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## **Khap panchayat: signs of desperation?**

*Jagmati Sangwan\**

*The number of cases in which the totally unconstitutional caste panchayats have openly defied the law of the land by issuing illegal diktats has increased manifold.*

In Haryana today, rapid capitalist transformation is accompanied by a regressive feudal consciousness. As education and political awareness spread among Dalits, women and backward sections, alongside there is a massive consolidation of caste (khap) panchayats in defence of the status quo. The number of cases in which the totally unconstitutional caste panchayats have openly defied the law of the land by issuing illegal diktats has increased manifold. Attacks on young couples, Dalits and progressive-minded people have become frequent.

A recent landmark judgment by the Additional Sessions Court at Karnal in the Manoj-Babli “honour” killing case, in which five accused were given the death sentence, sent shock waves among caste panchayat leaders, as it reminded them that they were not above the Constitution. The court took serious note of the fact that the policemen deployed for the security of Manoj and Babli actually facilitated the accused in perpetrating the crime.

Though geographically small, Haryana is socially and culturally heterogeneous. For example, in some areas and among certain castes, marriages within the village and even intra-gotra marriages are not uncommon. At the same time, such marriages are treated as incest in certain other areas, and among other castes. Even the caste or khap panchayat is not a feature prevalent

throughout the State, as many believe, but is confined to a particular region. Thus, a section of people of one particular caste proclaims itself as the cultural representative of Haryana, refusing to acknowledge the customs and traditions practised by others in their own neighbourhood.

A look at the demography of the State and its development statistics would help to contextualise the problem. The State that stood second in per capita income in the country has one of the lowest sex ratios (821 in the 0-6 age group). Female foeticide is rampant, and the situation is so bad that wives are being brought from far off States. Not once have these panchayats called a maha-panchayat to pass a resolution against female foeticide or dowry or even in connection with the crisis in agriculture — problems staring the people of Haryana in the face.

After the judgment in the Manoj-Babli case, however, a congregation of caste panchayats representing the Jat neighbourhoods from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan was called at Kurukshetra on April 13. It was decided that panchayats would now fight for legal status to legitimately maintain the “social order.” One of the main agendas of this sarv-khap panchayat was to push for amendments to the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 that would ban marriages within the same gotra (clan within which men and women are

considered siblings and hence cannot marry). Under this Act, marriages between certain lineages from the paternal and maternal sides are already barred.

Most of the khap panchayat diktats are against couples who are not from the same gotra. In fact, not more than one case of honour killing has been of a couple within the same gotra. By creating the false impression that all marriages of choice between young couples are incestuous, what the khaps are actually opposing is the right to choose a marriage partner. Among the several instances of khaps issuing fatwas in Jaundhi, Asanda, Dharana, Singhwal, Hadaudi, Maham-kheri, Ludana and other villages, not a single one was an intra-gotra marriage, yet the married couples were declared siblings, and families made to suffer boycotts and excommunication from their villages.

A sad example of the gotra row is that of Ved Pal Moan, brutally beaten to death last year when he tried to secure his wife who was confined by her parents at Singhwal village in Jind district. He was escorted by a police party and a warrant officer of the High Court. Ved Pal had married neither within his gotra nor within the same village. In this case, another absurd code was invoked by the khap: that the couple violated the custom of not marrying in the neighbouring village as it forms part of bhaichara (brotherhood). A khap congregation held in March 2009 publicly pronounced the death sentence for Ved Pal, and it succeeded in executing it in June. As couples are selectively targeted, it is clear the real motive is to control women's sexuality to ensure that property remains within the patriarchal caste domain (mainly Jats in Haryana).

The sarv khap panchayat also called for social boycott of individuals who raised their voice against the caste panchayats. A former police chief of Haryana, himself a self-styled caste leader, went on record threatening khap-critics. How can a former DGP publicly threaten law-abiding citizens, and yet continue to enjoy the hefty perks and pension out of the public exchequer?

The caste panchayat leaders have decided to stifle any voice of assertion from the backward sections. On

April 21 more than 20 houses of Dalits were burnt down at Mirchpur village, in the presence of a police force, allegedly by thugs belonging to a dominant caste, resulting in the death of an 18-year-old handicapped girl and her ailing father. A panchayat of khaps convened at Mirchpur three days after the carnage not only declared all arrested persons innocent but also issued an ultimatum to the government for their release! This was exactly the pattern adopted by caste panchayats in the Gohana (2005) and Duleena (2002) incidents, where brutal attacks on Dalits took place.

Even elders from socially and economically weaker families are not spared. At Khedi Meham in December 2009, the father of a newly wed groom was forced to hold a shoe in his mouth in front of the whole village by the panchayatis. Ordinary citizens are caught in the contradiction between two sets of values — the blind consumerism of the neo-liberal dispensation, and the outdated feudal values represented by the khaps. The first is no replacement for the second, and indeed, pseudo-modernism only strengthens the forces of revivalism. The alternative to both types of distortions lies in the spread of healthy and progressive values that can be unleashed through only a new social reform movement in the entire Hindi belt.

### **Limited but crucial role**

The judiciary does have a crucial role to play but has its limitations too. On June 23, 2008 Justice K.S. Ahluwalia of the Punjab and Haryana High Court made a revealing observation while simultaneously hearing 10 cases pertaining to marriages between young couples aged 18 - 21: "The High Court is flooded with petitions where ... judges of this Court have to answer for the right of life and liberty to married couples. The State is a mute spectator. When shall the State awake from its slumber [and] for how long can Courts provide solace and balm by disposing of such cases?" A legislature with little political will and a pliant executive will have to be made responsive under pressure of a mass movement.

The voices of dissent are also getting consolidated under the umbrella of organisations like the AIDWA and other democratic forces. The younger generation

must stand forth as responsible social activists and lead the struggle for change in an otherwise feudal society that lives by the dictum “Jiski lathi uski bhains” (the powerful call the shots). In Haryana each passing day is costing the lives of innocent women and men.

*\*The author is Director, Women's Study Centre, Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, and State President of AIDWA, Haryana.*

*(The Hindu, 7 May 2010)*

### **Family commits suicide after persecution by panchayat**

In another shocking case of the autocratic and unreasonable diktats by community panchayats, an order by a community panchayat that a man pay Rs 71,000 to the panchayat for allegedly committing adultery had tragic consequences in Rajasthan.

The accused and his entire family alongwith his so called paramour committed suicide by jumping in front of a train in Karauli district. In his suicide note, the man claimed that he was taking this step because of ostracism by the community panchayat and his inability to pay the money demanded by them. Six-year-old Mona is too young to understand her life has changed forever. She was part of the suicide pact that killed her father, mother, brother and sister, but Mona survived even as they all jumped before a running train.

Gajendra (36), was accused by the community panchayat of having an affair with his neighbour's wife. The panchayat gave unanimous verdict that Gajendra pay Rs 71,000 to the panchayat or else face ostracism. Unable to bear the social pressure and with no money to pay up, Gajendra alongwith his wife, two children and his alleged paramour all committed suicide.

Bhupendra Singh, Gajendra's brother says, "He has lost his life only because of the caste pressure. The panchayat leaders said we have to pay up in front of a Panchayat of all 18 Jat villages in our area. Otherwise they said, they won't allow any social dealings with families of all of our 4 brothers."

The police were at the spot where the panchayat announced its draconian diktat four days ago. Although caste panchayats like these have been declared illegal and there's a court order which asks the government to launch criminal proceedings against them. However, in many parts of Rajasthan they continue to function with impunity.

Maman Singh, Additional SP Karauli says, "We have registered a case and rounded up a few people. As soon as we complete our investigation, we will arrest those who are accused in this case." Gajendra's suicide note is now with the police but the panchayat leaders whom he has held responsible for his suicide in that note are now all absconding.

*(NDTV, 23 April 2010)*

### **Panchayat an Instrument to Counter Maoists: PM**

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh today said challenges posed by Maoists could be countered by empowering rural poor and marginalised sections through Panchayati Raj Institutions.

"We should pay special attention to ensure that PRIs function effectively in remote and backward areas, which include tribal areas. This will help us in tackling the challenges such as the Maoist menace," he said inaugurating a conference to celebrate the

National Panchayati Raj Day. Singh said participation of Panchayats in various development programmes was essential as "they understand the local needs."

"Panchayats not only make direct participation possible for the marginalised section of society in governance, but also play an important role in ensuring transparency and accountability in the functioning of government institutions and officials," he added.

Describing the day as "historic" for PRIs, he said it was on this day in 1993 that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was implemented to enable the three-tier Panchayats to take responsibility of governance. "This has made decentralisation (of power) possible up to the grassroot level. The impact of the 73rd amendment is now very clearly visible. It has empowered the common man and poor, and has brought about changes in the power equations in rural India," he said.

Expressing happiness over the regular conduct of Panchayat elections, Singh said over 28 lakh people have now officially become part of the country's democracy through about 600 district panchayats, 6,000 intermediate panchayats and 2.3 lakh gram panchayats. Noting that 33 per cent reservation for women has been implemented in the PRIs, the Prime Minister said it was a matter of pride for the country that today about 10 lakh women work in rural India as elected representative, which is more than the number of reserved seats.

"With the implementation of the proposed 50 per cent quota for women in PRIs, their number is expected to increase to 14 lakh in these institutions," he added.

The Prime Minister said apart from the women's reservation in PRIs, there are arrangements for providing quota for SCs and STs in proportion to their population, while some states have provided reservation to OBCs too. "The objective of all these measures is to enhance direct participation of weaker sections in governance," he said.

Singh said PRIs have been given special importance in the implementation of various government schemes in the 11th Five-Year Plan as they understood the local issues well. "Our government is aware of the difficulties being faced by Panchayats. It has been our continuous endeavour that basic facilities are provided to PRIs and arrangements for (devolution of) funds, functions and functionaries be made to them," he said. "This will help giving a new shape to the services rendered by the Panchayats," he said.

Noting that the government had under the 13th Finance Commission announced a share to the Panchayats from tax collections, the Prime Minister said this would give PRIs the status of local self-governance units in the real sense. Expressing the hope that the conference would discuss all the issues, which were inevitable for making PRIs more effective and transparent, he said the recommendations of the meet would be seriously looked into and after examination, the government would take necessary action.

Earlier, Singh presented awards for Effective Implementation of Panchayats' Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme to Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Sikkim. He also released a two-volume report for 2010 on the status of Panchayati Raj. Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Minister C P Joshi said the government intended to build a new India through the Panchayats by empowering the villages. Joshi said time had come for another Constitutional Amendment to empower the rural people by making devolution of power to PRIs mandatory.

He said there was need to bring changes at the grassroots level by setting Human Development Index standards and pointed out that NREGA had given opportunity to the rural poor to improve their economic and social status. The government, he said, would soon launch a National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) for socio-economic development in rural India.

Panchayati Raj Secretary A N P Sinha urged the Prime Minister to increase the plan allocation for the ministry, which had not been done for the last three years. He said a meeting of the newly constituted National Advisory Council (NAC) under UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi should be convened to discuss a road map for PRIs.

(Outlook India, 24 April, 2010)

## College students give Kerala's cyber panchayat a tech edge

The status of being home to India's first technology park in the form of Technopark, inaugurated by late prime minister PV Narasimha Rao, should confer on Kazhakoottam panchayat in the outskirts of Kerala's capital city a technological halo.

The 4 million sq ft of built-up space and 170-odd IT and ITES companies in its sprawling campus employing about 25,000 techies make the park and Kazhakoottam panchayat the centerpieces of Kerala's IT sector. A group of college students from a local government college - most of who did not even have personal e-mail ids a couple of years ago - have given the panchayat a whole new tech makeover from the grassroots level, creating digitized maps of the panchayat, using global positioning system (GPS) tools.

At least three other panchayats in Kerala - Muthalamada, Sreekrishnapuram and Karimpuzha, all in Palakkad district - are known to have done digital resource mapping, but the Kazhakoottam example stands out for a variety of reasons.

The undergraduate BSc geography students of the Government College, Kariavattom who undertook the digital resource mapping had only an old computer to work on, and the entire project was completed on a shoestring budget of Rs 45,000, before the map was handed over to Kazhakoottam panchayat president Sindhu Sasidharan.

Says D Nandakumar, head of the department of geography at the college, who led the team of

students in the mapping exercise: "Resource maps have been done in panchayats before, but those were commissioned works undertaken by private parties. The Kazhakoottam mapping was the first by undergraduate students, and we could do it with open source GIS system instead of proprietary software that could cost in the region of Rs 6 lakh".

The students used the free GIS software, Q-GIS, and produced thematic maps depicting the working population of the panchayat, population distribution, places of worship, educational institutions, and the political map of the panchayat, with support from the University College, and the Indian Institute of Information Technology - Kerala.

Kazhakoottam panchayat president Sindhu Sasidharan is happy to have the total resource mapping of her panchayat, done. "Earlier, we had a traditional map for the 15 wards in the panchayat, but since reconstitution of the panchayat with 19 wards, we were not having any composite map of the panchayat", says she.

The students, who have opted for an add-on course in digital cartography as part of their BSc in geography, collected the census data, linked it to the spatial format and created the thematic maps. Impressed by the resource maps, state education minister MA Baby has offered funding for such ventures.

(The Economic Times, 25 February, 2010)

## Haryana village panchayat offers a lesson in women's quota

*Dinker Vashisht*

**Nuh (Mewat) :** Five years ago, the unanimous election of an all-women panchayat in Neemkhera village in Haryana's Mewat district had generated considerable curiosity. Now, with panchayat elections due next month in this village where Muslims comprise 98 per cent of the population, the verdict on the all-women panchayat is mixed.

"Merely reserving a seat for a woman or having her as a leader is not going to solve any problem," is the collective response of the 10-member panchayat comprising Asubi, Memuna, Hazra, Semuna, Sakuran, Memudi, Majiden, Asini, Noorjahan and Rasso — all in their early forties.

“Fancy delegations comprising foreign dignitaries, sociologists, media people visited us initially. But we have just remained an exotic case study. This panchayat has completed its tenure and we are due for elections next month but most of our problems still remain because of the sheer apathy of the administration,” says the sarpanch, Asubi Khan.

The biggest problem, she says, is the lack of a hospital or even a health centre in the village, which has witnessed the deaths of 70 infants and six women (all maternity deaths) in the last five years.

But there is no doubt that change has come to this village, once known as a place where both water and brides were next to impossible to find. Due to an acute water crisis, people had refused to marry off their daughters here. During summers, the administration arranges for water tankers to tide over the scarcity.

For instance, there are a lot many children going to school now. “The number of children who attend school has seen a remarkable increase from just 70 students to 450 students in the last five years,” says Rampyari, a village elder who plans to contest the coming panchayat elections.

The panchayat can also count a grant of Rs 2 crore (for developmental work) and four hours of “non-stop” electricity among its achievements.

“Because of religion, things are more complicated. If we complain too much, we are quickly dubbed as difficult to please, as perennially peeved or, much worse, as traitors. But certain things defy our understanding. There were only three Haryana Roadways buses which used to connect this village. But in the last five years, these three buses were cancelled and now the nearest bus stop is about 10 kms away,” says another member of the panchayat.

“When elections take place next month, the village has decided that this time too the sarpanch will be a woman from a BPL Scheduled Caste family. This isn’t about politics because there are only four Scheduled Caste households in this village. This is about ensuring amity. Also, there is a misconception that ours is a matriarchal society. In most families, the

head of the family is the man,” she adds.

The all-women panchayat has an interesting story behind it. “Five years ago, the sarpanch’s seat from this village was reserved for a woman. Besides the sarpanch, three other women were elected. Thereafter, the villagers unanimously decided that it would be better to have only women as panchayat members as they felt that the all-women team would perform better than a panchayat with mixed representation,” says M S Yadav, Additional Deputy Commissioner, Mewat.

Elaborating on this decision, Asubi says, “Five years ago, most of my panchayat members wouldn’t come out of the veil. When in the company of men, they would sit on the floor. So there was no way they could have participated in a mixed panchayat. Today, they talk freely. When we go to the Deputy Commissioner’s office, they tell him their grievances on their own. This is a change which we had hoped for when the village residents made the choice.”

The feudal structure in many Haryana villages has often thrown up instances where despite the election of a woman to a panchayat, her male relatives act on her behalf. But, Neemkhera residents deny this. “The only seat reserved for a woman was that of sarpanch. If we were subject to the decrees of our husbands, why would we have elected women as the other nine members? Also look at the work done. Five years ago, only 23 per cent of the families would send their kids to school. Today, more than 80 per cent of the families send their children to school. The village had no proper sanitation and drainage system. Today, we have pucca roads. We have a school for girls and most importantly, the rampant problem of alcoholism among village men has been contained to a large extent,” says Asini, another member.

So has “reserving” seats for women helped? “Yes, it has and in that way the Women’s Reservation Bill is commendable. But what we are saying is that the Bill in itself will not help. A woman leader has to be given resources and help. As a panchayat, we were successful in bringing some social changes, but when it comes to big problems they can’t be solved without the government’s assistance,” says Asubi.

“Our village still doesn’t have proper water supply, which means that most of us have to walk 10 kms daily to get water. After Class X, children have nowhere to go for further studies. It is here that the government has to pitch in. About two years back, we even wrote to UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi, but after a brief flutter in the administration, things have again slowed down. And then, we are always conscious of being blamed for having played the religion card,” says Asubi. Villagers say that no chief

minister has visited them in the last two decades.

Nevertheless, at Neemkhera , the monthly village meetings no longer debate the panchayat’s “non-performance”, but focus on the issues that need to be dealt with to contribute to the quality of life. That may be the biggest harbinger of the change that the all-women panchayat has managed to bring about.

(Indian Express, 23 April, 2010)

## **Panchayat Raj may have more women**

The government is planning to hike women's reservation in the three-tier panchayat raj bodies to 50 per cent. This is proportionate to their population in Karnataka, rural development and panchayat raj minister Jagadish Shettar said on Friday.

An amendment to the Act to hike the quota is being seriously considered and will be moved in the next session of the legislature, Shettar told reporters. This is in tune with the plans at the Centre, the minister said.

Though women reservation in gram, taluk and zilla panchayats is 33 per cent, women representation in Karnataka exceeds the limit as electorate are favouring women politicians in rural bodies. Meanwhile, the minister said ombudsman will be appointed at district level to monitor works taken up in rural areas. This is part of a mission to bring in accountability in implementation of the projects, the

minister stated. There are complaints about misuse of funds or lax implementation of the projects. "We have initiated punitive action, including filing of criminal cases against the officials," he stated.

Against Rs 2,800 crore proposed to be spent under the ambitious national rural employment guarantee scheme this fiscal, Karnataka has spent Rs 1,588 crore. "I am focusing on the NREG scheme by touring the state," he stated. Following Shettar's meeting with Union rural development and panchayat raj minister, C P Joshi, in Delhi, Rs 470 crore that was pending with the Centre has been released. He has requested Joshi to allocate more funds for rural roads under the Gram Sadak Yojana.

(The Times of India, 15 January 2010)

## **This widow fought caste panchayat despite all odds**

**Sukhbir Siwach**

Chanderpati, 55, a widow, is probably the first women in Haryana to have spoken boldly against the influential khap panchayats after the honour killing of her son and daughter-in-law. Not only this, she also fought a long legal battle to ensure conviction of the murderers despite sharp opposition from her entire village.

Normally, after such honour killings, affected families do not approach the police or courts and just surrender to the decisions of the panchayats. "Not only conviction, but punishment for killers of Manoj and Babli is also important for us. I want to see all of them hanged," Chanderpati said over the phone from village Karora in Kaithal district after hearing about court verdict in the case.

Chanderpati's elder son Manoj, an electrician by profession, had eloped with Babli from the same village, and soon after the khap panchayat started putting pressure on the family to locate the couple. Recalling those horrifying days, Chanderpati, said, "Our small family was left alone in the village. Nobody used to speak with us."

But Chanderpati wanted to teach a lesson to the so-called panchayat and decided to fight back despite all odds. She not only filed a complaint with the police but also approached the Punjab and Haryana High

Court for justice. Fighting a lonely battle, she remembers how difficult it was for a widow to fight a court case. "Those days we got support only from some activists who stood by us despite having no clout in the state politics," she said. Not that the battle is won, she fears that even if the convicts get appropriate punishment they may still be victimized and therefore demands police protection.

(The Times of India, 26 March, 2010)

## **Kumily panchayat shows the way in raising own resources**

### **C. Gouridasan Nair**

Planners who are worried about poor resource mobilisation by local bodies may have a lesson to take from Kumily panchayat in Idukki district which has succeeded in raising its own resources from Rs.28 lakh to roughly Rs.1.50 crore now.

Narrating his experiences with resource mobilisation at a two-day 'Consultation on the Terms of Reference of the Fourth State Finance Commission', president of the panchayat M.S. Vasu said he and his team were able to achieve the feat with common sense methods and consensual approach to resource mobilisation.

The common sense method involved steps to ensure that every asset of the panchayat brought in an annual return. Thus even the produce from the lone coconut palm in front of the panchayat office was auctioned off to fetch Rs.250.

Perhaps even better was the effort to ensure that tourism paid for the panchayat's developmental efforts and its provisioning for bettering the lot of the 35 per cent Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. The additional revenue, he said, was being used to clean up the place and provide additional facilities to the thousands of tourists arriving in Kumily.

A Rs.93-lakh 'Clean Kumily, Green Kumily' scheme is currently under implementation. The panchayat is also racing to become one with 100 per cent shelter coverage constructing some 2,000 houses under the EMS Housing Scheme, Mr. Vasu told *The Hindu*.

(The Hindu, 16 May, 2010)

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## Delaying Enactment of Law on 'Honour' Killing

M.S. Jaglan

There is a growing concern among the liberal minded individuals, social and democratic organisations and even international institutions on the rising trend of brutal killings of innocent youngsters in the name of family or clan honour in India. The United Nations also takes a very serious view of such heinous crimes. The naked brutality of such acts against women is in contravention of the spirit of the 'United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)' which has been duly signed and ratified by India. The prevalence and entrenchment of the caste system and rabid patriarchal ethos in the society at large are the root cause of this social evil. The Supreme Court of India, in its observation in the case of Lata Singh versus State of Uttar Pradesh and others in 2006, termed the caste system as a curse on the nation and acknowledged that inter-caste marriages are in the national interest as they will result in destroying the caste system. Referring to 'honour' killings the Apex Court stated: "There is nothing honourable in such killings, and in fact they are nothing but barbaric and shameful acts of murder committed by brutal, feudal minded persons who deserve harsh punishment."

Recent months in the country have witnessed a spate of 'honour' killings. Taking cognisance of these incidents the Supreme Court on June 10, 2010 issued a notice to the Central Government and nine State governments to know about the steps taken to curb such violence. The Union Government constituted a group of nine Ministers to look into

the possibility of framing a separate law to deal with the menace of 'honour' killings. Interestingly, so far only one State Government, that of Rajasthan, has dared to exhibit political will to catch the bull by the horns. In an affidavit to the Supreme Court, the Rajasthan Government is reported to have committed to booking the perpetrators of this crime, including the Khap Panchayat members, under the National Security Law and Goonda Act. It has also directed the police officials to keep a tab on the panches of such organisations. But neither the spirit of the Apex Court's intervention nor the plea of the women organisations could result in the MPs' comprehending the urgency to enact an effective law dealing with this social evil during the monsoon session of Parliament. The Central Government seems to be dithering under the pressure of Khap Panchayats and the political class that always aspires for the support of such patriarchal forums. The pertinent question that agitates the mind of conscious people is: how long are we to witness this medieval barbaric practice and the stonewalling of the proposed legislation by its practitioners?

In Haryana, where 'honour' killings have hogged the headlines in newspapers more frequently than in other States, the ruling as well as Opposition political parties, with the lone exception of the Left organisations, seem to be engaged in shielding the medieval institution of Khap Panchayats from the clutches of the proposed law on 'honour killings'. It is being suggested that 'honour' killing is not the outcome of the gender bias attitude of the Khap Panchayats because in most cases the family

members of the girl, including women, are the perpetrators of the crime. But the fact of the matter is that the ideology of the so-called family or clan honour is derived from the gender role assigned by patriarchy. The women who do not follow the socially acceptable behaviour or preserve their chastity have to bear the brunt in the form of violence, coercion and killings to restore the family 'honour'. And it is an open secret that Khap Panchayats are the functional forums of patriarchy in the State and surrounding areas. There are numerous examples in Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh where these medieval institutions have directly or indirectly precipitated situations leading to cold-blooded murders of young women and men defying the age-old established value system.

The debate on enactment of the law is also being trivialised on the ground that 'honour' killing is, after all, a murder and the perpetrators of this crime can be tried under the existing provisions of the IPC. But it is not a case of simple murder. It is a social evil no less in enormity than sati, dowry deaths and atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It is difficult to quantify, but India is counted among the countries (Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran being others) having very high per capita incidents of 'honour' killings in the world. We have the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987; Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (amended in 1983 and 1986); and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to deal with the social evils listed earlier. Then why not a stand-alone law to

deal with 'honour' killing which shames the civil society and silences forever the women and youth who dare to dream differently?

The Khap Panchayats and their supporters have raised dissenting voices against the enactment of a comprehensive law on 'honour' killings. This is understandable as these extra-constitutional and mob-gathering forums have always considered themselves above the law of the land. The proposed Act for the abatement of 'honour killings' has to be quite stringent whereby the perpetrators of the crime shall get life imprisonment or capital punishment and the institutions and individuals aiding and abetting such killings shall also get deterrent punishment. The new law should target the perpetrators and abettors of the crime as in the case of the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.

The time has come when all those who are organically attached to the ideals of secular and liberal values intervene to stop such ghastly murders of young people. They have to press for the enactment of a law today; they will have to strive for its implementation tomorrow. The task is not impossible but it will be a long-drawn-out battle.

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## **GoM to look into 'honour killings'**

**Smita Gupta**

United on the need to deal with the pernicious practice of "honour killings," but facing division in the Cabinet on how to tackle the issue, the Centre on Wednesday decided to consult the States and set up a Group of Ministers (GoM) to suggest changes in the law to deal with the matter.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Ambika Soni said after a Cabinet meeting: "We do feel the pressure to bring amendments [to the law] in the monsoon session of Parliament. There is not only social pressure [and] media pressure, but within our

own Cabinet and party too; we feel the so-called honour killings have to be brought under the ambit of the law of the land."

At the Cabinet meeting, there was agreement on the fact that the current laws simply cannot deal with such killings. But that was it. Home Minister P Chidambaram's fervent plea to expeditiously amend the Indian Penal Code, the Indian Evidence Act and the Special Marriages Act in the monsoon session did not find favour with many of his Cabinet colleagues.

Mr. Chidambaram's point was that the government could not afford to waste time in more discussion, unless it was prepared to see many more girls summarily killed. But his colleagues felt that it was too complex an issue to be dealt with hastily, especially as 'khap panchayats' — which exerted pressure to act against the marriage of young men and women of the same 'gotra,' village or outside the caste — often had social sanction.

Minister for Youth and Sports M.S. Gill pointed out that there could be problems in implementing any changes in the law, given that the Centre was dependent on the States to do so. He wanted to know whether when a whole congregation of villagers was involved in issuing orders to kill someone, all of them could be held accountable.

Others who spoke of the need to exercise caution included Surface Transport Minister Kamal Nath and Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal, who suggested some changes in the law to deal with such killings specifically.

Sources in the government told TheHindu that the crux of the changes proposed focus on placing the onus of proving innocence on the "khap panchayat" members — and this includes not just the charge of murder, but of being an abettor, or having instigated any other sort of humiliation, including stripping, social boycott, etc. The amendments, if made into law, would also make all 'khap panchayat' members associated with a death accountable.

*(The Hindu, July 8, 2010)*

### **Caste discrimination raises its ugly head**

CHENNAI: The deadly cocktail of corporal punishment and caste discrimination is not a child's play. The type of punishment meted out by teachers often has a tinge of caste discrimination.

Dalit students being forced to clean toilets is an example of caste discrimination raising its ugly head in most corporal punishment cases. On Saturday, such cases came up before the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights.

Murugan, a Dalit studying in Standard IV at Sikkarasampalayam Panchayat Union Elementary

School in Sathyamangalam, was forced to clean the toilets by the headmaster.

V. Yogatharani (13), belonging to Arunthathiyar community and hailing from Kurinji Nagar in Theni, was discriminated upon by teachers of the P C Convent Girls School. The Class IX student committed suicide on October 14. The note that she left behind put the blame on her teachers.

Bama, a Dalit writer, said harassment of Dalit students was a common sight in schools.

*(Express News Service, November 29, 2010)*

### **Girl defies caste panchayat on marriage**

*P J Joychen, Jaipur*

In the world of caste panchayats and age old customs, a village girl in Bikaner, Asha Gujjar, has emerged as a beacon of hope for her brethren. Her story is a fine example of how education could make a difference in the life of the people in the villages who still reel under the diktats of deep entrenched caste system.

A caste panchayat in Bia Kalla village in Makarana sub division dubbed Asha Gujjar and her family an

outcaste after she refused to marry the bridegroom decided in her childhood.

Asha, currently doing her graduation at BMS College, Bikaner, refused the proposal to marry the bother-in-law of her uncle, Pannaram Gujjar. Incidentally, the family of Asha also came to her support as she was able to convince her parents that she could not marry an uneducated man and will marry a man of her choice.

This was an insult which her uncle could not bear. He approached the caste panchayat and the panchayat promptly imposed a penalty of Rs 25,000 on the family for its breach of promise,' said Asha in her complaint to the district collector.

The panchayat also declared that anybody from the community found violating its diktat would also attract a penalty of Rs 11,000 and also announced a cash reward of Rs 500 to those who provide information regarding the violation of the panchayat order. The decision was taken on November 30.

However, Asha's family was not ready to change their stand and the harassed family finally approached the district collector for protection from the caste panchayat. The collector directed the police to investigate the matter.

SHO, Gachipura, Vijendra Meel, who investigated the matter told TOI that the complaint was found true in the investigation and "we had instructed the

family of Pannaram Gujjar not to disturb Asha and her family on this ground anymore. If he was found violating the order, action would be initiated against them. When asked why no action was initiated against the caste panchayat, he said the complaint does not mention any person of the caste panchayat.

"If the family gives in writing the names of the people of the caste panchayat we would definitely look in to the matter. He said till they name the people involved in the caste panchayat, we are helpless."

However, Asha and her family wants the matter to be settled and carry on with their life. Asha's father said we have no revenge against anybody provided they leave them alone and hopes that things would be normal after the intervention of the district administration.

*(The Times of India, December 18, 2010)*

## **Dirty politics' keeps women off ZP polls**

**Manu Aiyappa & S Senthilir, Bangalore**

Dirty politics is not everyone's cup of tea — political parties in Karnataka are finding this out the hard way.

"Politics is a dirty game. Sorry, we don't want to contest." Even with 50% seats reserved for them in the coming taluk and zilla panchayat elections, women are not willing to take the political plunge. Political parties which are desperately trying to find women candidates are stunned by this strong resistance.

With just one week to go for finalizing the candidates, almost every party has launched a door-to-door campaign to scout for candidates for the elections due on December 26 and 31.

The unexpected demand for women candidates is following the state government's decision to reserve 50 % of the seats for women in the local bodies. "We barely have the time to select candidates. But this being the first election since the 50% reservation rule came into force, every party is seriously looking for good women candidates," said JD(S) spokesperson Y S V Datta.

If all three major parties in the fray — the BJP, Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) — adhere to the reservation rule, the panchayat elections would need to throw up at least 1,617 women candidates before the process of nominations begins.

Leaders cutting across party lines admitted that several women matching the profile of a panchayat member had turned down offers with a standard response: "Politics is not my cup of tea." According to them, most women perceive politics as a dirty game from which they cannot emerge with their reputation intact."

A senior Congress leader entrusted with the task of drawing up a list of potential women candidates in Davanagere said: "Our leadership wants the names of 50 suitable women candidates for the zilla and taluk panchayat elections by next week. But where do we find them? We have been going from door to door but to no avail"

For BJP though its organisational structure across the state with active women members in pockets has helped to find the candidates and looks like it's the only party to finalize the women candidates list

early. "We are still a male-dominated society where women are not given the opportunities they deserve. But we have a strong women's wing. We are trying to select the best candidates possible," said BJP spokesperson C T Ravi.

In addition, another 200-250 women may also contest as independent candidates.

Given the shortage, most parties might ultimately resort to shuffling candidates to enable sitting women councillors to shift to the reserved wards or the sitting male members may end up fielding their wives, sisters-in-law or other relatives.

### Expert Speak

Low literacy level, male-dominated standing committees and less opportunity in the decision-making process in panchayats have become hurdles for women's participation in the coming zilla panchayat and taluk panchayat elections, feel experts.

M Devendra Babu, assistant professor, Centre for Decentralization and Development, Institute of Social and Economic Change, said past experiences show that many women elected representatives become disgusted with the system.

Besides, the role of members was not great in governance and administration especially that of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe and Backward Class women members.

Interestingly, at least 33% of the state revenue is given to rural panchayats. The grants available for the rural panchayats in Karnataka are much higher than other states. But it is the male candidates who take decision in development sectors and awarding contracts, he said. Except in Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Mysore districts, women's participation in elections and functioning of ZP/TP in other districts are very low.

*(The Times of India, December 13, 2010)*

## She battles for women's property rights in tribal Kinnaur

### Vishal Gulati

Rekong Peo (Himachal Pradesh): Over a decade after she spearheaded a campaign on the issue, 57-year-old social activist Rattan Manjari is back to leading a movement in Himachal Pradesh's Kinnaur district to secure the rights of tribal women - single or married - to inherit ancestral property.

Manjari has taken on the patriarchal laws that bar tribal women from inheriting property in the state. This, she says, is a huge step in empowering women and making their lives more dignified.

The tribal laws of Kinnaur, and Lahaul and Spiti districts do not give women the right to inherit the property of their parents or husband.

'My fight against the tribal laws will continue. Most women settled in the interiors need to be educated and motivated to achieve social dignity,' Manjari, an independent member of the zila parishad from the Pooh block for two consecutive terms, told IANS.

She is all set again to contest the panchayat

elections to be held Dec 28.

Manjari said it is important to first change the mindset of women before forcing the government to change or amend the laws.

She should know it only too well. Manjari spearheaded an awareness drive on tribal women's right to property and against polyandry across Kinnaur with a handful of dedicated peers more than a decade ago.

'There is need to visit every village to make women more sensitive. A majority of them are illiterate and live in obscurity. They are not willing to stand up against the male-dominated society. The widows, completely deserted, are the worst sufferers and their number is on the rise,' she said.

Manjari, an apple grower from the picturesque Ribba village, some 250 km from state capital Shimla, recalled: 'My mother made her will putting her entire agricultural land in my name despite my

brothers.

'This was somehow an exception in my community. But if this is possible in my case, it can be possible for the rest of the tribal women too,' she insisted.

'As per customary laws, only men have the right to inherit ancestral property. Even the wife has no right on her husband's assets, which are directly transferred to the sons. This is totally unjust,' she added.

Manjari, who has been associated with panchayati raj institutions since 1981, said: 'If parents willed ancestral property to their girl child, then she would be entitled for its claim. But if the parents don't do it, then she can't claim the property even legally.'

She is also chairperson of the Mahila Kalyan Parishad, a women's rights group based in the district.

'Polyandry (a tradition where brothers in a family share one wife) is another problem in the area. But

somehow, we have managed to make youth break with tradition. Still a lot needs to be done,' she added.

Manjari had played an important role in getting an all-woman panchayat for Kamru, in the Kalpa block, elected unanimously.

'We motivated the voters to unanimously decide on seven women candidates for the equal number of posts and we succeeded,' she said.

The three-phase elections in 3,195 panchayats in the state will be held Dec 28, Dec 30 and Jan 1, 2011.

The state government has already reserved 50 percent seats for women in all panchayati raj institutions, except the post of vice-president, which is open.

(Indo-Asian News service, December 23, 2010)

### **Himachal village unanimously elects all-woman panchayat**

The national leaders are still battling it out on the issue of women reservation in parliament, but a remote village in Himachal Pradesh has unanimously decided to elect an all-woman panchayat.

Returning officer BC Thakur said on Thursday that only women candidates filed their nomination papers for the panchayat of Kamru in Kalpa block of Kinnaur district. The panchayat has 1,100 voters - mostly tribals.

There is one candidate each for seven posts. The posts are of 'pradhan' or president and 'up-pradhan' or vice-president and five ward members.

"All the voters unanimously decided to field only seven candidates for the equal number of posts. On the last date of filing the nomination papers (Dec 14), only seven candidates were in the fray. The results would be only declared after Dec 18 - the last date for the withdrawal of the names," he added.

If nobody withdraws the nominations, Sunila Negi would be declared elected as 'pardhan', Rattan Manjari 'up-pradhan' and five women as ward members - Krishna Devi, Vinod Kumari, Sanjyoti, Shabnam Kumari and Sunder Devi.

"It was the unanimous decision of all the voters to have an all-woman panchayat. The voters think that women are more sensitive to the local issues," Negi said.

The three-phase elections for 3,195 panchayat in the state will be held Dec 28, Dec 30 and Jan 1, 2011.

The state government has already reserved 50 percent seats for women in all panchayati raj institutions - the village-level third tier of governance - except for the post of 'up-pradhan' which is open.

(Hindustan Times, December 16, 2010)

### **Omar wants increased participation of women in Panchayat polls**

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah today said women should contest in large numbers in the upcoming Panchayat elections by taking

advantage of the 33 per cent reservation fixed for them in the exercise. He said participation in the elections, which will be held in January 2011,

would enable women empowerment and their involvement in the framing of policies at grass root level. The chief minister said a comprehensive development programme launched by his government during the past two years for holistic progress in all areas would get necessary fillip by the Panchayat elections. "Panchayats will be effective tools in curbing corruption and bringing transparency in the implementation of works and spending of funds," he said at a public meeting in Nagrota constituency.

Omar said that formulation and implementation of schemes and monitoring of expenditures at Panchayat level by the elected representatives would not only improve governance but help restrict malpractices to a greater extent. "When power will be in the hands of people they would take care of making best use of funds," he said.

The chief minister said the revival of mobile schools for Gujjar and Bakerwal population, which were closed due to militancy, is in the offing. There were more than 100 mobile schools for Gujjars and

Bakerwals in the state before the onset of militancy in the state in 1990 but were closed following the emergence of militancy.

Omar said he would also look into the possibility of engaging local girls as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) so that they would help in basic health aid and awareness programmes for Gujjar community. He said universalisation of education and health services in the backward rural areas was essential to pull the poor above the poverty line and enhancing their avenues of employment and social justice.

Road connectivity in these areas was being improved to generate economic activities and upgrade public service infrastructure, he said. "While due attention is being paid to provide protected drinking water in these areas, equal attention is on power supply improvement," Omar said.

*(The Pioneer, December 3, 2020)*

## **Women's quota: civic polls set to create history in Kerala**

**M V Girish Kumar Thiruvananthapuram**

Kerala is set to script yet another chapter in its electoral history in the local body polls slated to be held next month, with 50 per cent of seats in corporations, municipalities and panchayats reserved for women, for the first time in the state. Political parties are working overtime to get their act together for the elections, scheduled for October 23 and 25, as it is seen as a dress rehearsal for the assembly elections due in May next with the main fight between the ruling CPI-M led LDF and opposition UDF spearheaded by Congress. Though parties are finding it hard to get the right candidates for the seats reserved for women as most young women in the state are career-oriented, the quota is certain to bring in a major change in the state's political scene. The election is an acid test for the LDF which suffered a drubbing in the Lok Sabha polls last year when the Congress and allies grabbed 16 of the 20 seats. It would be a tough task for the LDF to retain its hold over majority of local bodies

which it won last time since the ministry is facing a host of problems, mainly linked to Finance and Education departments, and questions are being raised about the lack of collective responsibility. Allegations of corruption are also doing the rounds with the Opposition charging CPI-M, leading partner of the ruling Left Democratic Front, with helping the 'lottery mafia' operating in the state. The Finance department's inept handling of the 'other state lottery mafia' has also come in for criticism. The United Democratic Front also blames the government for 'sabotaging' the panchayati raj system by failing to distribute funds to local bodies properly which stalled development. "Devolution of funds to local bodies had been a failure in the last five years," Opposition Leader Oommen Chandy said. The Opposition is also likely to raise in their campaign the issue of the fiasco in the education sector connected with the admission procedure to self-financing educational colleges in the state

which eludes solution even after four years of LDF rule. The sufferings of landless tribals is another issue the UDF would bring in their campaign, Front sources said. The main plank of the LDF, which has a tougher battle ahead as they have to retain their prevailing supremacy in the village, block and

district panchayats as well as urban bodies, will be the rise in the price of essential commodities, a fall-out of the hike in petroleum prices effected by the Congress-led UPA government at the centre.

(IBN Live, September 26, 2010)

## **Rural jobs planned to empower panchayats**

**Prasad Nichenametla**

In a multi-pronged approach that would empower village administration and monitor the rural schemes efficiently, the Ministry of Panchayat Raj has proposed a Panchayat Service Cadre.

The cadre, which would provide a core complement of personnel to the panchayats, is intended to help local institutions handle responsibilities increasing with government programmes such as the MNREGA, Backward Regions Grant Fund, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and National Rural Health Mission.

"Grassroots delivery happens at panchayat level. But sadly the state of machinery is appalling and not equipped to deliver the desirable results. The dedicated staff proposed would take care of people's interests at village level — bringing awareness and also act as checks to political intervention in works," CP Joshi, minister for rural development and panchayati raj, said.

The plans are big, as four posts — Panchayat Development Officer, Jr Engineer (works), Assistant Extension Officer and an Accountant cum Data Entry Operator — for each of the 2.4 lakh panchayats in the country have been floated.

If the plan reaches all, the cadre would provide about 10 lakh jobs to the rural India — a major boost to its employment and economy besides empowerment. Current state is dismal, as for example, there are only 8,000 gram sevaks operating for 50,000 panchayats in UP at present, Joshi said.

The panchayat raj ministry, which moved the proposal, also held consultations with state secretaries and ministers. "The states were appreciative of the cadre idea that would strengthen the panchayats," a senior official said.

In its first phase, the scheme would cover gram panchayats with above 5,000 population. The 80 extremist-affected districts in nine states would also be covered in the first go.

To get the states interested, the Centre also proposed to share 80% of the burden of the cadre in first year, progressively reducing 10% every year — which means it has to be fully met by states from ninth year.

(*Hindustan Times*, November 28, 2010)

## **The panchayati Raj gamble**

**Rukmini Shrinivasan, Jaipur/Malaton ki Ber (Ajmer District)**

As Rajasthan begins to roll out an ambitious plan of devolution of powers to panchayati raj institutions, the state is having to confront a prickly question: Is there such a thing as too much power to the people? The furthest such devolution of powers in any state other than Kerala is being watched with interest in

the rest of the country, where many state governments are also grappling with panchayat-level corruption.

On October 2 this year, the Chief Minister of Rajasthan announced that the rural district-level



functioning of five departments - primary education, health, women and child welfare, social justice and agriculture - would be transferred to the three-tiered PRIs: the zilla parishad at the district level, the panchayat samiti at the block level and the gram panchayat at the panchayat level. This is Gehlot's second attempt at devolution after an abortive one in 2003.

The state government has begun to conduct training programmes for PRI representatives. Although limited information has reached most villages, enthusiasm is high. In village after village that TOI visited in Rajsamand, Ajmer and Bhilwara districts, residents said the power to transfer errant school-teachers, anganwadi sevikas and PDS shop owners would make government officials more accountable to the village.

In Ajmer district's Malaton ki Ber panchayat, retired Armyman Laxman Singh complained that the two teachers of the primary school were related to each other and rarely came to school. On a Saturday morning, the headmaster, who is also named Laxman Singh, hastily gathered his class of 15 children aged four to six together when he saw strangers approaching, and pulled out a book. There are 90 children on the school's rolls. "The village knows exactly how the school is working, how often the teacher comes and what he or she teaches. It will be great if we get the power to actually do something about it now," said Singh, the retired subheddar.

Yet, Malaton ki Ber knows well the pitfalls of increased powers in the hands of village elected representatives. Last week, the sarpanch, Ganpat Singh Malawat, was arrested for misappropriating Rs 1.41 crore over the course of just one year from

this panchayat with a population of 4,000. Malawat allegedly siphoned off National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme funds by "purchasing" materials from fraudulent firms in the names of friends and family.

The sarpanch is today the only elected representative in India who signs cheques. "At the higher levels of our democracy, we elect legislators but at the lower levels, we are electing executives," says former Union panchayati raj minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, adding that the role of the panchayat should be that of identifying beneficiaries, giving approvals and authorizing allocations. "The PM and CMs don't sign cheques, but no cheque can be signed without their approval. The same should be the case at the panchayati raj level," says Aiyar.

"We are fully in favour of devolution. However, what we want to see is panchayati raj, not sarpanch raj, which is what is currently taking place," says activist Nikhil Dey of the Rajasthan-based grassroots workers organization, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan. For this, greater power has to be given to the village rather than individuals, and financial powers must be taken away from the sarpanch, says Dey.

Deputy chairman of the planning board, V S Vyas, on whose report the new orders are based, says that the orders have taken care to put power in the hands of committees rather than individuals. "We are taking corruption in NREGA seriously and clamping down on it," adds Bharat Singh, Rajasthan's rural development and panchayati raj minister, himself a former sarpanch from Kota district.

(The Times of India, December 23, 2010)

## UNICEF joins hands with govt for uplift of rural populace

**New Delhi:** United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on Wednesday joined hands with the government to work for the welfare of people in rural areas with focus on sanitation and hygiene.

"The Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj would work together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for the

uplift of people living in the rural areas," the Ministry said in a statement.

The focus would be on sanitation and improving hygiene for a "healthy society", it said.

"This was agreed during a meeting of Anthony Lake, Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund

(UNICEF) with the Union Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj C P Joshi here today," it added.

The Rural Development Minister said efforts should be made to increase the capacity at the panchayat level and improve the service delivery systems in the rural areas.

"The emphasis should be on economic empowerment of the vulnerable sections of society, provision of safe drinking water and sanitation, specially in the schools, and providing internet connectivity at Panchayats," he said.

Joshi said progress is visible with the implementation of social welfare schemes in the rural areas but underlined the need to do a lot more by applying the concept of convergence with other ministries in providing basic amenities.

He also said there was scope for cooperation with UNICEF in raising awareness among people about issues related to health, hygiene and sanitation in villages.

"Another area could be the training of the functionaries towards effective implementation of the welfare schemes," he said.

*(Indian Express, December 08, 2010)*

## **Empowering rural India through Wi-Fi**

**Osama Manzar**

*The 2010 Manthan Award will set a new tone in inclusive digital development*

In my last interaction with readers this season, I'd like to reiterate some of the issues that Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) has been stressing for close to a decade. The seventh year of the Manthan Award, convening 17-18 December in New Delhi, is a landmark as far as the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the life of the common man is concerned.

When we instituted the Manthan Award in 2003, we wanted to look for people, projects, organizations and entrepreneurs who were creating and deploying innovative digital content and services. The search was for cost-effective, useful applications. The purpose was—and still is—to scout for practices that have creative uses but need to scale up. We wanted to make these visible, so that the government could then learn from them, industry could adopt them, and departments could implement them.

At DEF, the focus of the Manthan Award was to establish a goodwill relationship and a collaborative network. After more than half a decade, this network has enabled many common grounds to be discovered and worked upon. Partnerships have been forged with government departments, industry, civil society, NGOs, entrepreneurs, industry

associations, grassroots activists, *panchayats*, academic institutions and international organisations. More than 2,000 active organizations have brought value to the macro objective: To make Indian and south Asian communities information-rich and knowledge-empowered.

The extended outcome from the Award has involved the ideating and implementation of many digital programmes. The Digital Panchayat pilot is one of these initiatives, launched with 100 *panchayats* in Maharashtra with the help of a key Manthan Award partner, SMS One.

The idea behind the Digital Panchayat is to digitally enable more than 250,000 *panchayats*. The next phase of this pilot was to include 500 *panchayats* in 15 states, with support from the department of information technology and the National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI). By the time the 2011 Award rolls around, hopefully 500 *panchayats* will have their own virtual presence, with local ownership of content and management.

Another extended outcome of the award is the involvement of voluntary organizations. There exists thousands of NGOs in India working at the grassroots-level rural settings. They have a rich body of knowledge and can possibly plug into the

larger development network. The eNGO programme has been designed by DEF and NIXI to facilitate that. So far, 500 grassroots entities have been provided with no-cost, dynamic web services, and skill development and web management solutions.

This network enabled DEF to contribute to the content framework of the roll-out of 100,000 common service centres. The next step will be to connect stakeholders with the proposed India Tele Center Network in order to make sure that all village-level kiosks, as rural enterprises, serve rural communities with valuable information and services.

Part of our vision is that we should have at least one large community information resource centre (CIRC) established in each of India's states, to facilitate ICT applications, link local content and produce to markets, and serve as an integrated resource and service delivery centre. Five CIRC's are up, and through the Manthan Award network, we're going to achieve the rest in the next five years.

The 2010 Manthan Award will set a new tone in inclusive digital development. The 77 finalists this year, selected out of 456 nominees from eight countries across 15 categories, bring innovation to a new level. The central focus this year is empowering rural communities through wireless connectivity.

The reason: Our remote communities can only be connected to the information highway, rapidly and economically, through wireless, be it mobile, 3G or broadband or wireless mesh networks. To make the gathering a true exchange of knowledge, participation has also been extended to major ministries, 25 state governments, eight countries and their governments, and more than 200 organizations. Throughout, we continue to pursue our motto: To make societies information producers, rather than just information consumers.

*Osama Manzar is founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chairman of the Manthan awards. Mint is a partner of the Manthan awards.*

(www.livemint.com, December 12, 2010)

## Himachal to open 'Grameen Haats'

*H.P. will set up 36 'Grameen Haats' or rural markets across the state to help boost economic condition of local artisans*

**Shimla:** To enable local artisans market their products in their vicinity, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal announced that 36 'Grameen Haats' or rural markets would be set up across the state with an outlay of Rs 5.40 crore.

"The state government would be creating a strong network of 'Grameen Haats' in all districts in a phased manner where the artisans could showcase a range of local products made by them," Dhumal said at a public rally at Bhatakufar, located on the outskirts of this state capital town, reports IANS.

The hill state is known for hand-knitted woolens like shawls, stoles, mufflers, socks, gloves,

pullovers and caps, Chamba rumal (handkerchief), Chamba chappals (slippers) and jewellery items.

The Himachal Handicraft and Handloom Corporation, which is marketing the products made by the local artisans and craftsmen, is operating 15 sales outlets, including one each in Bangalore and Delhi.

The state government has got the Chamba handkerchief, Kullu and Kinnauri shawl and Kangra tea registered under the Geographical Indications (GI) of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, with the Chennai-based Geographical Indications Registry.

(www.igovernment.in, November 29, 2010)

## Bangalore rural leads in cleanliness drive

*The Bangalore Rural District has received a rainfall of 178 mm, more than the average, this year.*

The government would be urged to pay a compensation of Rs 8,000 per acre of crop lost, Minister for Labour Bachegowda has said.

Speaking with reporters after a review meeting of Bangalore Rural Zilla Panchayat here on Monday, the Minister said the untimely rains had cast a devastating effect on farmers.

He divulged that the State has received Rs 44.74 crore from the Centre under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) this year. As many as 593 projects were underway in 90 villages.

“A sum of Rs 10.14 crore has been released for drinking water projects and rejuvenation of 127 wells has been taken up,” he added. The shortage of potable water has increased in rural areas due to depletion of water table.

However, the minister said the Bangalore Rural district has earned a distinction in the country for carrying out cleanliness drive in an effective way.

Gowda defended the government’s decision of ordering a judicial probe into land scams despite a concurrent inquiry by Lokayukta.

He also said he has highest regard for the Lokayukta.

(Deccan Herald, November 29, 2010)

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