help of the Integrated Confidential Training and Counselling Centre (ICTC) from the district headquarters hospital, camps to test blood samples are set up at regular intervals and villagers volunteer to help organise the camp.

*(The Statesman, 1 December 2009)*

## **Remote village lit up by solar power**

KARWAR: The Macchalli village of Karwar taluk finally got electricity supply, with Karwar DC Channappa Gowda inaugurating the solar light facility extended to the village under Rajeev Gandhi Akshaya Urja Yojana (RGAUY) scheme on Wednesday.

The village is about 5 km away from Amadalli village

and is located deep in the forest, above the hillock. One has to walk and then climb the steep hill to reach the village.

Every year the district administration used to spend lakhs of rupees on the RGAUY function in Karwar. But this time, the deputy commissioner planned to celebrate it in a different way, by utilizing the amount

spent on the function to extend the facility of the solar lamps to the houses and streets in the village.

With the cooperation of the Deepa Solar Lighting Systems and the Karwar taluk panchayat, the district administration was successful in lighting the houses and streets of the village. All the 14 houses in the village were facilitated with two bulbs each, while streetlights were installed near the school and temple.

Speaking at the function, the DC said the celebration of the RGAUY was meaningful, because the village which was deprived of electricity for such a long period after independence, can enjoy now solar power supply. He said the solar power was much more

feasible, as it is difficult to lay electricity lines to the remote areas and is economically not viable.

But the solar energy which is becoming popular as an alternative energy can solve the problems and can be used as alternative source to the conventional energy like hydel electricity, he said.

CEO of zilla panchayat V G Turmuri, headquarter assistant T N Narasimhamurty, tahsildar Shivanandmurty, ZP member Sujata Patil, taluk panchayat member Umakant Harikanatra were present during the inauguration.

*(The Times of India, 18 November 2009)*

## **A Kerala village set for organic makeover**

*Shaju Philip*

Thiruvananthapuram: Farmers of Mankulam village panchayat in Kerala's Idukki district are nursing their soil to reverse the damage done to it over the years. They have begun with adopting new farming practices and bidding adieu to pesticides and chemical fertilizers over the past year. Their aim: To transform Mankulam into an organic village panchayat, a first-of-its-kind in the state, by 2011.

Once the feat is achieved, it would be another feather in Mankulam's cap. Five years ago, it had earned the status of being the first village panchayat in the country to implement a mini-hydel project in association with the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation Regional Centre for Small Hydro Power. The panchayat installed a hydel project of 110 KW to meet its power requirements and found a mention in the UN Energy report.

The effort to transform Mankulam into an organic village was initiated under the Idukki Organic Project in 2005. The project, conceived by Kerala Agricultural Development Society (KADS), an NGO floated by farmers in the district, was meant to draw as many as farmers towards organic farming. Around

2,200 farmers of 32 village local bodies in the district have so far been declared organic farmers.

Inspired by the response from the farmers of the district and considering the village's geographical features, KADS chose Mankulam. The entire panchayat area is surrounded by forests, which would make the organic makeover easy. The panchayat, spread over 12 divisions, has 4,000-odd agricultural families. The Spices Board, the State Agriculture Department, the Local Self-Government Department and the National Centre of Organic Farming (NCOF) under the Union Agricultural Ministry are also involved in the project.

Within a year, 1,006 farmers of the panchayat have enrolled for bio-cultivation practices. Of them, 243 are already eligible for the organic tag. They have brought the dominating cultivation of coffee, tea, cardamom, pepper, fruits, vegetable and tuber crops under organic farming.

*(Indian Express, 7 November, 2009)*

## Gender disparity in panchayat work at all levels

Behrampore: Women representatives of panchayat in all tiers are lagging far behind their male counterparts in terms of knowledge, understanding and management of panchayat affairs. The likely remedy to help women catch up with their male functionaries lies in imparting special training to the elected women of the local self-government. The matter was brought to light during a symposium held here on Tuesday at the first panchayat show of the state where a number of ministers and panchayat executives shared their views on the topic ~ Role of Panchayat in Women Empowerment and suggested ways to empower elected women of the Panchayati Raj system.

The recommendation of special training for women representatives was first made by the chairperson of the state women's commission, Mrs Malini Bhattacharya. She said: "Women can be as good as their male colleagues in panchayat if proper training is imparted to them. Even the male representatives take time to learn the nitty-gritty of panchayat functioning." Her recommendation was supported by another speaker, Mrs Rekha Goswami, the minister of self-employment and Self-Help Groups (SHG). The minister iterated the need to give special training to women members of panchayat so that they can enrich

themselves with knowledge and management of panchayat affairs.

A senior district official pointed out in his speech that it was an exception to find a woman panchayat pradhan or a member who is practically guided by her husband or any male representative discharging the daily duties of a panchayat.

The panchayat and rural development minister, Mr Anisur Rahaman, who was also present at the programme, said: "The need for special training for elected women of panchayats cannot be ruled out. Only yesterday I took up the issue of training on health-related matters with officials of the health department.

Work for further training on SHGs and panchayat affairs in general is also in progress. But initially the training would include both men and women functionaries of panchayat. Re-orientation programme, if necessary, would be conducted especially for women later."

*(The Statesman, 12 December 2009)*

## Women gram panchayats not keen in education drive

*Arun Kumar*

The government may have given 50 per cent reservation to women at the panchayat level, but their empowerment is still far from real in most cases. For, local MPs (read *Mukhia Patis*) still hold the reins and don't want their wives to be educated under the special scheme for such women.

As per government's own study, nearly 30 per cent of the woman public representatives at the lowest level of governance are illiterate. In case of men, it is around 7-10 per cent. Bihar ranks amongst the bottom-placed States along with Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh when it comes to literacy among public representatives at the lowest rung.

"With so much stress on decentralization of power, this is a big impediment. The public representatives need to be aware to make optimal use of various schemes like Indira Awas, marriage of girls, insurance of BPL families, and most importantly, educational programmes," said a senior official of the Human Resource Development Department official. To make the public representatives literate, the Mass Education Department has launched an ambitious literacy programme.

Under the scheme, each district was sanctioned Rs 1.24 lakh in 2009-10 for boosting literacy among public representatives at the panchayat level. This comes to around Rs 45 lakh in the State. So far, bulk

of the money has remained unspent. "In case of women, the husbands don't want them to be educated. Perhaps, it suits their interest to wield power by proxy," said the official. What is worse, there is no intention to turn a new leaf, either. The statistics is discouraging in most parts of the State, especially with regard to women, barring a few exceptions like Siwan, Begusarai, Bhojpur and a few others.

But the government is not ready to give up. Bihar was the first State, which visualised the problem at the grassroots level and worked out a mechanism. Now,

we are holding 10-day residential camps at the district level, with free food and stay, for basic literacy training to public representatives," said Director, Mass Education, Vinodanand Jha. Jha said that scheme also had an added incentive for the public representatives. "The teachers are attached with the representatives for a month to help them further in discharge of their duties. They are like Private assistants to the representatives for the period. If they have any difficulty, they can seek help," he added.

*(Hindustan Times, 26 December 2009)*

### **Bill for 50% women's quota in panchayats introduced**

NEW DELHI: A Bill to amend Article 243 D of the Constitution and thus increase reservation for women from one-third to not less than half of the seats in panchayats was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Thursday. The Bill is also aimed at increasing reservation for women in the post of Chairperson and in the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes across three tiers (village panchayat, panchayat union and district panchayat).

Introducing the Constitution (110th Amendment) Bill, 2009, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Minister C.P. Joshi said the move would empower women and make panchayats more inclusive. According to the objects and reasons, women suffered multiple deprivations of class, caste and gender. The existing provisions in the Constitution facilitated women in general, especially those from the marginalised communities, to become politically active.

*(The Hindu, 28 November 2009)*

### **Training for women representatives at local-self governing bodies**

PUNE: The state government has decided to undertake a state-wide programme for capability building and skills enhancement of elected women representatives in local self-government bodies like gram panchayats and zilla parishads.

The training programmes will be ready for implementation by next month and sessions will start from February while the trainers' training programmes will be taken up in January.

The chairman of state election commission, Neela Satyanarayan elaborated the programme details while addressing a meeting in the city on Saturday. Satyanarayan said, "The programme focuses on strong and effective women's representation at the local level. This would be a three-year programme

and will cover all the local self-government bodies and zilla parishads in the state."

"The trainees will be told about the administrative work at grampanchayats, economy of a gram panchayat and effective implementation of the Panchayat Raj Act. The training would also talk about the success stories of women in villages and overall personality development of women," said Satyanarayan.

The programme will bring awareness in women representatives about their roles, functions, duties, responsibilities and authority. Also, the programme is a step ahead to encourage women's participation in the process of local development.

Satyanarayan said, "Each district in the state would have a separate programme considering the social, economical and geographical whereabouts as well as the local problems. The consideration is also being given to the educational background and social standing of the women representatives. It would also have interactive sessions to make the programme more effective".

The state government would move ahead the proposal to the union government in demand of the financial assistance for its implementation. The programme is being framed with the help of Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (Yashada), Akhil Bharatiya Sthanik Swarajya Sanstha, Yashaswini and Symbiosis College.

*(The Times of India, 3 November 2009)*

## **Women panchayat chiefs to take up the cudgels against domestic violence**

*Anita Joshua*

NEW DELHI: The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development will rope in women panchayat leaders to mobilise rural India as part of the nationwide campaign against violence against women. In particular, the effort is to generate awareness of the Prevention of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. This will be launched on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti.

### **Brand ambassadors**

Union Minister of State Krishna Tirath said on Thursday that women panchayat leaders would act as brand ambassadors of the Act. To begin with, 25 best performing and trained among them from 14 States were selected to lead the campaign in their areas. Special attention will be paid to rural areas, as the Act has been used primarily by urban women, while

village women continue to suffer in silence out of ignorance of the law.

### **Incidence of violence alarming**

According to the Minister, the incidence of violence against women within and outside home is quite alarming.

The campaign will be launched with a human chain by more than 5,000 women — including anganwadi workers and members of self-help groups — from India Gate to the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Friday. Besides the Delhi event, *prabhat pharies* (early morning congregations), involving local leaders and opinion makers, will be organised throughout the country, she said.

*(The Hindu, 2 October 2009)*

## **Exclusive tribal panchayat in Idukki**

*N.J. Nair*

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: An exclusive grama panchayat for Scheduled Tribes will come into being at Idamalakudi in Idukki district.

The total population of the tribal panchayat has been estimated at 5,500. The new panchayat will have 13 divisions, with each ward having a strength around 400 people.

Sources in the State Delimitation Commission told *The Hindu* that the total number of grama panchayats in the State would come down from 999 to 977, but it has been decided to add one ward each to all grama

panchayats. By fixing the strength of local self-government institutions, the Commission has completed the first phase of the delimitation process.

While deciding to add five adjoining panchayats to the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, the commission has decided to make three panchayats part of the Kozhikode Corporation. Two panchayats will be merged with the Kottayam municipality and one each with Thripunithura, Kodungalloor and Irinjalakuda municipalities in Ernakulam district and two with Guruvayur municipality in Thrissur district. Seven grama panchayats will be upgraded as municipalities.

Thus the number of municipalities will go up from 53 to 60. The panchayats to be upgraded as municipalities are Karunagapally in Kollam, Maradu, Thrikkakara and Eloor in Ernakulam district, Kottakkal and Nilambur in Malappuram district and Neeleswaram in Kasaragod. All these panchayats have an urban nature and have witnessed a construction boom of late. The delimitation proposals have been formulated on the basis of the density of population, area and own funds generated in each civic body. The government is understood to have recommended the commission to upgrade civic bodies having more than a population of 50,000, own

income of Rs.20 lakh and 20 sq. km area. Density of population and the ratio of non-agriculture male labourers were the norms considered for upgrading panchayats as municipalities.

Proposals to amend the Panchayati Raj Act and Municipalities Act too have been drawn up. As per the existing strength, there are 16,139 wards in 999 grama panchayats. This includes 9,106 general divisions, 5,705 reserved for women, 1,750 SC and 208 ST wards.

*(The Hindu, 3 December 2009)*

### **House panel slams flip-flop on panchayats**

NEW DELHI: Slamming the approach to training of panchayat functionaries, a parliamentary panel has directed the rural development ministry to stop its flip-flop and chart out a time-bound training programme to enable rural bodies to work as purposeful units of self-governance.

“Instead of charting out a flip-flop approach, a time-bound programme of training of panchayati raj institution functionaries should be prepared so that panchayats can work as units of self-government in the real sense,” the parliamentary standing committee said in its report tabled recently. The panel noted that the ministry does not even have the basic data about the number of elected panchayat members trained in states.

Dismissing the official claims that 11.95 lakh elected representatives out of 28.8 lakhs were trained, it questioned the rationale behind the ministry seeking

enhanced funds of Rs 1000 crore to train the remaining.

The committee said before asking for higher funds “the ministry has to put its house in order to take care of higher funds”. The panel recommended that the government should make a “realistic assessment” of untrained panchayat members and gear up to the task accordingly. The committee also said a “business-like approach” is essential on the issue of training of elected representatives in panchayats.

The 31-member committee comprising members from both Houses of Parliament observed that with regard to the functioning of backward region grant fund (BGRF), the achievement of major objectives of removal of imbalances “is in doubt”. The panel said expected progress has not been made on the issue of simplification of decentralised planning under BGRF.

*(The Statesman, 22 December 2009)*

### **Law panel allows additional power to panchayat secys**

PANAJI: The law commission has given a clean chit to the controversial panchayat amendment bill that seeks to give panchayat secretaries “additional” power and which was recently returned by the governor.

In its report submitted to the law minister, the commission, headed by former Union minister of

state for law Ramakant Khalap, said that the amendment proposed by the government “does not encroach upon the rights of the elected bodies”. It stated that the decisions of the panchayat are naturally to be executed by the panchayat secretaries and that the sarpanch cannot be expected to function as an executive officer.

This is precisely what the Panchayati Raj Amendment Bill provided. Panch members and NGOs had protested against the amendment as they perceived excessive interference by the government in the affairs of the local bodies as the bill proposed to empower panchayat secretaries to execute the orders of the panchayat director within a specified period if the same was not complied with by the sarpanch. In other recommendations, the law commission suggested that the panchayat director be vested with powers to hear and decide appeals against any order or resolution of the panchayat or of any officer under the Panchayati Raj Act.

It also suggested the setting up of a panchayat tribunal at the district level to hear revision petitions against

any order passed by the panchayat director. Another recommendation is that the provisions of the Civil Procedure Code be made applicable to all inquiries and proceedings before panchayat tribunals or any officer under the Panchayat Raj Act. The commission also noted that section 178(2) of the Goa Panchayati Raj Act provides that the director shall forward his order or direction to the government which may confirm, rescind or modify the order.

The commission felt that this power vested in the government is not conducive to the healthy growth of an independent elected body.

*(The Times of India, 5 November 2009)*

### **Panchayat chiefs for more powers**

MADURAI: Tamil Nadu Village Panchayat Presidents' Federation on Tuesday pleaded for autonomy to village panchayats. It stated that the panchayats were reeling under unavailability of financial assistance and wanted the State Government to look into their demands.

At the executive committee meeting held here, M. Muniyandi and K.S. Sheik Muhammed, president and secretary of the federation respectively, said that autonomy for panchayat bodies was not complete in accordance with the Constitution.

The federation also complained that the Pooled Assigned Revenue earmarked for panchayats had not been distributed properly. Listing out various demands, the federation insisted that power to execute Anaithu Grama Anna Marumalarchi Thittam work

should be given to the local bodies rather than contractors from outside.

It also wanted the State Government to reconsider its decision and provide assistance to financially weaker village panchayats, which was normative for many years.

The meeting called for the scrapping of Section 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act under which the panchayat presidents had been facing a lot of troubles especially after the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Following the Kerala model, the Tamil Nadu Government should also provide monthly salary for panchayat presidents, the federation said. Panchayat presidents from various districts across the State participated in the meeting.

*(The Hindu, 16 October 2009)*

### **PM for greater use of panchayat scheme**

New Delhi: Announcing the decision to re-christen the UPA government's flagship National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) after Mahatma Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday lamented the less than optimal use of the Panchayati Raj set-up in the country and called for

reforms to delegate more power from states to the panchayati raj system.

“Even today in many states, the functions, funds and functionaries have not been delegated effectively to panchayati raj institutions. We need to reform the

system,” Singh said at a function to commemorate the golden jubilee of panchayati raj.

“The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution provides that the state legislatures should empower panchayati raj institutions as the institutions of local self-government and strengthen them so that they can evolve schemes for social justice and development.

But these legal provisions have not been used effectively,” he added.

UPA chairperson and Congress president Sonia Gandhi also underlined the need for minimising hurdles against panchayats and asked state governments to work towards strengthening them.

*(Indian Express, 4 October 2009)*

## **The BPOs are calling Bharat**

*Mini Joseph Tejaswi*

College and an office job was 17-year-old Abhijit's dream. But financial problems meant he had to join his father on the farm, helping to grow paddy and sugarcane, collect fodder and sell milk. That became his life in the tiny hamlet of Baburayanakoppal, near Srirangapatna in Karnataka.

Until three months ago, when an abandoned rice mill in the village was renovated and became the office for a 100-seater BPO (business process outsourcing) unit.

Word was soon out in the village that there were jobs to be had. Though he neither spoke nor understood English, Abhijit decided to give it a shot. He applied, wrote a test, was taken in and trained. Today, he's part of the Indian BPO army, once seen as an urban opportunity accessible only to educated, English-speaking boys and girls.

Abhijit's employer B S Venugopal, a director of Mpro Solutions, says though the training takes time, it is worth the effort. "We did not expect to find readily employable talent in rural areas. They are raw with no language or communication skills but eager to learn."

A few weeks into his training, Abhijit tells TOI Crest in grammatically correct English, " It's not that a farmer's life was a bad one, but farming doesn't pay enough for a comfortable living. In my case, I had no education and didn't think I could be anything other than a farmer." Now as part of his job, he makes calls to prospective donors from a database seeking funds for NGOs. His salary is Rs 3,500 a month.

Abhijit isn't the only one taking advantage of BPOs going rural. Even as many outsourcing firms based in cities put a freeze on hiring, many new units are opening up in villages and towns in the south.

Karnataka's IT/BT secretary Ashok Kumar C Manoli says the companies are bringing technology and financial empowerment to rural youth. " The idea is to create a rural BPO cluster , which can be integrated with similar projects across the country," he says. " We want to promote jobs for rural youth who have some computer knowledge and belong to small towns with a one lakh population. To start with, each of these centres will have 100 seats," he adds.

Abhijit's colleagues at Mpro - Mahesh, Jagadish , an orphan, Soumya and a dozen others - are also taking advantage of this economic transformation. But what will they do with the extra money? Abhijit wants to help his father buy more cows. His friends, too, want to help their parents out but they also want to buy mobile phones and bicycles.

"The initiative will change the economic fabric of the countryside," Manoli says. BPOs will make youth in the hinterland financially independent as they did in the urban areas. They will have money for marriage, to pay off debts or buy sewing machines and cows. More importantly, it will stop the mass exodus of young people from villages to cities seeking employment, he says.

It is the cost of business in big cities - exorbitant



rentals, steep wages, high attrition - that has many companies looking towards the village. Mpro Solutions is the first to become operational under the Karnataka government's ambitious rural BPO scheme. The state plans to set up a hundred such units to create one lakh jobs in the next four years. A few weeks ago another centre was opened at Gundlupet, while two centres are being readied in Salgame and Shiggaon in Karnataka. Also in the pipeline are eight more in Sirsi, Huliur, Chikbalapur, Hosadurga, Pavagada, Mundargi and Devadurg in rural Karnataka.

The state is rolling out the red carpet for those adventurous enough to go rural. It's offering financial incentives of up to Rs 20 lakh and a per employee training incentive of Rs 10,000. Manoli says the response from entrepreneurs has been overwhelming. Infosys and Wipro, too, have shown interest.

Bangalore-based BPO company RuralShores, which already has a centre in Bagepalli, is in the process of entering rural areas in Tamil Nadu and Bihar. Xchanging, which acquired Cambridge Solutions, and Hinduja Global Solutions too are venturing into semi-urban places like Shimoga in Karnataka and Durgapur in West Bengal.

Other southern states too are developing business models to encourage private players to venture beyond the cities. Tamil Nadu already has rural BPO units and is planning another 100 rural units in the next few years.

Kerala is looking at a hub-and-spoke model. The government aims to set up 100 rural BPOs at the panchayat and district level in 14 districts over the next three years. The first rural BPOs have already come up in Perinad and Kadakkal in Kollam district.

Sai Seva Business Solutions, a rural BPO unit, was set up in Puttaparthi, a couple of years ago by management students of the Sri Sathya Sai University. HDFC Bank outsources part of its work on data capture and profiling of new accounts to them. Tata Business Support Services has set up a BPO in Mithapur in Gujarat, near the manufacturing unit of Tata Chemicals.

A country-wide rural BPO drive is expected to create employment opportunities for millions of rural Indians, allowing them a share in the country's \$12-billion BPO pie.

*(The Times of India, 10 October 2009)*

## **Gandhians review panchayat raj**

*Vijaykumar Patil*

Belgaum: While government celebrated Gandhi Jayanti by paying floral tributes to the Mahatma, the gandhians here have found no reason to join the administration in the celebrations. For them, the Gandhian concept of "gram swaraj" – a democratic system that visualizes self-governance and self-reliance, is still far away as the means of development and progress continues to be luxury of the elite and influential.

This sense was widely prevalent during what was a brain storming session of Gandhians of "Gandhi Ghar" at Devagri village of Belgaum taluk on Friday. The Gandhi Ghar is essentially an ashram of gandhians. It has been a couple of decades since it was set up by

veteran Gandhian and freedom fighter Sadashivrao Bhonsale with the avowed objective of spreading Gandhian values among the rural people and work for achieving *gram swaraj*.

After offering garlands to the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, activists, including women from Devagiri, Kattanbhavi, Kadoli and adjoining areas and from Khanapur taluk sat down to take a look at the functioning of gram panchayats and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in the district. The presence of Mr. Bhonsale, social workers Ashok Deshpande, Dilip Kamat and Shivaji Kagnekar was to help assess the prevailing situation.

The sum of the discussion, which included complaints against gram panchayat secretaries and elected members, who allegedly were in connivance in committing irregularities in the implementation of the NREGS was only to defeat the objective of the scheme. At the end of the meeting, a unanimous resolution was adopted to organise a “march” to the Deputy Commissioner’s office on November 2 to protest against irregularities, which included payment of wages less than Rs. 82 fixed as minimum wages by the Government, part-payments, and denial of job cards and employment to registered members.

They would demand the Government to pay unemployment allowance to those who had been

denied employment even after registering under the scheme and issuance of job cards so that proper entries of work done and wages disbursed were recorded.

The people said the workers were getting much less than Rs. 82. Even the payment of wages was not regular. Many had not been paid for the last three months. In several cases, the payment had been partial. Interestingly, the payments were made as per the whims and fancies of gram panchayat secretaries.

*(The Hindu, 3 October 2009)*

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