



UMA PRACHAR

Vol. 12

No. 1

Private Circulation

2005

Panchayats & Employment Guarantee

By A. Vaidyanathan

THE EMPLOYMENT Guarantee Bill, recently tabled in Parliament, has provoked extensive debate. At one extreme are those who hold that the best way to expand and diversify employment opportunities is to achieve and sustain higher growth rates. They argue — or at any rate insinuate — that a guarantee of employment will not accomplish much, and that the money spent on it will be wasted. For them, pushing forward the neo-liberal reform agenda should be the main concern of public policy. The protagonists of employment guarantee, on the other hand, cover a wide spectrum of both professional economists and politicians but they are divided over the scale, coverage, and modalities of implementing the guarantee. This article addresses the latter set of issues.

First, let us consider the rationale for an employment guarantee. Some invoke the deceleration of employment growth during the latter half of the 1990s to argue that unemployment and under-employment in rural areas are rampant and increasing. A closer examination of the available data suggests that the deceleration of employment growth between 1993 and 1999 is due in part to the fact that the increase in agricultural output between 1993 and 1999 was substantially lower than the growth between 1987-88 and 1993-94; and in part to the fact that an increasing proportion of youth (especially in

the age group 5-14 and to some extent in the 15-29 group) are attending schools. The decline in labour force participation of the 15-29 age group may also reflect the increasing educational levels in the group and the attendant changes in job aspirations and wage expectations. This would make it extremely unlikely that the unemployed in this class would offer themselves for unskilled manual work at the wages offered by the EGS (employment guarantee scheme).

The nature and magnitude of rural employment problems can be better appreciated by looking at trends over a longer-term perspective. On the basis of data from the quinquennial employment surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation, the following features are noteworthy:

- a) The proportion of the rural labour force, which is normally unemployed, does not show any sustained trend over the period 1977 to 1999.
- b) The person-day unemployment rate (i.e., the proportion of days in a year for which persons available for work do not get it) also does not show a sustained trend. The rate of unemployment by this means was about seven per cent in 1999-2000, about the same as in 1977 and 1983.
- c) Open employment in rural areas is largely concentrated among casual labourers; their share in the working population has been increasing steadily over the period from around 27 per cent to 36 per

cent in the case of men; and from 35 per cent to 40 per cent in the case of women.

d) Between 1977 and 1999, the number of men workers in rural areas increased 53 million. The majority of them (28 million) have been absorbed in non-agricultural activity; the pace of diversification away from agriculture is much less pronounced among women. But for both sexes, practically the entire increase in rural employment between 1993 and 1999 came from outside agriculture.

e) Real wages of casual labour have been rising throughout the period.

There is certainly no room for complacency about these trends. The pace of increase in non-farm employment needs to be accelerated; wage rates, through rising, are still far too low to provide a reasonable level of living. Under-employment is again mostly concentrated among casual labourers. Providing additional employment to meet the unsatisfied demand for work can directly increase incomes of this class to a significant extent and also — as the experience of the Maharashtra ECS showed — strengthen their bargaining position in the rural market for wage labour.

A universal EGS sounds appealing but in reality its scope and impact are likely to be limited. Casual labourers are likely to be the principal claimants and potential beneficiaries of the EGS. Farmers and other self-employed persons as well as those with regular employment are unlikely to be willing to do unskilled manual work at the wage rates offered. The coverage and scale of the EGS should be decided keeping this in view.

If the EGS is to cover the employment deficit indicated by current daily status unemployment rate, it is necessary to create additional employment of seven billion person-days in a year. The cost would depend on the wage rate and assumptions about the magnitude of materials and overhead costs for generating the employment. Assuming the current national average wage rate for casual labour at Rs.60

for men (the average in 1999-2000 was Rs.45 in agriculture and Rs.60 in non-agriculture) and Rs.45 for women (1999-2000 range 31 to 37) and assuming that material costs and overheads to be around a third of the wage bill, the programme would require an annual outlay of about Rs.33,000-34,000 crore.

The statutory minimum wage is conceptually a more appropriate basis, provided it is the same or higher than the prevailing market rates. A better criterion, and one which takes care of differences between the market and the minimum wage rates and also self-selection of beneficiaries, would therefore be to fix EGS wage rate at the prevailing market rate or the minimum wage rate whichever is higher. This would require a State-wise review.

A third set of questions concerns the role of a legal or constitutional guarantee. These include: (1) whether a national guarantee can be made effective through Central legislation alone? (2) Since the responsibility for implementation vests with the States, would it not be necessary to get the States to formulate legislation in conformity with the central law? (3) Can the legal guarantee be effectively enforced if, for whatever reasons, States do not implement the programme at all or implement it in a way that does not benefit the intended beneficiaries?

The ongoing debate on the EGS focuses far too much on the scale of resources to be allocated to the programme and the feasibility of mobilising them and far too little on its content and implementation. Whether the allocation for the EGS should be Rs.25,000 crore or Rs.40,000 crore cannot be judged without clarifying whether it is to replace the ongoing RLEGP (Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme) or be in addition to it.

Whether deficit financing can or should be used and on what scale again cannot be judged solely with reference to the EGS. The sizeable food grain stocks and foreign exchange reserves would seem to suggest that the economy has some cushion to

absorb higher fiscal deficit to finance increased public expenditure. Food grain prices can be kept under control at least for some time. But food grain supply is no longer the only or even the major factor determining the impact of deficits. Increased spending on the EGS and rural development, even if they are more effective than in the past, cannot address deeper resource and technology constraints on achieving the rate and pattern of agricultural growth necessary to meet the rapidly diversifying patterns of food consumption at all levels.

The effectiveness of the EGS depends not just on the scale of outlay on that programme, but on what activities are taken up, how they will mesh with similar activities under other programmes for rural improvement, and what steps will be taken to improve implementation. Concerns about the provisions limiting initial coverage to poorest districts and expanding it in a phased manner are understandable.

The argument that even if there are large leakages to the better off, the increased spending by recipients of the leakage would have a multiplier effect and lead, in the second or third round, to increase employment and incomes for the rural unemployed is both disingenuous and dangerous.

Much of the EGS as indeed of rural development consists of local works for local development. The local communities are best equipped to decide on these. Many are sceptical whether local leaders have the necessary competence and whether they are any less prone to corruption and inefficiency. The emphasis is therefore on strengthening centralized monitoring, inspection and audit, independent

evaluations and freedom of information. Important as these are, experience has shown that they make hardly any dent on waste, corruption and inefficiency.

It is no one's argument that panchayats are or will be free of these ills. The argument is simply that there is a far greater chance that left to themselves the panchayats will implement schemes with a greater sense of responsibility. Even under the existing, severely constrained panchayati raj regime, numerous elected panchayats have shown the willingness and the ability to decide on projects appropriate to local needs, mobilise local resources for such projects and to take the responsibility for implementing government sponsored projects. Works taken up by them have been found to be completed faster, better and cheaper than those of the government agencies. Democratically elected, representative panchayats are far more effective means for containing (though not eliminating) corruption and ensuring accountability than is generally recognised. If decentralized planning and implementation leads to even a modest reduction in waste and leakage — from the current, and widely quoted, 85 per cent to say 60 or 70 per cent — there will be a dramatic improvement in effectiveness in all aspects of the programme. The campaign for a wider and better funded EGS must be combined with a campaign to generate strong public opinion and mobilise elected panchayat members all over the country to bring strong pressure on the Central and State Governments to strengthen democratic panchayats and empower them to plan and implement all local development programmes.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 15 February, 2005)

They set good example in panchayat poll campaign

By Sunny Sebastian

Elections to panchayati raj institutions in Rajasthan are an enormous exercise in which the rural people decide on the choice of 105,247 panchs and 9,178 sarpanchs besides electing 5,257 representatives to the panchayat samitis and another 1,008 to the 32 zila parishads in this geographically largest State in the country. Evidently it also turns out to be the time for large-scale misuse of money and muscle power.

There are sceptics who even say that the country could decentralize only corruption through panchayats in its attempt to decentralise power and resources. The little republics as conceived by the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, are surely not the places where true democratic practices prevail.

Yet all is not lost. There is a silver lining amid the dark clouds of despondency as there are practitioners of grass root level democracy in places as backward Rajsamand. They have set examples for transparent and responsive functioning of gram panchayats.

When the Bhim-based Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) started exposing the corruption in panchayat bodies with the help of a series of "jan sunwais" (public hearings) in the past, at least some of the well meaning people were anguished about its negative impact in the public. Now the Sangathan -- as it is known in these areas -- is all set to show the way acting positively.

"To a great extent we have been able to initiate a public debate into just electoral practices by fielding 12 candidates and showing it ourselves for the rest of them to follow", said Aruna Roy, Magsaysay Award winner, at Atolia village in Bhim panchayat samiti.

MKSS candidates are expected to go by foot to the villages to seek votes and no one is using a vehicle

for campaign. Even when the maximum expenses allowed by the State Election Commission in the campaign for a sarpanch is Rs.5,000, the MKSS nominees will confine their spending to Rs.2000. "In the year 2000 it was Rs.1200. This time the increase has been allowed after taking into account the inflation," noted Shankar Singh, MKSS activist and star puppeteer.

"The standard issues which come up during the local elections have given way to issues like transparency, employment guarantee and adherence to the model election code," Ms.Roy, who took time off from the issues of National Advisory Council on the United Progressive Alliance Government's Common Minimum Programme, to be amid the villagers, said.

"We were now pleasantly surprised to find that many of the candidates from the political parties like the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party have some of the items from our Peoples manifesto", Ms.Roy pointed out even as she went around on a padyatra campaigning for Tara Devi, the MKSS nominee for Kushalpur gram panchayat in Bhim panchayat samiti. "Now there are fewer vehicles also in others' campaign," she pointed out.

A shy and illiterate Tara Devi, who is yet to free herself from the confines of the veil the society has forced upon her, is the wife of Narain Singh, sarpanch of Kushalpur for the period from 2000 to 2005 when it was a general seat. Narain Singh along with Tej Singh, who represented neighboring Todgarh gram panchayat in the past are the two success stories the MKSS flaunts this time.

"Narain had won the previous election after spending a mere Rs.1,200. He ran the panchayat also in an exemplary manner. The right type of person in sarpanch's post can do wonders as sarpanch's is one of the most powerful posts in the country. It is the only elected executive post," Nikhil Dey, MKSS activist and one of the founders

of the Election Watch in Rajasthan said. Tej Singh or Teju has to his credit eliminating the practice of manual scavenging in his area.

But why did MKSS go for Tara Devi, the wife of a former sarpanch, when jokes on "sarpanch-patis" are rampant in India's country-side? She is not even literate and can hardly speak a sentence of her own.

"When the seat was reserved for women this time we were not exactly prepared with a candidate. The literate women in this area belong to a different class. We then opted for Tara Devi as she is well versed with the Sangathan's commitments. As for public utterances, we have made it mandatory for all our candidates to address the electorate, even if it needs prompting," Mr.Dey argued.

"We are not openly asking votes for a particular candidate. We have a set of basic commitments the public wants from the candidates. That concerns all. In the case of candidates put up by MKSS, it is our commitment too," Ms.Roy pointed out. The "Janata Ka Ghoshna Patra", a two-page manifesto from MKSS pledges to adhering to the model election code which includes not offering incentives like money, liquor, "gur" (jaggery) or transport to the voter on the polling day.

The manifesto forbids discriminating against anyone in the name of religion, caste, gotra, gender or region and wants the candidates to make a commitment on the development of the area, to keep the muster rolls of employment in relief works open to all and to ensure minimum wages to workers.

In Tara Devi's individual "ghoshna patra" there are additional commitments to fight social evils like child marriage and holding of ceremonial feasts after deaths. She pledges not to be an usurer and promises to keep away from selling as well as using intoxicants.

There is a commitment from all the candidates to support the agitation for the enactment of a central law for employment guarantee, for which Ms.Roy and the economist Jean Dreze are fighting from within the NAC.

"This is quite natural as the proposed Right to Information Act and the Rural Employment Guarantee Act which are before Parliament now have their origin in the area where you are moving around now," Mr. Dey said pointing out the historic role of these otherwise nondescript Rajasthan country-side where dust and thorns of subabul trees seemed all pervading.

The candidates from the Sangathan are spread out in the districts of Rajsamand (5), Ajmer (5), Pali (1), Bhilwara (1). Of the dozen MKSS nominees four are regular workers of the organization. All except one--Kamla in Todgarh-- are fighting for the posts of sarpanchs. In the previous election MKSS had three candidates out of which two had won.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 1 February, 2005)

Breaking Silence: Pak woman fights for justice

By Munizae Jehangir

Sunday, March 13, 2005 (Multan): Thousands of Pakistani women took to the streets of Multan last week on International Women's Day. This was the

angry backlash against a controversial High Court ruling that acquitted the five of the six men accused of raping Mukhtiar Mai. Leading the demonstrations herself, Mukhtiar Mai demanded justice. She was gangraped three years ago on the orders of her village panchayat. The protests worked. Days later, a Federal Shariat Court overturned the Lahore High Court order.

Panchayat orders gang rape

Mukhtiar Mai's story goes back to June 2002 when the village panchayat controlled by a rival tribe ordered her gangrape as punishment for her 12-year-old brother's alleged rape of one of their women. This allegation later turned out to be false. But on that fateful day, Mukhtiar Mai was dragged, kicking and screaming to a room. One hundred and fifty villagers stood outside while she was raped inside the room.

Mukhtiar Mai is not the first victim of such a crime and such so called punishments and even honour killings are quite common in rural Pakistan. Recently, the government tried to bring in a law banning honour killings, but conservative voices stalled it. In light of the recent judgement on the Mukhtiar Mai case and the defeat of the honour killing bill due to a rebellion in the ruling party, the government's rhetoric on enlightened moderation and emancipation of women rings hollow.

Fighting odds

Speaking to NDTV, Mukhtiar Mai says that though she was afraid to say anything for several days after her rape, the support she got from the local press gave her the courage to go to the police. "There was no one to support all those other women who were raped. Not a single FIR was filed. But the entire world was with me, so I went and lodged an FIR," she says. And it was from here that Mukhtiar Mai's struggle really began as she fought against all the odds to get justice. She was threatened by the tribe whose men raped her. Only four of the 150 people, who stood outside while she was being raped, came forward and testified in her support. And then in August 2002, the court handed down the death sentence to six of the accused.

Icon for women's rights

Overnight, Mukhtiar Mai hit national and international headlines, becoming an icon for women's rights for daring to speak out. Using a grant given to her by the President, Mukhtiar set up

the first primary school in her village. Today, 200 girls and 150 boys are getting an education there. "The atmosphere in the village is very bad. If they are educated, they will learn to support themselves and stand on their feet," she says. Promises by the government of more money for the school did not come through, but Mukhtiar Mai did whatever she could to keep it going. "Yes, there was a time when I had to sell my own jewellery in order to pay for my students' books and the teachers' salaries," she recalls. And then just last week, the Canadian government gave her a grant of 20 lakh Pakistani rupees for the school.

Beacon of hope

Recently, *Time* magazine also included Mukhtiar Mai in its list of 20 Asian heroes. "There were attempts to pressurise Mukhtiar Bibi into submission. There were also attempts to compromise, but Mukhtiar Bibi stood firm. We received a lot of letters from many women. Mukhtiar Bibi became a beacon of hope for many women who had no hope," says Mustafa Baloch, Fundraiser for Mukhtiar Bibi. But not everyone in Pakistan is happy, especially men from the tribe that Mukhtiar Mai stood up to. "People don't like this. This has embarrassed Pakistan," claims a man from the Matoi tribe. But those comments do not deter Mukhtiar Mai at all. Today, she lives life on her own terms and looks forward to perhaps having children of her own. Thanks to her courage, the tradition of silence on rape has been broken. Once shamed, Mukhtiar's family are now proud and Mukhtiar has a message for other rape victims. "One should never lose hope. God will always help people in their search for justice. One should never hesitate," she says.

(Courtesy: www.ndtv.com)

Siulibona, model village for tribal welfare

In the heart of the Susunia hills in Bankura (West Bengal), six Santhal families had given birth to a village exclusively to accommodate Santhals who were willing to quit jungle life and settle closer to

the mainstream, some 100 years ago. The village named Siulibona gradually grew up and now houses 62 Santhal families. In 1967, the village was brought under Susunia panchayat in Chatna block.

The small village in 1999 was chosen as the ideal place for random sample survey and a detailed study on the gradually decaying Santhals by the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI). After completion of the research and survey work, the ISI had identified Siulibona as the model village to help the state and the Central government in respect of implementation of different tribal welfare projects.

The village does not have even a primary school. Yet Siulibona has recorded 70 per cent literacy during survey work. The ISI survey report, however, regretted that “the kids do not go to school and are comfortable wasting time with no work and roaming in and around the village agricultural fields.” The ISI had advised the government to start schools to help child education.

The village is surrounded by the Susunia hills and scattered jungle stretches in the northern and southern part. Quite interestingly, the families which had migrated from the jungles and settled permanently with the mainstream had felt the necessity to have basic minimum education decades ago and so the literacy figure could reach up to 70 per cent. The ISI survey had revealed that this could be possible because of rich cultural heritage of the Siulibona residents. The village maintains the tribal rituals and legacy of folk-based Santhal festivals very sincerely. Every year on 1 January it arranges tribal dance and song festival and competition. Due to dearth of funds the festival was about to come to a halt. The tribal meet, meanwhile, had become a significant event in the district and Shamayita Math, a charitable forum and NGO, finally came to the rescue of the rhythmic dances of tribal men and women and the lingering tune of flute. Those together left the viewers mesmerised and spellbound during the meet this year too. According to the Siulibona residents this was the unexpected achievement this year.

The DM, Bankura, Mr PK Mishra said, “The village will be taken very sincerely to help preservation of the values and cultural heritage of the Santhals.” Rishi Riddha Anahata, secretary of the Shamayita Math, said: “The ancient tribal culture and tradition has been disappearing, especially among the new generation. So in order to enliven the rich culture and create community feelings through interaction of ideas and views, this tribal meet has proved to be very effective. The bureaucrats after almost five years of the ISI survey report felt the necessity to share the all-round uplift of the socio-economic status of the village.

(Courtesy: The Statesman, January 06, 2005)

Striving Towards Model Village Status

By: T.K. Devasia , Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Venganoor village, nestling near the renowned Kovalam beach resort, has set an example for Keralites, who are finding it hard to sustain the acclaimed ‘Kerala model’.

The village, with a population of 50,000, shows how an inspired leadership can ensure its development. It has sprung a few surprises under the leadership of 50-year-old T Rufus Daniel, the panchayat president. He has led the panchayat on the path of self-reliance, sufficiency and sustainability despite lacking any regular source of income. When Daniel took charge more than four years ago, a sizeable number of people were starving due to a crisis in the farm, fisheries and handloom sectors. Conventional methods of development had failed to deliver long-term succor. The thrust under the Kerala model was social welfare, but Rufus realized that this would not be sustainable without developing the productive sectors. He tried to press the productive forces in the village for the common good. His first task was to eradicate poverty and for this women were identified as the best tool.

However, in the beginning, they were reluctant to join. They were motivated to join the mainstream with the help of the 'Kudumbashree' mission and other agencies.

The local body made the women form self-help groups and engage in many poverty alleviation ventures. They are now engaged in a series of income-generating activities. Organic farming is one such activity. The panchayat has launched pesticide free farming under a 'Safe food' programme with 'Kudumbashree' units and Poabs Organic Resource Centre, a voluntary organization dedicated to organic farming, Mithraniketan Krishi Vigyan Kendra and the Kerala Agricultural University. The latter two are providing technical expertise, which includes community training and crop protection. Says Daniel: "the 'Safe food' programme was aimed at making Venganoor panchayat 100 per cent free from chemical fertilizers by 2007. Our products are in great demand now. Organic farming will make the village a hub of agricultural exports when the demand of pesticide free agricultural products increases."

The SHGs are also producing paper bags, coconut shell crafts, paper craft, cloth bags and a variety of bamboo and jute products under a zero waste programme initiated by Thanal, another NGO. Most of these products are made from wastes picked up from the Kovalam beach resort. These activities have helped Venganoor in getting the state Planning Boards recognition as the first self-sufficient, self-reliant, sustainable panchayat in Kerala. It was selected last year on the basis of a benchmark survey for poverty eradication.

Not content with the laurels, the panchayat is gearing itself to further improve the living standards. Its first attempt is to develop the creative and academic skills of the children. The mission is to encourage parents and children to make ethnic toys from locally available materials. A nodal centre will be set up to develop workbooks, hand books and learning materials. The local body has also sought participation of Non-Resident Indians in the development of the village. The NRIs are helping the village in developing public amenities like

government schools, hospitals, roads and tanks under their "My Village My Dream" project. The NRIs have already adopted a school in Venganoor.

Today the school has computer education facilities, reference library, facilities for vocational training and drinking water. The school was selected for the pilot project as it had recorded excellent results.

The panchayat president believes that these achievements were the result of a non-political approach adopted by each member in developing the village. He pointed out that the panchayat had worked on a consensual basis for the last four years. All decisions were taken unanimously in a transparent manner. There were no complaints regarding selection of beneficiaries and disbursement of funds. The poorest were given top priority." Rufus firmly believes that development at the grassroots would be possible only if all join hands. His ultimate aim is to turn Venganoor into a model village in the state, if not in the country.

(Courtesy: The Sahara Time)

Increase in outlay to strengthen panchayat raj system

By: M. Madan Mohan

When the Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister of Karnataka, Mr. Siddaramaiah, announced an increase in the district sector outlay from Rs.960 crores to Rs.2,500 crores during his budget speech on Friday, he was empowering the panchayat raj system in the State.

For the first time since the process of decentralizing democratic institutions began in Karnataka more than a decade ago, a financial commitment has been made towards empowering panchayat raj institutions.

This comes nearly 13 years after the adoption of 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, which envisaged the strengthening of rural and urban local bodies. Two years after that, the Karnataka

Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 was amended to take further legislative steps towards democratic decentralization.

Activity mapping

In October, the Dharam Singh Government took the first step for transferring finances, functions and functionaries to the three tier panchayat raj bodies. An activity mapping exercise was conducted to clearly delineate the functions of each tier to avoid confusion and overlapping of functions.

The Government has now legitimized the transfer of funds and schemes to the panchayat raj institutions. The budgetary allocation comes with a link document giving details of the sectoral allocation of funds, schemes transferred from the State sector to panchayat raj institutions, and the district wise allocation of funds to the different levels.

Sources are of the opinion that the link document is a landmark achievement in empowering panchayat raj institutions in Karnataka. It is an irreversible step and any move to withdraw the powers will have to be done through an amendment to the Act, they said.

The change in system comes at a time when a new team of office-bearers will assume responsibility in over 5600 gram panchayats in the State. When the new gram panchayat members assume office, they will head institutions that have been considerably strengthened to achieve development at the grassroots level.

The panchayat raj institutions will now have the finances and powers to take up projects within their jurisdiction. It may be noted that Karnataka was the first state in the country to adopt a new panchayat raj law, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, in 1993. When the congress came back to power in the State in 1999, the Act was amended to ensure empowerment of the rural and urban local bodies. However, the amendment was accepted and passed only in 2003.

Transfer of funds

Mr. Dharam Singh approved the transfer of finances

and functionaries from the State sector to the district sector in the middle of the current financial year to enable the panchayat raj institutions to get a feel to their new responsibilities. According to the Budget, around 170 schemes have been transferred to the district sector, increasing the responsibilities of the panchayats.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, 14 March, 2005)

Government to train gram panchayat members

The State Government of Karnataka will impart appropriate training for gram panchayat (GP) presidents, members of standing committees (in GPs) and staff, said Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Dr.H.C. Mahadevappa.

“After all elected GP members are sworn in, the GP secretaries and bill collectors would be given training on their functions, grant allocations for them an dhow to go about utilization. Further, orientation programmes will be held for anganwadi workers and others”, he said.

Close on the heels of JD(S) the party that Dr. Mahadevappa is affiliated to, declaring that the Union budget presented on Monday was disappointing, Dr. Mahadevappa expressed a difference in opinion. “The budget is pro-growth and pro-common man, rural development has got priority,” he felt. Not only have all drinking water schemes been brought under the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission and been allocated a whopping Rs.4,750 crore, the Centre has proposed plans to preserve water bodies, he observed.

(Courtesy: Deccan Herald, 2 March, 2005)

Panchayats to get share in projects

MANALI, 2 JANUARY: Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister today said the local panchayats would be provided developmental share in all the projects executed in their areas.

While addressing a public meeting after laying the foundation stone of a ropeway being constructed

at Solang Nullah near here, he said the government had made it mandatory for all project executors to make fair provision in the project cost for development of the area thereby becoming partners in the socio-economic development of the area. He said the government had made it mandatory for all private entrepreneurs to provide at least 70 per cent employment to local people as per their qualification and experience.

The CM said tourism development in the state was being done by ensuring that environment in the area was not disturbed. He said Solang Nullah was known for winter sports and necessary infrastructure was being created to facilitate the sportsmen and visitors to the valley.

He said with the construction of the ropeway, setting up skiing facilities at higher reaches would be possible and this would attract not only the tourists but also winter sport enthusiasts.

The CM said the ropeway authorities would spend Rs 12 lakh on three panchayats of Palchan, Burua and Shanag for development of the area. Mr Ashok Thakur, Principal Secretary, Tourism and Forests, said the project would be completed within 14 months.

(Courtesy: The Tribune, January 3, 2005)

Twelve Dharmapuri village panchayats 'free of child labour'

DHARMAPURI, JAN. 26. Twelve village panchayats out of a total of 251 in this district have declared themselves 100 per cent free of child labour, thanks to the unstinted efforts taken by the local bodies. This was declared at a special gram sabha meeting convened on the Republic Day today.

A total of 304 Village Education Committees (VEC) out of 1,083 claimed that 100 per cent enrolment of children had been made. This is in sequel to a special drive initiated by the district administration since October 2 last in which elected representatives took the lead in ensuring 100 per cent enrolment and

retention of children in schools in all village panchayats. Two panchayats in Harur, five in Morapur, two in Palacode, one in Pennagaram and two in Pappireddipatti blocks declared themselves child labour free.

The Information and Publicity and Local Administration Minister told *The Hindu*, "The Chief Minister, had made the highest ever allotment for upgrading educational infrastructure in Dharmapuri. With the provision of infrastructure, more number of children would be enrolled in the ongoing drive."

Survey undertaken

A survey was undertaken in all the 2,961 habitations targeting those who had never enrolled and dropouts, including child labourers and physically challenged children. All schools would be maintaining a record of the newly-enrolled students. All elected representatives in addition to the presidents of VECs were instructed that achievements in enrolling and ensuring the retention of children in schools would be made public.

According to the Collector, Ashish Vachhani, "9,926 children were identified as out of school, of which 5,039 children have already been enrolled in schools. The survey revealed that as many as 2,390 out of schoolchildren from the district migrated to other districts and the States along with their families."

The ongoing enrolment drive had been accompanied by a clampdown on business establishments engaging child labour.

As many as 136 child labourers were rescued since October 2004 out of which 95 were admitted to schools. Legal action was initiated against the erring establishments.

The Coimbatore district administration declared the Kinathukkadavu and Thondamuthur blocks free of child labour. The Kovai CLASS volunteers

embarked on a mission to identify children enumerated by the Sarva Siksha Abhyan (SSA) scheme. The volunteers rescued the children and got them admitted to special and regular schools. A number of government agencies were pressed into service for certifying the achievement.

The village education committee's of the Education Department, SSA Block supervisors and Assistant Primary Education Officers verified the enrolment records.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, January 27, 2005)

Manipur NGO opposes dam construction move

The Citizens Concern for Dams and Development (CCDD) opposed the construction of 1500 mw capacity Tipaimukh hydro-electric power project in Manipur. Co-convenor of the CCDD Aram Pamei said in a statement that in the conception and implementation process of the Tipaimukh project, failed to conduct an independent and accountable study of Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project, other ecology, human, wildlife, flora, fauna and health, socio-economic, cultural impacts on the indigenous people of Manipur was not conducted.

The project also failed to take, prior and informed consent of the people and is marked with absence of a concrete resettlement and rehabilitation plan for people to be displaced by the project. There is no environment management plan, risk management plan or cost benefit analysis Mr Pamei said.

A public hearing held at Mizoram on December 2, 2004, concerning the project had already objected to the dam construction over procedural lapses, including absence of provisions of project report, EIA, EMP and resettlement plan to the people to be affected. The procedural lapse contravened the recommendation of the World Commission Dams (WCD), which called for a respect for rights, valuing equity and sustainability in all decision - making processes in the construction of large dams.

The CCDD expressed that a thorough and participatory discussion respectful of the rights, wishes and aspiration of the people of Manipur should precede any process or meetings on Tipaimukh dam. CCDD regretted that the right to information was not guaranteed in the decision-making process of the project. NEEPCO authorities had been ignoring people's request to supply them with copies of the environment impact assessment despite the statutory provisions for supply of such reports, the statement said.

(Courtesy: North East News Agency, Jan 22, 2005)

Published by:



INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST,
Upper Ground Floor, Core 6A, India Habitat Centre,
Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003.
Tel: 91-11-24647873, 24653780;
Telefax: 91-11-24648724
Email: isstdel@isst-india.org
Website: www.isst-india.org

Branch Office: No. 601, North Block, Manipal Centre, 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore - 560 042

Editor: Uma Nandy
Assistance: Grace Fernandez
Layout, Graphics and Design: Vishal K. Goyal



UMA PRACHAR

Vol. 12

No. 2

Private Circulation

2005

Community Radio a Strong Development Tool in Uttarakhand

[Although a full-fledged community radio movement has still to become a reality in India, villagers in various rural pockets all over the country are using the airwaves to voice their concerns about various issues.]

Uttarakhand Community Radio is serving as an important development tool for creating awareness, spreading information and facilitating communication, despite the absence of policy support and government aid. It's a radio service for geographically bound communities in areas with poor infrastructure where people do not have access to the mainstream national and regional media.

The service, which is run and managed by local people addressing issues relating to the community in the local language, was introduced in Uttarakhand by the Himalaya Trust, a Dehradun-based civil society organisation, with support from UNESCO, in September 2001. A basic training workshop was held where volunteers were divided into five groups and taught the basics of radio programming and ways to narrowcast or broadcast, depending on the means available, framework of rules and outreach demands.

Since May 2004, five community radio groups -- four in Garhwal in the western part of the state, and one in Kumaon in the east -- have been engaged in a

research initiative looking at grassroots media and poverty. Pradeep Community Radio, Raibari Community Radio and Hewalvani Community Radio are some of the groups working actively in the region.

"First we did not know what it meant, but we learnt...It is very important for every community to get news on issues that are directly related to it, like that of employment, education, etc. In order for information to travel from one village to another in the hills it is very important to help create a community radio model," says Rajendra Negi, a volunteer at Hewalvani.

India has not yet built up a full-fledged community radio movement or process, as government policy governed by the Telegraph Act of 1885 does not permit such broadcasts. Community radio broadcasting became a possibility only when the Supreme Court declared in 1995 that the airwaves were public property and must be used to advance the public good.

In 1996, representatives from civil society organisations, media persons and government officials met and formulated a draft on community radio. However, the draft has still not been addressed by the concerned authorities.

While commercial FM (frequency modulated) licensing began in 2000 with a huge license fee and stringent restrictions, community radio made a modest start in December 2002 when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government started issuing broadcasting licenses to reputed academic institutions.

Communities interested in using the airwaves have two options. They can either cablecast -- narrowcast programmes through cable channels, thereby making it necessary for people to own television sets and have a satellite connection -- or they can buy time on All India Radio's local stations at concessional rates to broadcast in the local language for around an hour every week.

Uttaranchal's community radio groups make programmes and narrowcast them by playing them back to assembled audiences from a tape recorder, occasionally with the help of a loudspeaker.

The initiative has allowed people to take on the authorities, as in the case of Godawaridevi who was

being harassed by the local *patwari* (police official). "For many days nobody knew what had happened. Then we got to know about this incident. Godawari Devi had earlier opposed a man who then got her beaten up. We went and interviewed the woman. We also spoke to people around that village. Later we took the programme to other villages and played it there. Enough support was generated for the woman. Next time around this *patwari* will think twice before he takes the law into his own hands," says Archana Raturi from Hewalvani.

For Jagdai Rawat, social activist and member of Raibar Community Radio, the whole process has been an interesting journey into the world of radio -- to see how it speaks, what it does, how people can use it to put forward their views to raise new debates. "I have learnt some fascinating lessons in community participation thanks to my involvement with community radio," says Rawat.

(Source: Frontline, May 6, 2005)

Loan woes for Fishermen

SWATI DAS *(With inputs from Rajesh Chandramouli & T. S. Sreenivasa Raghavan)*

It's over four months since the tsunami struck the Tamil Nadu coast, washing away a prosperous economy. The interest and excitement has waned, but fishermen are unable to return to their profession. Standing rock-like in their path is the Central assistance announced by the finance ministry mainly in the form of loans.

The reason: With their livelihood and property washed away, the fishermen have nothing to provide in the form of surety, nor do they make any profits to pay back the loans. If some have taken loans, it's only because of efforts by some bankers to relax loan norms where no surety is demanded and payback is waived for the first one-and-half years.

Initially, from the Central allocation, finance minister Chidambaram announced that a 35:65 subsidy:loan would be disbursed through nationalised banks. TN protested and demanded that the money be routed through the state in the form of grant.

As my government has been rightly maintaining, there is no response from the fishermen for bank loans for a variety of reasons and this is not the time to coerce them into obtaining a loan which they are not happy with," Tamil Nadu chief minister J. Jayalalithaa had said in a statement after the announcement of the loan on January 29. Chidambaram clarified on January 31: "Like any subsidy-linked loans, such as the Prime Minister's Rozgar Yojna, Swarnajayanthi Grameen

Swarozgar Yojna and other similar loans given by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, this would also be given through the banks."

Following pressure from Jayalalithaa, the subsidy portion was given to the state as grant for relief works. The rest was routed through the banks under a tsunami scheme named after late Rajiv Gandhi. According to a government official, the Centre had sanctioned Rs 2,347 crore and so far it has disbursed Rs 627.80 crore. On Wednesday, the World Bank sanctioned \$435 million as soft loans to TN. It is immediately not known if this is part of the Central funds, which the Centre is arranging in association with WB, the official said.

But under the tsunami loan scheme, fishermen taking loans under various subsidies are given a moratorium/holiday period of 18 months after which they pay back the loan in seven years at seven per cent interest. And if the repayment is regular, there is a two per cent discount on the interest.

The Fisheries Department then released the list of fishermen who came under different branches and those fishermen could approach the respective bank and branch to seek loans. After a wait to see if the loans are converted into grants, some fishermen are beginning to take them for buying or repairing boats.

While one constraint is that the banks demand surety for giving loans, another is that the fishermen feel that even after returning to their livelihood, there won't be enough earnings to repay the loans. There is lack of uniformity in loan procedures in the banks. In some places, the banks demand surety or collateral security, which the tsunami victims do not have, whereas in some banks, thanks to efforts of collectors and bankers, the surety is waived.

For instance, Kanyakumari collector Sunil Paliwal, last week organised loans from the State Bank of India for buying mechanised boats. "After a series of meetings, it was decided that the fishermen will stand mutual security and their boats would be hypothecated to the bank until the loan is repaid," said Paliwal. Here, the recipients availed of mostly Rs 20 lakh loan where Rs 5 lakh waived in the form of subsidy.

The Nagapattinam branch the SBI was not willing to release the loan until the bills of all the purchases were submitted. "Not even a bolt or nut will get paid unless produce a bill. When there's uncertainty over our next meal, how can the government think we'll be able purchase material required for the boat?" asked Nagore panchayat member V. Govindarajan.

Nagapattinam district was almost completely ravaged by the tsunami but no one has touched the loan meant for 387 mechanised boats which were damaged.

Today, the state government and the bankers have even stopped encouraging the fishermen to take up loans.

In Cuddalore, the loans mainly for repair of mechanised boats and the loans assessed by the Fisheries Department is between Rs lakh to Rs 2 lakh per head. For S. Rajasekharan from Periyakuppam, Bank of Baroda has waived surety for Rs 1.16 lakh loan for repair FRP boat. But Indian Bank has demanded documents and other surety from Ibrahim of Akkaragori Rs 1.5 lakh for repair of catamarans and small boats.

(Courtesy : Times of India, May 10, 2005)

A Historic Day in Panchayat Raj History

By M. Madan Mohan

Binakadatti became the first gram panchayat in the State of Karnataka, where the newly elected members of the gram panchayat commenced their work with a lot of administrative and financial powers that panchayat raj institutions in the country never enjoyed before.

Binkadakatti Gram Panchayat, which covers the nearby Hirehandigol village too, arranged its first gram sabha on last Sunday (April 3, 2005) to discuss the formulation of the five-year plan in general and its first annual plan for 2005-2006.

Accountability

Under the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, gram sabhas have been conceived as bodies to which the gram panchayats are accountable and to whom the panchayats should present accounts, and consult them on the formulation of plans.

The Act also has a provision for ward sabhas to ensure greater participation of the people in the running of the lowest of the three-tier panchayat raj institutions.

What lent significance to the deliberations was the presence of L.C. Jain, doyen of the movement for democratic decentralisation and former member of the Planning Commission, and the top brass of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj such as V.P. Baligar and Shivashailam, Principal Secretary and Secretary of the department respectively, and also Chiranjivi Singh, who recently retired as Additional Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner.

Also present were D.R. Patil, Congress MLA and Chairman of the Assurance Committee of the State Legislative Committee.

Decisions

Mr. Jain told the members of the gram sabha that the stage has been set to decide on what is needed by the panchayats and act accordingly.

The gram sabha is at liberty to return governments schemes that are of no relevance or utility to them and prepare their own plan for the all-round welfare of the people of that particular area.

They (members) should ensure that no person slept hungry and no child is out of school.

Mr. Patil said the focus should be on conserving rainwater and switching over completely to organic farming within the next five years with a view to increasing productivity and eliminating damage to the soil caused by the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides. Mr. Patil sought the good offices of Mr. Jain in prevailing upon the Prime Minister that the subsidy for chemical fertilizers is also given for organic farming as an incentive to those popularising the concept.

He wanted the gram panchayat to take steps to ensure that the housing needs of people are met, achieve cent per cent tax collection, and emerge as harbingers of the change and the silent revolution in rural areas and concentrate on finding an additional source of income for the people within the next five years.

Mr. Jain said that the needs and views of the people should have precedence over what the government departments suggest.

Vision

Mr. Baligar unveiled a vision under which the village panchayat could go in for planning, meet the needs of infrastructure, secure economic

emancipation by giving work to every pair of hands, and providing a purposeful role for the Stree Shakti groups.

The panchayat could consider identifying the agricultural labourers and arrange to get them five guntas of land so that they could go in for cultivation of vegetables and fruits which should make them stand on their feet.

Mr. Shivashailam appreciated the initiative taken by the panchayat in presenting the details of income and expenditure for the financial year, which had just ended and also made some suggestions.

‘Good augury’

Mr. Chiranjivi Singh said it was a good augury that the panchayat members had got down to business in right earnest even as the Government had worked out a plan for training the panchayat members.

Quota Norms eased for Panchayat Polls

The state government of Uttar Pradesh on Tuesday decided to introduce new reservation policy for gram pradhans and khetra panahcyat pramukhs elections which are due anytime before the expiry of their five-year term.

A decision to this effect was taken by the state cabinet at its meeting presided over by chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. For this purpose, the cabinet had given its approval to new set of rules to be enforced first time in the coming panchayat polls, said new chief secretary Neera Yadav in her maiden press conference.

Although reservation will continue to be 21.15 per cent for those of Scheduled Castes, 27 per cent for other backward classes (OBC) and 33 per cent for women across all castes, the method of its implementation has been simplified under the new rules. Till now, the process adopted for it was cumbersome and the number of reserved seats used

There is nothing like on-hand training to learn things, he said.

Ravi, a farmer, drew the attention of the gram sabha to the absence of veterinary care at Hirehandigol village despite the repeated representations made in that regard.

Ajjanna Patil, Vice-President of the Gadag Zilla Panchayat, said now that the zilla panchayat has been empowered to take decisions it could sanction a veterinary hospital and pending its implementation it could ensure that the department doctors came on periodic visits to the village.

After the visitors had left, Malapert Kammar, the newly elected President of the Binkadakatti Gram Panchayat, spent a lot of time preparing the draft of the plan for being sent to the Government.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, April 5, 2005)

to vary from each panchayat and khetra panchayat. While the overall percentage of reserved seats in the state is fixed, they were divided disproportionately depending on the density of population of different castes. Now, this has been done away with under the new system and the number of reserved seats will be fixed in each panchayats and khetra panchayats irrespective of density of population.

One of the main advantages of new system is that it was easy to follow without any scope for manipulations in dealing with the reservation issue, chief secretary said.

Briefing about other cabinet decisions, Neera Yadav said that the cabinet had made significant changes in its sports policy to give incentives to the sports persons. For this purpose, she said the cabinet had approved a quantum jump in cash awards to sports persons for their achievements in

Olympics, international and national events. Besides this, the government has also decided to give grant-in-aid to all those sports persons, who had attained some positions in any of the above mentioned events but were living under financial

duress. All those having a net earning of Rs 10,000 per month, would be entitled for the grant-in-aid, Neera Yadav said.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, May 4, 2005)

Binkadakatte GP takes over PDS, others to follow suit

Binkadakatte Gram Panchayat in Gadag District (Karnataka) has become the first gram panchayats in the state to distribute food grains at the door steps of villagers.

The scheme was launched by Gadag MLA D. R. Pail on Monday to symbolize vibrancy of grassroot level democracy. Henceforth, this programme will be extended to all other Gram Panchayats across the state in a phased manner.

The state government which had already delegated most of the powers to Gram Panchayats is now directly releasing food grains to them. Henceforth, the fair price shops are answerable to Gram Panchayats with regard to availability of food grains, its storage and distribution as everything should take place in the presence of Gram Panchayat members.

The government has introduced the 'Double Lock System' for all fair price shops. As a result, the Gram Panchayat members and the shop owners should jointly inspect the stocking of food grains and distribution of the same. They have to jointly take care of closing the stocks daily and the Gram

Panchayat members have to retain the keys of the shops with them. The idea behind this is to check irregularities in distribution of food grains among poor people.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Patil said the state government was spending Rs.70 crore every year on this scheme besides giving Rs.700 crore annually as subsidy. "it was the duty of presidents and members of Gram Panchayats and Taluk Panchayats to keep a vigil on the new scheme and ensure that beneficiaries were not deprived of food grains, he stated.

"The new system has been introduced in rural areas and food grains have been released to respective Gram Panchayats already. The owners of fair price depots and gram panchayats should jointly lift the stock and distribute them among beneficiaries. A circular has been sent all the presidents and secretaries of Gram Panchayats in the district regarding this scheme," Gadag Taluk Tahasildhar Vinayak Joshi said.

(Deccan Herald, 28th June 2005)

Panchayati Raj Institutionalised but not Empowered, says Aiyar

"We can bring about a revolution; it needs to be central point for development"

Equipped with a staff of 66 personnel, Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar believes he can expedite establishment of rural business hubs. "With a full-fledged Ministry, we can bring in a revolution in rural India, Mr. Aiyar said here in

New Delhi on 16th of May. Mr. Aiyar was interacting with the media after the Union Cabinet sanctioned a secretary, two additional secretaries and four joint secretaries for the Panchayati Raj Ministry.

The Minister said 300-odd Centrally-sponsored schemes, if implemented through panchayati raj institutions, could help in achieving the concept of "poorna swaraj" or "gram swaraj" as preached by Mahatma Gandhi.

Talking about his experiences at the end of seven round-table conferences on devolution of power to grass roots, Mr. Aiyar said: "We have institutionalised panchayati raj but not empowered it." Karnataka and West Bengal have given enough powers to these institutions and Pondicherry, Bihar and Jharkhand were yet to begin the process.

List of recommendations

The Minister said he had sent a list of 150 recommendations to all Chief Ministers on devolution of powers to these institutions about three months ago. He presumed that they have been accepted by States, as there were no objections.

"Panchayati raj impacts crores of people across the country at the grass roots level and it needs to be the central point for development of rural areas.

Under Schedule 7, panchayati raj is listed as a State subject but I believe that the States and the Centre

Rajasthan plan for 'pani panchayats' to help farmers

'Jal Lok Adalats' and 'Pani Panchayats' will be organised soon in the drought affected areas across Rajasthan for the benefit of farmers as part of the Jal Adhikar Abhiyan launched by the Vice President, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, in New Delhi early this week. The campaign aims at securing the water rights of people at large.

The Executive Chairperson of the Rajasthan State Legal Services Authority, Justice Shiv Kumar Sharma, said here that the availability of sufficient quantity of water was a significant issue in a State like Rajasthan and the Lok Adalats would address the disputes in the water sector.

need to come together to implement the system," Mr. Aiyar said.

Not applicable in J&K

While the Constitutional amendment on implementation of the system is not applicable in Jammu and Kashmir, the State Government has already begun the process of strengthening it there.

The State asked the Centre to study its implementation in accordance with the Central law.

"The Panchayati Raj Secretary, Wajahat Habibullah, will shortly visit Jammu and Kashmir for the purpose," Mr. Aiyar announced.

Monthly Review

The Minister is visiting all States to assess the implementation of the system. He has directed State secretaries to meet at least once a month to review the implementation of the recommendations of the seven round tables.

Courtesy : The Hindu, May 17, 2005

"Water, after its inclusion in the public utility services, is considered within the jurisdiction of special courts. Citizens have a right to get clean water," he said.

A delegation of 50 farmers and 20 lawyers from the State participated in the function marking the initiation of Jal Adhikar Abhiyan in New Delhi on Wednesday. Mr. Justice Sharma assured the delegation that the Legal Service Authority would make sincere attempts to fulfil the aspirations of the farming community by securing their rights.

Mr. Justice Sharma - who is also a sitting Judge of the Rajasthan High Court - said the Legal Services Authority had appointed legal service volunteers in all the 9,189 village panchayats in the State to apprise the villagers of their rights and duties under the law.

An intensive programme for training of these volunteers had also been chalked out, he added.

(Courtesy: The Hindu, May 2, 2005)

First all-women panchayat in Mewat

By Annu Anand, Ferozapur Jhirka, Haryana

Neemkheda is one of the most backward villages of Mewat region in Haryana. Barring a few houses of landlords, there are hardly any signs of community development in the village. Most inhabitants of this village of Meo community are illiterate. The average number of children per family in the village is seven. Most young boys and girls in the village take their animals for grazing.

For changing the face of this village, untouched by development, illiterate women here have shown a unique way. Taking the reigns of power in their hands, they have formed the first all-women panchayat in Haryana. On all the nine wards of village, women candidates have been made ward panch. Interestingly, the village has nominated only women to represent it in the Block Committee and District Council Committee. All members of the panchayat have made Asubi Begum, a member of a political family of the village, as Sarpanch.

Before the panchayat elections in Haryana, held in April, a meeting of villagers decided to hand over the responsibility of running the panchayat to women. One major reason for doing so was that men dominated the panchayat for the past 17-18 years, according to villagers. During this period, no major developmental activity was taken up in the village. Therefore, the villagers decided unanimously to elect an active woman from every ward in the village to form all-women body.

Explaining the importance of the panchayat, 60-year-old Asubi Begam said: "For the past 17 years,

men ruled the village but did not take look at problems of the village. Because they don't have to struggle with these problems." Giving reasons for this, she says: "Most men of the village pass their time in gambling or moving out to places outside the village. Those who don't go out, just while away their time chatting at the tea stall, while women of the village work in the fields and take care of animals in addition to household chores. In doing all this work, women face a number of difficulties. When they take animals out for grazing, they are worried about water supplies at home. They have to walk for about one kilometer to fetch water from the hand pump located outside the village. This way they spend a lot of their time in collecting water." One can see the problem of water scarcity by looking at the crowd of women at the hand pump.

The village, falling under the Ferozapur Jhirka block, is at the fag end of the Mewat region of Haryana. The region is the most backward, socially and economically, in the state. The population of the village is 3000 and most families have, on an average, 7 to 8 children as Muslims living in the area don't practice family planning methods. The village has a middle school, but no teacher comes there. Another reason for villagers not sending girls to the school is the absence of a lady teacher in the school. Instead of sending them to school, parents send them to work on farms or for grazing animals.

"What is the use of sending them to school? Even if we send, they will be able to study only up to fifth standard, and that too if a teacher is available. For higher school, we will have to send girls to the city. The high school is 15 km away at Punhana. How can we send girls that far?" said 60-year-old ward panch Sakuran. She and other members of the panchayat are worried about the education problem. Eighteen-year-old Farzana has studied up to class fifth and wanted to pursue her studies further, but her family members did not want to send her far to study.

Memuna was made ward panch from a seat reserved for backward classes. She has seven children and her husband works as farm labourer. She wants to send her children to school, so she is keen on the panchayat working towards opening a school in the village.

Most women here cover their faces behind a veil and don't even speak in front of men. Therefore, their representation in the panchayat had been negligible so far. The mother-in-law of Asubi Begum had become sarpanch 18 years ago. Some women believe that some development activity did take place at that time. But men who became panch and sarpanch after that never paid any attention to problems of the village. In this period, Asubi's husband was also sarpanch, but Asubi says frankly that nobody paid any attention towards development, barring during the tenure of her mother-in-law.

Elaborating on the slow process of development in the region, Dr A Azeez, secretary of Mewat Social Educational Development Society, said the pace was slow not just in Neemkheda, but in the entire region. A major reason for this was the mental makeup of the people. People here have a negative attitude. They are still shackled in centuries-old traditions. It is this attitude that comes in the way of any development. In the Mewat region, panchayats based on religion, caste and Gotra are more dominant than officially elected panchayats. These other panchayats have a greater say in the region. Recently a caste panchayat in Nuh severely

punished a young couple for marrying out of the caste.

Dr Azeez, working in the region for the past 20 years, says when he started organizing self-help groups of women in Mewat, a fatawa was issued that it is a crime for Meo women to come out of their homes and take money on interest. Such fatawas, issued due to lack of awareness, become hindrances in development." On the all-women panchayat, he said: "Women don't speak in the presence of men, but it is possible that they can consult among themselves. But for this, a positive attitude of their husbands is a must."

Forty-year-old ward panch Semuna covers her face with purdah, but is excited to have become a panch. She says her husband is also happy. Asubi Begum and her fellow panchayat members feel that they could take up the challenge only due to the cooperation of their husbands. Asubi says that she will have to take the help of the men in completing administrative processes. But she is confident that though her panchayat members may take help of husbands in talking to the block development officer or in getting information from the administration, they will be able to take all decisions on their own.

When asked what was the biggest problem facing the village, ward panch Mahmoodi retorted: "Ask us what problems we don't have. It is very difficult for urban women to understand our problems. We start our day with blowing the chulha in the kitchen. Then we take our animals out for grazing. We cut wheat and jowar crops in fields during the day. On top of all this, we have to fetch water for the entire household. This is the routine of all women in the village." She feels that a gober gas plant in the village may solve the problem of cooking fuel, while proper water supply could save a lot of labour of women.

The newly elected panchayat members submitted a memorandum to the state assembly deputy speaker when he visited the village on the water supply

issue. Now water supply has been started by releasing water in the village nallah. This water is meant for irrigation only. So the problem of supply for drinking and other household purposes remains unsolved.

Besides water and education, lack of health facilities is another problem. The nearest health centre is at Punhana. There is no hospital for deliveries here. Nearly 99 per cent of deliveries are done by untrained dais due to which women get infected and face problems during labour. "No ANM or doctor comes to the village. Women have to be rushed to city hospitals in case of complications", said ward panch Semuna. "In many cases the woman either dies or suffers from such complications." Ward panch Ashimi expresses concern over the lack of sanitation facilities in homes, along with lack of health facilities. She says most houses don't have proper toilets. Women, specially old and sick, find it difficult going to the jungle. So, she wants toilets constructed in the houses of the poor and dalits.

Mahila Panchayat for Instant Justice

By Naziya Alvi

Kailashi Devi worked without money for six months in a garment factory. Every time she asked for her remuneration, the owner would insult and threaten her. She then approached the police but in vain. Finally, it was a women's body which helped her in getting back her money.

The mahila panchayat, which helped Kailash Devi, is one such women's body that is working for the welfare of the poor and destitute women.

The 25-member panchayat, formed several years ago, help victims of dowry, domestic violence and sexual harassment in getting justice.

"Women often hesitate to complain due to family pressure. We, therefore, go to their houses and encourage them to come out and air their grievances. First, we try to solve the problem through family

All members of this all-women panchayat are quite aware of the needs of the village, but they need to be trained and need better cooperation to fulfill these needs. They want the administration to appoint a woman secretary to help them in the proper functioning of the panchayat.

They feel that if a woman holds this post as well, the panchayat's work will become smoother. Now these women are eagerly waiting for their swearing-in. As soon as they take the oath, they want to open a panchayat office. Already they are on the look out for a suitable place. They are determined to change the face of their village. And in this task, their veil or inability to read and write will not come in the way because adversity has become their strength.

(Reproduced from : Grassroots, Vo. 6, No. 5, May 2005)

counseling. But when things go out of control, we approach the women cell," said Geeta Sahae, a member, Delhi Commission for Women, a government initiative that funds these mahila panchayats.

Most of the women in the panchayat were illiterate and victims of similar problems before they joined the panchayat. Now they have been trained into counselors. They have been taught in laws related to women under the Indian Penal Code.

"The mahila panchayat has given us confidence and a new direction in life. Now, we are not scared of anyone, not even our husbands or the police," said Rupa, a panchayat member.

(Courtesy: The Hindustan Times, May 13, 2005)

Empowering Women Sarpanches

By Sandip Das, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

Kavita Devi, 42, from the Jhatawa Khurd village in Alishwar block in this district is a proud person today. She has been elected sarpanch from her village in the recent elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Rajasthan. She contested for the first time. However, from filling up the election form to canvassing for votes and meeting the village leaders, her husband Mohan did it all 'on her behalf'. "I have three children to look after, it becomes difficult to do the campaigning," Kavita Devi said.

Asked about the main issues like unemployment and electricity shortage and water, she looks at her husband for an answer. "As promised in her election campaign, she will fight for providing 'rozgar' to youth, for cleaning up the streets and also take up the problem of electricity shortage," Mohan, a retired Army jawan said. Such is the thickness of veil covering her face that one cannot make out how strongly she feels about these issues, or if she agrees at all with her husband.

The Jhatawa Khurd village has a population of 2000 people. Typically about 70 per cent of men are in the Army and are posted in different parts of the country. Rest of the men folk depend on the agriculture. The problems relating to drinking water and sanitation remains key issues like any other parts of the state. Sushila Devi, another sarpanch from neighbouring Alishwar village has a similar story.

Her husband managed her campaign. She has also promised to take up issues such as water shortage, electricity and sanitation. Most elected representatives to the gram panchayat have promised to take up the issue of water, which is a perennial problem in this part. Rajasthan is known for its puppets and the long colourful veils of its women. Put the two together and you get the typical woman sarpanch, or Kathputli. "After winning the seat, the husband takes over the reins, relegating the

dummy sarpanch to the background," Summan Chowdhary, coordinator of Panchayat Resource Center (PRC) in Alsesar village said. The PRC is being run by a local NGO - Shikshit Rozgaar Kendra Prabandhak Samiti (SRKPS) - for spreading awareness.

"Even some of the 'husbands' of newly elected sarpanches or panches, will be printing visiting cards which mention them as 'sarpanch pati' (husband of the sarpanch), said Raghubir, an NGO activist.

However, there is a silver lining. Thanks to the Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) launched by SRKPS with support from a state level network of NGOs, eight women have been elected as sarpanch in the Alsisar block of the Jhunjhunu district in the recent elections. Shravani Devi from Kakreu Kala panchayat, Kamla Devi from Birmi panchayat, Mungi Devi from Pilani Khurd etc are a few of these women sarpanches. The focus of PEVAC was to increase participation of women and election of good and clean candidates for PRIs. Besides, PEVAC was instrumental in creating awareness about the elections.

A large number of posters to create awareness about dummy candidates and selection 'clean' candidates were distributed across the state. Another interesting dimension was broadcast of and short messages through various stations of All India Radio (AIR). Jhunjhunu district, in the northwestern Rajasthan, was covered under PEVAC programme by SRKPS, which is part of Rajasthan state coalition of NGOs such as PRIA, The Hunger Project etc. Dismissing the general cynicism, Rajan Chowdhary, Secretary, SRKPS said: "I concede that there are many puppet candidates here. But within the span of a year, you will notice a sea change in these veiled women and their confidence level will go up." It has already

under-taken preparation of a blueprint for training of these elected representatives.

Besides, Chowdhary points out that many women sarpanches have been elected from seats not reserved for them. "Election of women candidates is the first step towards empowerment. There will be a gradual change in their behaviour," he said. "Under the law laid down by the government, a woman sarpanch's husband is not allowed to attend official meetings with her.

Given the status of women in rural Rajasthan, there will a gradual change brought about by awareness,

exposure and opportunity." However, as far as literacy level is concerned, Jhunjhunu district has a little advantage over other districts. There is also an urgent need to conduct training programmes for them in financial management, budgeting etc.

There is also inadequate information and exposure about their roles and responsibilities, particularly amongst marginalized sections such as dalits and the poor.

(Reproduced from : Grassroots, Vol 6, No. 5, April 2005)

Published by:



INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST,

Upper Ground Floor, Core 6A, India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003.

Tel: 91-11-24647873, 24653780;

Telefax: 91-11-24648724

Email: isstdel@isst-india.org

Website: www.isst-india.org

Branch Office: 601 North Block, Manipal Centre, 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore - 560 042

Editor: UMA NANDY

Assistance: GRACE FERNANDEZ

Layout, Graphics and Design: VISHAL K. GOYAL



UMA PRACHAR

Vol. 12

No. 3

Private Circulation

2005

Rural job bill hits wage wall

By Santwana Bhattacharya

The Rural Development Ministry may have accepted some of the amendments suggested to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill by the Kalyan Singh-chaired Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development but differences persist over minimum wages and involvement of panchayats in implementation.

The bill is meant to be introduced in the Monsoon session of Parliament that begins on July 25 but the Group of Ministers formed to finalise the 50-odd amendments proposed by the Standing Committee is yet to meet before the bill goes to the Cabinet for approval.

Rural Development Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh says: “On our part, we are ready to bring it (the bill) in the first week of the session. We are determined to make it pro-poor, but it is not practicable to impose uniform minimum wages across the country.” He points out that Northeastern states have the lowest minimum wage of Rs 40 per day; Kerala has a minimum wage of Rs 120.

The Standing Committee has recommended that minimum wages should take into account the national minimum wage requirement. “The recommendation is that (the) minimum wage should be fixed on the basis of whichever is higher

— a particular state’s (wage) or the national,” a panel member said.

The Ministry is also reluctant to hand over the entire implementation of the bill to the panchayats without Central supervision because it feels panchayats are not bound to be accountable.

Differences also persist over the aim of the bill. The Standing Committee has recommended that panchayats be allowed to select the work through which employment is to be generated. But the Ministry says the Bill’s goals — providing employment guarantees to unskilled workers and generating production assets for the country—would be defeated if it is left to panchayats to select the work.

Nor does the Rural Development Ministry intend to give up its supervisory role or discretionary power when it comes to selecting work.

“We are not restricting the panchayats from generating work, but our permission should be taken for specific works which would be outside the ambit of the bill. The Centre’s (read Ministry’s) approval would be required for work not prescribed in the Bill,” Singh said.

(The Indian Express, July 19, 2005)

Centre keen on implementing Panchayats Act

The Union Home Ministry is keen on implementing the provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, as a tool to check naxalite activities in tribal-dominated areas. The Act enables the tribal communities in Schedule V areas to assert their identity, control their natural resources and gives them autonomy through participation in Panchayati Raj institutions.

At a recent meeting of the Ministry's coordination committee which deals with the naxalite problem, the members stressed the need to implement PESA (as the Act is known) through empowering gram sabhas and panchayats in Schedule V areas to safeguard community ownership and its resources to ensure that tribal land was not alienated.

The provisions ensure consultation with the tribal population before land is acquired for any purpose. Also, the tribal community's right over minor forest produce (MFP) is assured and they have a

role in managing minor water bodies, and in controlled and regulated extraction of minor minerals.

According to the Union Panchayati Raj secretary, Wajahat Habibullah, alienation is one of the main reasons for an increasing number of people turning naxalites. "I feel once the security forces deal with the problem, the next thing should be to hand over power to the people. This can be done by strictly implementing the Panchayati Raj Act and PESA in Schedule V areas, where the problem is more profound," he said.

Over 150 districts across the country are affected by the naxalite problem. Most of the affected districts are tribal-dominated areas and PESA is applicable in many of them.

(The Hindu, July 5, 2005)

Micro-credit for macro change in Gujarat

By Khalique Ahmed

Singla Hasukhbhai Rathwa (35) of Kotiya village had mortgaged his family's silver ornaments with a moneylender for a loan Rs 2,700. Four years passed and Singla ended up paying three times the amount he loaned in interest (at the rate of 5 cent per month). His debt remained unpaid. That's when Potiya Patel Phalia II Micro Credit Society came to his rescue. He got a membership of the society and a loan, at the rate of 8 per cent per annum. He repaid his debt, released his rakam (ornaments) and was free from the clutches of the moneylender.

The credit society in Chhotaudepur was founded one year ago. Like Singla, there are thousands of poor tribal farmers in the area who take loans from

the local moneylenders at extortionate interest rates — 60 per cent to 120 per cent. They loan money for agricultural purposes or marriages. Once they fall in the moneylender's trap, they came out only as paupers. Several of them have lost their family ornaments, cattle and land to the moneylender.

However, during the last six years, 550 micro credit societies have been formed in 350 villages of Chhotaudepur, Kwant, Pavi Jetpur and Lunavada talukas of Gujarat and Alirajpur taluka of the neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. The main force behind these societies is the Adivasi Chetna Kendra (ACK). If tribal activists are to be believed, so far over 5,000 farmers have been freed from the grip of moneylenders and in most of the cases, they got the

ornaments as well as land back to the tribals by getting them micro credits.

ACK president Nagin J Rathwa, himself a tribal, says that the exploitation of tribal farmers had been going on for decades. Moneylenders never gave receipts to these mostly illiterate tribals.

“Moneylenders even used the local state machinery to exploit and extort tribals”, says Rathwa.

The idea to set up a micro credit society was conceived during discussions with G.N. Devy of the Tribal Academy at Tejgadh. “Deyv insisted that we set up a micro credit society to free tribals from such exploitation and the first credit society was born in 1999 in Ambala village”, said Rathwa. “It has now taken the shape of a movement. Owing to the spread of education more and more tribals are coming forward to join in and help set up such societies in their villages.” Rathwa plans to cover another 650 tribal villages in the region in the next three years.

According to him, each society has a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 members. Each member is required to deposit Rs 25-100 per month with the society. This money is then deposited in the society’s account in a nationalised bank. Loans are arranged for the members from the society or from the bank with society as a guarantor. According to Rathwa, these societies have advanced a loan of Rs 46 lakh so far and together have a saving of Rs 36 lakh. The interest coming from the disbursement of loans is proportionately distributed among the members.

The micro credit societies have also helped to dig wells and bore tubewells by setting up “Pani Mandalis” (water associations) to boost agriculture. A total of 60 tubewells have been dug

in Panvad and Chhotaudepur. This has boosted agricultural activities in the region and checked tribal migration. Tansinh Ranchho Rathwa of Panvad used to grow only one crop during monsoon. Now he harvests three. “My income has gone up by Rs 50,000 with the setting up of tubewells,” says Jaggubhai Virabhai Rathwa, a resident of Kavra village.

ACK has also set up 70 “Grain Mandalis” (grain banks) run by women. “Grain banks advance loan in kind — in grain. The repayment, at 100 g per kilogramme of the loaned grain, is also taken in kind”, said Hakliben Rathwa, a member of the Kajuria grain bank.

Next step is to take adivasis to “micro enterprise” and help them sell their produce, says another ACK office-bearer Ramsinh Hasubhai Rathwa. ACK plans to start this by trading in mahua. Mahua is purchased by local traders at throwaway prices during winters and then sold at high prices to tribal farmers during monsoon. “Our ‘mandali’ will buy the mahua, store it and sell it at a little-above-the-purchase price in monsoon. The profit earned will go to the credit society and would be distributed among the members”, said Ramsinh.

If Tejgadh’s Tribal Academy gave the idea for setting up micro-credit groups, it is also providing human resource to sustain the movement. “In the last three years, the academy has trained 40 tribal youths in tribal rights, social security and development”, said the academy’s honorary resident director Arjun Rathwa. “The new batch of 30 tribal youths is been trained in affairs concerning tribals and their local needs”, said Arjun.

A lecturer of English, Arjun philosophises that no amount of governmental assistance can empower a community till the community members themselves come forward for it.

Out of the clutches of moneylenders

- Thousands of poor tribal farmers take loans from the local moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates — 60 per cent to 120 per cent. Several of them lose their family ornaments, cattle and land to the moneylender
- Potiya Patel Phalia II Micro Credit Society comes to their rescue, gives them loans to pay debts. During the last six years, 550 such micro credit societies have been formed in 350 villages of Chhotaudepur, Kwant, Pavi Jetpur and Lunavada talukas of Gujarat and Alirajpur taluka of the neighbouring MP.
- Each member is required to deposit Rs 25-100 per month with the society, in its bank. Bank Loans are arranged for the members.

(The Indian Express, September 23, 2005)

Village that's a model for self-help

By Sayli Udas

It's not what you would expect an Indian village to be. There are neither any dung heaps, nor garbage mounds. And anyone defecating in the open is slapped with a Rs-20 fine. You can't dump garbage outside your house.

And if all this sounds too wonderful to be true, there's more. From being water deficient, Mahaluge village in Thane district, 80 km from Mumbai, has managed to end its dependence on outside sources. Agriculture is back in fashion and migration has ebbed.

All this hasn't happened overnight. In fact, when about 500 villagers from Koyna were rehabilitated here in 1962 due to the construction of the Koyna dam, they were filled with despair. For the next 20 years, nothing changed.

Things started moving after one Suresh More retired in 1987 and settled in the village. "When I started living here, I realised that the dirty surroundings were coming in the way of the development of the village. So I decided to get everyone together to clean it up," recalls More, now 68.

Today a huge arched cement gateway welcomes you to the village. When you walk on the clean

red-mud village road, you marvel at the dustbins hanging from green hedges on either side, every 25 metres, and boards with messages to keep the village clean on the trees around you. This has fetched the village awards.

"Earlier we used to wait for someone from the Collectorate to come and clean our village and for politicians to get us water. When nothing happened, we decided to do it ourselves," said More.

It wasn't easy. The villagers were so used to defecating in the open and dumping garbage outside that they were reluctant to spend money on toilets. But when More and some other villagers started sweeping the village themselves, they were convinced.

Recalls Balkrishna More, 70, who supported Suresh More right from the beginning: "Slowly people started joining us in sweeping the village and collecting the garbage and the look of the village changed." For those who couldn't afford cement toilets, they devised a Rs-500 toilet and also contributed for those who couldn't afford.

Today Mahaluge is swept on Tuesdays and there's a daily muster for garbage collection. Besides, 90-odd homes have their own toilets.

Once the villagers witnessed how they could improve their quality of life, it was only a matter of time before they resolved to solve other problems similarly. They conducted a water audit in 2002 and dug a borewell in 2003 after pooling in Rs 50,000. The women had come together and formed small saving groups.

This led to the birth of a small women credit cooperative where some money could be saved every month. “Today we have six women self-help groups with more than 200 women involved in it,” said Rekha Bhonsale (30), who heads the cooperative.

As a result of all this, the youth who were leaving the village took a second look at it. “After the village has become clean and there is enough

water, the youth in about 85 per cent of the families have

gone back to the traditional agriculture,” says More. Those who hold private jobs now commute from the village. And the youth are also coaching students from the village so that they can do better in life.

Mahaluge, which has been without a panchayat for the past seven years, takes every decision democratically, with a majority vote. “Our village came under tribal reservation seven years ago and since we did not have anyone from the ST community, we decided to have open democratic rule,” said More. Politicians are kept at an arm’s length. The villagers says they are their own leaders.

(The Indian Express, September 8, 2005)

At e-gram panchayat, new windows open

By Bashir Pathan

It’s a remote area, surrounded by dense forests and the Aravalli hills. Juna Chamun and three other villages here have a population of 4,500 with most of the people belonging to Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. And only 10 per cent of them own their own agricultural land.

In this most unlikely of places, an e-governance revolution has been silently creating new milestones. Three years ago, the panchayat of this group of villages had no funds to carry out developmental work. The reason: many families simply won’t pay any tax. Two years back it got a system under which the government has provided the GSWAN (Gujarat State Wide Area Network) connectivity using a BSNL dial-up facility installed at its office.

“There was no proper mechanism available with the panchayat to collect taxes from villagers. After I got elected as chief, I collected Rs 60,000

through public donations to purchase a computer, scanner, printer and web camera for the panchayat office,” recalled panchayat president Gunvant Barot. They then got the GSWAN connectivity that was to change their lives.

Data collection followed: names and addresses of villagers, status of their properties, agricultural land records, details about roads, sanitation, education and so on were fed into the system. The panchayat then identified the tax defaulters and launched a collection drive.

What proved to be an added incentive was the facility of getting public utility documents, photo-identity cards etc without any hassles from the office. The panchayat’s annual revenue from taxes had been a meagre Rs 1.60 lakh and the entire amount went towards administrative/establishment expenditure. Now a surplus revenue of Rs 1 lakh has been invested in a Central Government

scheme under which the government provides 75 per cent of the total amount while the rest is raised through public contributions.

This is the first group village panchayat in Gujarat to earn the status of an 'e-gram panchayat'.

Among other things that the panchayat is now able to provide to the villagers are an e-mail facility and information about various developmental and welfare schemes. "We also display results of the SSC/HSC board examinations for students who had to walk a long distance to reach either the taluka or the district centre for this," says peon Suresh Thakarda at the panchayat office. He operates the system when the sarpanch is away.

Devji Patel, who usually issues land certificates and other utility documents to farmers, says the GSWAN dial-up centre has reduced his burden. "Now, I can concentrate more on developmental work in the four villages and help the panchayat implement them in time."

The public utility documents being issued through this system include birth/death certificates, income and caste/sub-caste certificates and certain documents vital to local farmers like ones which certify the death of their cattleheads and also enable them to sell legally the wood cut from trees grown on their private farm lands.

Narsinh Barot, a local primary teacher, says his loan papers would not have been processed

promptly if the panchayat had not issued a no-dues certificate to him. Similarly, college student Rahul Parmar recalled how he could promptly obtain a domicile certificate that was mandatory for him to appear in the recently-held railway recruitment examination in Ahmedabad.

Feeling empowered, the villagers are now experimenting. The panchayat was recently able to cut down the power consumed by streetlights by at least 55 per cent by replacing 95 per cent of the tubelights with 14-watt CFL bulbs fitted with reflectors made from galvanised sheets. "The idea struck me when I was surfing a website on energy. This experiment is now being replicated by other villages in our region," said panchayat chief Barot.

His only regret is that the dial-up system is slowing them down.

State Secretary (Science and Technology) J N Singh says "Gujarat has the largest internet protocol (IP)-based IT infrastructure called GSWAN with multi-service facility of voice, data and video, connecting more than 1,400 government offices in all the 25 districts and 225 talukas to the state capital. Now, other states are following us." With the GSWAN connectivity having already been provided at the taluka-level, the government has plans to cover all the 18,000 villages in the state.

(The Indian Express, September 10, 2005)

All panchayats to get networked computers

The Panchayati Raj Ministry is to spend over Rs. 1,000 crores in the next two years towards installation of computers in 2.4 lakh panchayats, interlink them with one another and also with a national panchayat portal.

But realising that it would not be able to raise funds for this from its own resources, the Ministry

is banking on the Planning Commission and the Finance Ministry.

Empowered committee

Besides linking rural areas, the programme would also provide employment to at least two persons from each gram panchayat who would be trained to operate the computers.

The Ministry would soon enter into a memorandum of understanding with the State Governments, with the target of completing the work within two years. An Empowered Committee will be constituted to implement the programme and an officer of the rank of joint secretary would be designated as ex-officio director for the mission.

This decision was taken at the meeting of the Committee of Chief Secretaries and Principal Secretaries (Panchayati Raj) of States and Union Territories here last week.

About 35 to 40 per cent of the panchayats are likely to be computerised in the first year.

Rough estimates made by the Ministry recommend a cap of Rs. 45,000 for every gram panchayat for the installation of the hardware component.

The Ministry would spend Rs. 4,000 on training two individuals in every gram panchayat.

The total expense of training 5 lakh persons, including upgradation and refresher courses over two years, would be about Rs. 100 crores.

Bank of India to help set up 100 e-grama centres

The Bank of India has come forward to provide assistance to the unemployed graduates to open e-grama information centres in villages in Davangere, Mysore and Belgaum districts, under the long-term priority sector lending.

The Bank has set a target of providing assistance for the setting up of e-grama centres in the first 100 villages in four taluks- Davangere, Jagalur, Harapanahalli and Harihar- in Davangere district. The scheme would be formally launched on July 19 which is being observed as Kissan by the Bank.

Disclosing this at a press conference here, Bank of India Manager R M Patil said the e-grama project developed by the Gramin Mahiti Parishat, a NGO,

The Ministry is making efforts to club its computerisation programme with the Bharat Nirman project that aims at providing infrastructure in rural areas. Computerisation is an important component of the Rs. 1.74 lakh crores Bharat Nirman project initiated by President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

Chairing the meeting, Union Panchayati Raj Secretary Wajahat Habibullah asked the State Governments to expedite constitution of district planning committees (DPCs) in all districts on a priority basis.

Funds to augment income of panchayats would be allocated to States on the recommendation of the Central Finance Commission based on the consolidated plans of DPCs, Mr. Habibullah said.

The Eleventh Finance Commission has recommended grants of Rs. 8,000 crores for the Panchayati Raj Institutions for 2000-05, he added.

(The Hindu, July 15, 2005)

had been touted as a model for the expansion of IT-enabled services in rural areas. The scheme had already been introduced in several villages in Davangere district as a pilot project.

The e-grama information centres where the villagers had an access to on-line information regarding market, agriculture, matrimony, health and all other aspects of rural life could provide employment to the educated youths in villages, he said.

The Bank of India which was planning to double the assistance provided to the priority sector by 2007 would provide loan to the graduates to open e-grama centres, Mr Patil said. The Bank would provide Rs 50,000 as loan repayable in 60 installments (five

years) to set up e-grama centres whose unit cost was Rs 65,000.

Facilities

Mr. Chandrashekhar, e-grama project director, said e-grama centres would also be equipped with telephone booth, digital phot lab and fax facilities. Big companies like Reliance Infocomm, Hewlett Packard, Kodak and American Power Conservors had come forward to provide technical assistance to set-up e-grama centres.

An entire family in the village could obtain membership under 'e-grama Samudaya Kutumba' scheme by paying Rs 10 per month. Apart from availing free information service at e-grama centres, the members of the scheme would get concession at selected hospitals, optical shops, clinical labs and medical shops in Davangere City.

(Deccan Herald, July 15, 2005)

Panchayat Raj Department to run Public Distribution System (PDS)

The Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj will now run the public distribution system (PDS) in rural areas. This is in continuation of the commitment to decentralize and empower the panchayat system as per the Belur Declaration, Food and Civil Supplies Minister H. S. Mahadeva Prasad said here on Tuesday.

He told presspersons that the gram panchayat standing committee on social justice will function as food security panels to monitor and regulate the PDS. There will be vigilance committees in every village comprising five women, a local elected representative and a social worker to additionally monitor fair price shops and track ration card fraud.

Mr. Prasad said a scheme to issue computerized ration cards to 1.19 crore families is under way. Tenders will be announced in the coming week and the issuing of cards will begin by November 1. Biometry is being used to ensure that there is no ration card fraud or misuse. The cards will celebrate the theme of Suvarna Karnataka, which is the celebration of the golden jubilee of the reorganization of the State.

LPG shortage

The Minister met representatives of oil companies on Tuesday to discuss the shortage of LPG. Following reports of traffic jams created by auto rickshaws at LPG filling stations, Mr. Prasad said

the companies have decided to speed up work on setting up 28 LPG stations by December-end, as they had undertaken in December 2004.

There are 13 stations functioning and three more are likely to become functional this week. By December, all 28 will be in place to cater for the 25000 plus retrofitted auto rickshaws in Bangalore. Mysore and Mangalore will also get two LPG stations each. By June next year, Shimoga, Gulbarga and Hubli will get one station each.

Mr. Prasad said the shortage of domestic LPG cylinders has been traced to the free connections that were given a few years ago under the National Democratic Alliance Government's scheme to increase the number of connections. He also said the multiple connections are turning out to be a major problem, creating artificial shortage. The Government has plans to monitor the situation and penalize those who hold multiple connections. Surveys will be conducted to ensure that each household has only one connection with two cylinders. Since April this year, 2472 cylinders that were being illegally distributed have been seized.

Dealers as well as cardholders are indulging in diversion of kerosene supplies under the PDS, and the Government is thinking of issuing coupons to put a stop to it.

(The Hindu, September 21, 2005)

Management of Water Resources for Food Security and Sustainable Livelihood

By BAIF Development Research Foundation, Pune

Water is the primary necessity for the survival of plants and animals. It has a direct influence on food security in India where agriculture is the main source of livelihood. In the absence of perennial source of irrigation, over 70% of the Indian agriculture is dependent on rain water but over 60-65% of it is underutilised due to neglect. Even in irrigated areas, wastage of precious water has led to depletion of nutrients and soil salinity, while serving as a breeding ground for many diseases. Thus, water, which is an important asset, critical for food security and prosperity has become a cause of soil erosion, flooding, siltation of river beds and reservoirs, while lowering the water table and posing a threat to the existence of the poor. Hence, the strategy for water resources management should be to conserve the accessible water resources and promote equitable distribution and its judicious use, for the benefit of the local communities.

BAIF is engaged in water resources management through watershed development in selected village clusters of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh over a decade, with the primary objective of drinking water security, to boost agriculture and livestock production, particularly to benefit weaker sections of the community. This was also considered as an opportunity to conserve the ecosystem, empower the women and to develop community based organisations which are essential for promoting sustainable development.

Strategy

The focus of this programme is based on the following strategy.

- Participation of the entire community with special focus on the weaker sections, in planning and implementation

- Efficient water conservation with appropriate technologies and systems
- Convergence for holistic development, particularly for food and water security, supply of drinking water, health and hygiene and environmental conservation.

Participation of Weaker Sections of the Community

Credibility of the Implementing Agency and awareness about the project being important factors influencing participation of the target population, suitable entry point activities are selected through Gram Sabha, to benefit larger sections of the community immediately. Closer interaction of the villagers with project staff, and efficient and transparent method of working could help in obtaining confidence of the community and identifying the poor. While the User Groups, consisting of members from different hamlets in the watershed, discuss the plan of implementation, Self Help Groups of women and men, particularly those belonging to weaker sections are encouraged to look beyond watershed to empower themselves. They meet regularly, contribute a sum for their saving fund, disburse credit to needy members and identify various opportunities to enhance their income.

With increase in soil productivity and confidence in the participants, many SHGs demanded agricultural inputs for improving agricultural production and livestock for supplementary income. Many groups have set up community grain banks, seed banks and agro-service centres. Simultaneously, many social problems which were affecting their morale and progress, have also been solved by the women themselves. Formation of village level watershed committees at the initiation of the project has helped to prepare an action plan, based on the local priorities.

Appropriate Technologies for Water Conservation

While adopting a ridge-to-valley approach, for conservation of rain water, modern technologies such as Geographic Information System and Remote Sensing have been adopted for improving the efficiency of watershed development. Suitable technologies have been adopted based on local conditions and traditional knowledge and scientific skills. In this process, many innovative approaches have been evolved to ensure equitable distribution, effective use of water and improved agricultural production.

Convergence for Sustainable Livelihood

To enhance the economic benefits and ensure food security, various activities are being initiated through people's organizations, apart from Water Resource development, efficient water use and improvement in land productivity. These include the following: (i) Increase in Cropping Intensity, (ii) promotion of eco-friendly technologies and use of nutritional supplements, (iii) post production activities, (iv) improved livestock husbandry practices, (v) micro enterprises for landless and women's groups for livelihood, and (vi) chlorination of wells, health camps and promotion of toilets for improved health and hygiene.

Achievements and Impact

- 0.3 million ha spread over 483 villages has been covered, benefiting 0.2 million families, intensifying the cropping area and increasing the yield by 30-80%. As a result, the annual income has increased by Rs 330 crores.
- In Saurashtra region of Gujarat, where soil fertility is high, the impact of watershed development had a significant impact on the crop yields.
- In most of these villages, the water table has risen significantly and potable drinking water is available throughout the year. As the time taken now to fetch drinking water, fuel and

fodder has reduced by 50%, drudgery of women has reduced significantly.

- Many women's groups have established their grain banks, to provide foodgrains on loan to their members, who return it after the harvest, without being exploited by the money lenders.
- Increased crop yields and enhancement in employment have reduced migration, particularly of women and children. This has had a favourable impact on health and education of children.
- With improved soil and water conservation, and enhanced green cover, there is an improvement in the micro-environment and eco-system, leading to sustainable development of rural India.
- The average additional employment generated per village is about 1,58,000 person days per annum.
- The landholders are earning an additional gross income of Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 over the baseline from agriculture, livestock and agricultural labour within the watershed.
- The watershed development approaches, especially farmpond networking and community pasture management have been widely replicated by various Government and Non-Government organisations and farmers.
- In Madhya Pradesh, promotion of soya bean in watersheds, with application of micro-nutrients such as boron and sulphur gave a boost to the crop yield by 30%.

To ensure the transfer of new technologies in water resource management, improved agriculture and livestock husbandry, processing and marketing to strengthen linkages with financial institutions, Panchayati Raj institutions, information services, BAIF has adopted a policy of continuing its

presence as a service provider to the community at cost, even after formal completion of the project.

(BAIF Research Foundation is a voluntary organization involved in sustainable rural development with the aim of improving the quality of life of the rural poor. Through its multi-

disciplinary programme BAIF is providing services to over 18 million families spread over 30,000 villages in 10 states in the country. For further information, you may please write to Ms. Sucharita Dhar, Senior Programme Coordinator, BAIF Research foundation, Pune. E-mail baif@vsnl.com)

Published by:



INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST,

Upper Ground Floor, Core 6A, India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003.

Tel: 91-11-24647873, 24653780;

Telefax: 91-11-24648724

Email: isstdel@isst-india.org

Website: www.isst-india.org

Branch Office: 601 North Block, Manipal Centre, 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore - 560 042

Editor: UMA NANDY

Assistance: GRACE FERNANDEZ

Layout, Graphics and Design: VISHAL K. GOYAL



UMA PRACHAR

Vol. 12

No. 4

Private Circulation

2005

Panchayati Rani: Glimpses of modern rural India

By: Neha Kaushik, Churu (Rajasthan)

Good Governance does not necessarily come with literacy. Being an illiterate Shana Devi, *sarpanch* of Singodada gram panchayat, in Rajasthan's Sikar district, is guiding her panchayat efficiently.

When Union Minister for Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyer, on his visit to the State gram panchayats asked her if the decision to stand in the elections was her own or her family's, she immediately responded in the affirmative, "*maara apna* (my own)."

When asked about her priorities by the Minister, she responded immediately, "First of all I want to open a girls school, so that girls do not have to go to far-off areas to study." Water is another problem, she said, adding that she would like to work on. The villagers applauded in approval.

She was aware about all the work done in her district. What needed more attention, what projects were on track? Be it schools, roads, water, health, she knew it all.

Mr. Aiyer asked the villagers, "If in the next election there is no reservation of women candidates, would you still re-elect her?" The deafening volley in her support said it all. Shana Devi's case is an excellent example that illiteracy need not be a bar.

On the other hand, Satyabhama Poojari, *sarpanch*, Salasar gram panchayat, Churu district, was dumbstruck with the Minister's questions. Even though literate, she did not have a word to say about the work done in her area. "*Hum ne sadak banvayi hai, par naam nahi yaad sadak ka,*" she said. She is an unfortunate example of false feminine empowerment, where the husband, or the other men in the family, pull the strings from behind the scenes.

In interior Rajasthan's Gopalpura gram panchayat, Savita Rathi is the *sarpanch* of the gram sabha. She is a law graduate and was elected to her post. Another fine example of feminine empowerment, she has won the respect of all with her work in providing housing for those below the poverty line under the Indira Awaas Scheme, health facilities have improved with the setting up of a local dispensary, roads have been built which have made the villages accessible. Praising the *sarpanch*, Mr. Aiyer told the villagers, "She understands Panchayati Raj, and you are in safe hands."

Inspired by their Chief Minister, who is also a woman, these *sarpanchs* in Rajasthan have unleashed the power of *Shakti* by usurping authority in what was traditionally a male preserve.

Shana Devi, Savita Rathi are just a few names, as women today head 45 per cent of the panchayats in

India, and are successfully transforming the rural countryside.

(The Pioneer, Thursday, December 8, 2005)

New windows open at e-gram panchayat

By: Bashir Pathan, Juna Chamun, Gujarat

It's a remote area, surrounded by dense forests and the Aravalli hills. Juna Chamun and three other villages here have a population of 4,500, with most of the people belonging to Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. And only 10 per cent of them own their own agricultural land. In this most unlikely of places, an e-governance revolution has been silently creating new milestones.

Three years ago, the panchayat of this group of villages had no funds to carry out developmental work. The reason: many families simply won't pay and tax. Two years back it got a system under which the government has provided GSWAN (Gujarat State Wide Area Network) connectivity, using a BSNL dial-up facility installed at its office.

"There was no proper mechanism available with the panchayat to collect taxes from villagers," recalled panchayat president Gunvant Barot. "After I got elected as chief, I collected Rs. 60,000 through public donations to purchase a computer, scanner, printer and web camera for the panchayat office." They then got the GSWAN connectivity that was to change their lives.

Data collection followed: names and addresses of villagers, status of their properties, agricultural land records, details about roads, sanitation, education and so on were fed into the system. The panchayat then identified the tax defaulters and launched a collection drive.

What proved to be an added incentive was the facility of getting public utility documents, photo-identity cards etc without any difficulty. The panchayat's annual revenue from taxes had been a meagre Rs 1.60 lakhs, and the entire amount went

towards administrative / establishment expenditure. Now surplus revenue of Rs one lakh has been invested in a Central Government scheme, under which the government provides 75 per cent of the total amount while the rest is raised through public contributions.

This is the first group village panchayat in Gujarat to earn the status of an 'e-gram panchayat'. Among other things that the panchayat is now able to provide to the villagers are an e-mail facility, and information about various development and welfare schemes.

"We also display results of the SSC/HSC board examinations for students who had to walk a long distance to reach either the taluka or the district centre for this," says peon Suresh Thakarda at the panchayat office. He operates the system when the sarpanch is away.

Devji Patel, who usually issues land certificates and other utility documents to farmers, says the GSWAN dial-up centre has reduced his burden. "Now, I can concentrate more on developmental work in the four villages and help the panchayat implement them in time."

The public utility documents being issued through this system include birth/death certificates, income and caste/sub-caste certificates, and certain documents vital to local farmers like ones which certify the death of their cattle, and also enable them to sell legally the wood cut from trees grown on their private farm lands. Narsinh Barot, a local primary teacher, says his loan papers would not have been processed promptly if the panchayat had not issued a no-dues certificate to him.

Similarly, college student Rahul Parmar recalled how he could promptly obtain a domicile certificate that was mandatory for him to appear in the recently held railway recruitment examination in Ahmedabad. Empowered, the villagers are now experimenting. The panchayat was recently able to cut down the power consumed by streetlights by at least 55 per cent, by replacing 95 per cent of the tube-lights with 14-watt CFL bulbs fitted with reflectors made from galvanised sheets. “The idea struck me when I was surfing a website on energy. This experiment is now being replicated by other villages in our region,” said panchayat chief Barot. His only regret is that the dial-up system is slowing them down.

Karnataka’s panchayat get more powers

By: Sugata Srinivasaraju, Bangalore, Karnataka

In the last fortnight, Karnataka’s villages have seen a quiet churn at the gram panchayat level, one which could forever alter their destiny.

‘Quiet’ is the operative word here, for there’s been scarce news of it anywhere. State officials are beaming though, pointing out that it is for the first time in the country that a sum of Rs 3,000 crore has been directly handed over to panchayati raj institutions. Of this, Rs 1,588 crore has gone directly to the bigger ones.

Again, Karnataka scores a first here, for the transfer of government functionaries to gram panchayats. Most of the newly elected members-about 61,667 members from 4,339 panchayats-have completed their training at the Abdul Nasir Sab Institute of Rural Development (ANSIRD), Mysore. Meanwhile, with new powers in hand, panchayats have posted a record tax collection of Rs 115 crore. In short, the dynamics of development at the basic unit of Karnataka’s democracy has changed forever.

In fact, although few took notice, the machine had started cranking up some time back. On October 16, 2004, the Dharam Singh government passed a

State Secretary (Science and Technology) J N Singh says, “Gujarat has the largest internet protocol (IP)-based IT infrastructure called GSWAN, with multi-service facility of voice, data and video, connecting more than 1,400 government offices in all the 25 districts and 225 talukas to the state capital. Now, other states are following us. “With GSWAN connectivity already provided at the taluka-level, the government has plans to cover all the 18,000 villages in the state.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express)

government order quietly slipping through changes that would empower panchayats in an unprecedented manner, implementing the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments not just in letter, but also in spirit.

The Government transferred all related schemes after a massive administrative exercise, which again went unnoticed. This move was backed up with the Rs 1,588 crore direct allocation to the panchayats in the 2005 state budget. Given that until the ‘full devolution’ took place, funds at a panchayat’s disposal never exceeded Rs 3-4 lakh, it’s a quantum leap in development.

They now have to manage Rs 30-40 lakh a year, Rs 1.5 crore-plus across five years. They also have the option to raise additional funds through taxation or borrowings.

These initiatives make Karnataka the first state to have devolved “maximum powers”. In fact, from the point of view of transfer of funds and functionaries, Karnataka has gone an extra mile compared to Kerala, which too has a famed Panchayati Raj model. Another area in which the

state beats Kerala is in devolution of tax collection and revision powers.

“After the transfer, panchayats have already collected Rs 115 crore as against Rs 60 crore the previous year,” says V.P. Baligar, secretary, rural development and panchayat raj. ‘In future, no at-source cuts will be made in grants. This is in the faith that they will pay their bills including for electricity, on their own. The arrangement involves six public banks and 12 grameen banks. Since they system was introduced, one instalment each of the untied statutory funds and the 11th Finance Commission grants has been made through it.” In the last couple of weeks, the government has also begun to transfer staff in order to help panchayats run the schemes effectively. “The engineering staff has already moved,” he added.

Strangely, the government propaganda machinery hasn't put out a word on any of these developments. Even when the coalition regime completed a year in office, the list of achievements did not include changes effected in the panchayat system. When Outlook asked CM Dharam Singh about this, he magnanimously took the actions-speak-louder-than-words line.

“My government has come in for much criticism from the media,” he said. “They aren't aware that we have actually made a difference to the quality of life for crores of people in rural areas. The outcome of these initiatives may take awhile coming, but in the days to come Karnataka will be the role model in self-governance for India.”

A top-ranking bureaucrat, though, had another take on why the precarious coalition regime downplayed the “revolutionary” changes. “Who would want to give up power? The kind of large-scale devolution to panchayats clearly means the authority of ministers and MLAs will be curtailed. With these changes, their association, at best, would be limited to zilla parishads. If the government had gone on a publicity

blitz, it would have been akin to rubbing salt on a wound. The silence was strategic, even before people woke up to it, the new system was up and running.”

An example of how this can happen: the allotment of houses under the Ashraya Housing Scheme. Earlier, powers were vested with the Ashraya committees headed by legislators. Now, it will come under the purview of the panchayats. Similarly, 33,000 minor irrigation projects and appointment of teachers in rural schools will also be handled by them directly, with no interference from politicians.

“Theoretically, in Karnataka today a schedule caste woman, who can also be a panchayat head, will take decisions that impacts the entire village. In caste-ridden India, it'll be a great social leveler,” says Chiranjiv Singh, one of those responsible for scripting this major change as additional chief secretary and development commissioner. He retired recently.

Chiranjiv Singh also adds that this devolution of power is the state's non-violent response to the Naxal problem. “When I went around Naxal-affected Malnad region, most of the complaints were in the nature of ‘we don't have water’; ‘there's no road here’; ‘a culvert needs to be built’; ‘the school needs to be shifted’ etc. now all these decisions will have to be taken by the people themselves. They can't pass on the blame to the government,” he says. Be that as it may, there are a few skeptics too. LC. Jain, a known champion of panchayati raj, is one. Admitting that the new changes are a “splendid step”, he says he can't understand why the same Dharam Singh government has “scuttled” elections to the zilla parishads that were due. “This is a violation of the Constitution which says continuity has to be ensured.

(Courtesy: Outlook)

INDIA EMPOWERED TO ME IS When hunger is history and gram swaraj a reality

M S Swaminathan

India's independence was born in the backdrop of the great Bengal famine. This led Jawaharlal Nehru to say in 1947, "everything else can wait but not agriculture".

In free India's tryst with destiny, achieving freedom from hunger was thus accorded high priority. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our independence on the midnight of August 14-15, 1997, the then President K R Narayanan referred to our democratic system of governance and the green revolution as the two major achievements of the first 50 years of freedom from colonial rule.

What should we consider as our principal achievements on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of our independence on August 14-15, 2007? In my view, providing every child, woman and man in our country an opportunity for a healthy and productive life through concurrent attention to nutrition and education should be our overriding priority.

We no longer experience famines unlike in the colonial period when serious famines occurred almost once in five years. However, food security at the level of every household defined in terms of access to balanced diet and clean drinking water, is still a far cry. Over 250 million children, women and men will go to bed tonight partially hungry.

According to the mid-term appraisal of the Tenth Plan by the Union Planning Commission, we are off-track in achieving the UN Millennium Development Goal of reducing the incidence of hunger by half by 2015.

What is worse is the widespread incidence of maternal and foetal under-nutrition leading to the birth of babies characterized by low birth weight (LBW). Such LBW children face even at birth handicaps in terms of brain development and cognitive abilities.

Denying a child the right to realize its innate genetic potential for physical and mental development is the cruelest form of inequity. Any nation which undervalues its human resource and over-values its material resources like land and building will always remain poor. This is the basic cause of the Indian enigma, where excellence in many areas of human endeavour and science and technology co-exists with extensive poverty and deprivation and inhuman living conditions for 25 per cent of the population.

This is not a God-given destiny, but entirely man-made. How then can we shape our destiny in the direction of making hunger history and gram swaraj a reality?

Hunger has three dimensions—chronic under-nutrition arising from inadequate purchasing power; hidden, caused by the deficiency of micronutrients in the diet like iron, iodine, zinc and vitamin A; and transient, caused by earthquakes, tsunami, drought, floods and other natural calamities.

The hunger hot spot areas in our country are largely rainfed with poor infrastructure and communication. The present conditions of food insecurity prevailing in the earthquake affected areas in Jammu and Kashmir as well as in Pakistan are examples of transient hunger. Where there is a problem there is invariably also an affordable and implementable solution.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act will help to reduce chronic under-nutrition. In my view, this should be developed into a Food Guarantee Act by August 15, 2007, combining the features of the Food for Work and Employment Guarantee programmes. We must increase consumption if we are to induce our farmers to produce more. Enabling small farmers

to enhance productivity will help to eradicate hunger considerably.

Unlike in industrialized countries, where 2 to 3 per cent of the population depend upon agriculture for their livelihood, over 60 per cent of our population depend on crop and animal husbandry, fisheries, agro-forestry and agro-processing for their daily bread.

The National Commission on Farmers (NCF) has suggested methods of enhancing small farm productivity in their first two reports submitted to the Government of India in December 2004 and August 2005. Improving soil health, particularly addressing micro-nutrient deficiencies in the soil, besides improved water conservation and management will help greatly to bridge the prevailing wide gap between potential and actual yields in most cropping systems.

Hidden hunger caused by micronutrient deficiencies can be overcome through an integrated food-cum-fortification approach, including multiple fortification of salt. Transient hunger can be eliminated through a national grid of Community Grain Banks operated by local women's Self-Help Groups. Priority in the location of the Grain Banks should go to areas where communication tends to be disrupted during the monsoon season or during natural calamities as in hilly areas and islands.

There is no time to relax on the production front. Both absolute and factor productivity (i.e. response to fertilizer, water, etc.) are going down. The rate of growth in food production is now much below that of population growth rate. The multiple role of agriculture as the backbone of our food, livelihood and ecological security systems as well as of national sovereignty is yet to be widely realized.

Farmers in industrialized countries operate large farms supported by heavy inputs of capital, technology and subsidy. In contrast, the 25 per cent of the global farming population living in our country suffer from serious constraints in the areas

of technology, input supply, services and public policies, particularly in the areas of pricing, marketing and rural infrastructure.

Our agriculture is increasingly becoming a gamble in the market and without arrangements for assured and remunerative marketing, farmers will lose interest in farming. There is need for an integrated strategy which involves attention to defending the gains already made, extending the gains to dry farming areas and making new gains through farming systems diversification, value addition and enlarging home and external trade.

Defending the gains will involve proactive research to meet the challenges of climate change and the incidence of new diseases. In particular, we should immediately strengthen our capacity in Biosecurity as suggested by NCF last year. H5N1 strain of bird flu virus can kill millions of both poultry and human beings. Alien invasive species of pests, pathogens and weeds can do immense harm to our crop and animal security.

The challenges are formidable but they can be overcome if we use the power of democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj institutions. Every Gram Panchayat can develop and operate a community food and water security system. By harnessing the tools of the internet and community radio, every village can become a knowledge centre.

Knowledge Connectivity should become the backbone of the Bharat Nirman movement. Fortunately, a National Alliance, consisting of all the stakeholders, assisted by an International Support Group, has been formed to make Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre a reality.

Complex problems can be solved only by disaggregating the analysis as well as the action plan. This is where the over 3 million elected members of Panchayats, including over a million women members, can become the torch bearers

of an India Empowered Movement designed to make hunger and illiteracy problems of the past.

(The Indian Express, October 21, 2005)

Tamil Nadu Panchayat Evolves Novel Method to Save Power

Vellore has enough reasons to rejoice, thanks to Pacchal Village Panchayat in Jolarpet Panchayat Union near Tiruppattur, which is producing electricity from thorny wood to illuminate street lights. The novel system – bio-mass gasifier for electrical use – is the first of its kind in the district and is seen as a blend of rural development and technological advancement. The project was started on 1 August on a trial basis.

With the functioning of a mini power station constructed at a cost of Rs. 1.80 lakh on land donated by a villager and using equipment worth Rs. 3.60 lakh purchased from Gujarat, the panchayat is generating power using gas and by burning small pieces of thorny wood that are available free of cost everywhere in the village. At present, around 75 street lamps in the village are illuminated from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. using this non-conventional energy source. The state government has given a subsidy for the implementation of the project.

The new venture has come as a reprieve to the panchayat, which, on an average, has been paying Rs. 2.30 lakh for electricity to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) once in two months. Since bio-mass electricity costs only 60 paise per unit, as against the TNEB rate of Rs. 3.60 per unit, this new source of power is being considered a blessing by villagers.

“It is a highly cost-effective method. Apart from the initial investment of a few lakhs, it requires only a small amount to be paid as labour charges for cutting wood and for plant operators,” said G.

Asogan, Pacchal panchayat president. He stated that the power station had the capacity of providing energy to illuminate all 367 street lamps in the panchayat limits. “However, we are unable to utilize the full capacity due to insufficient funds for buying more electric posts, lights and wires,” he added.

The story does not end here. The panchayat is now taking steps to provide water supply using alternative energy. “We have 19 overhead tanks within our jurisdiction, of which water from two tanks would be supplied using the new system soon,” said Asogan.

Interestingly, the panchayat has also offered free power supply to poor families who do not have electricity connections. “As many as 40 families have applied for connections. We will provide them free power supply to illuminate one tubelight in each house. However, they would not be allowed to use the power to operate other domestic appliances,” said panchayat officials.

The village panchayat had also introduced smokeless stoves in around 320 houses two years ago. With a total population of 21,000, the panchayat’s annual income is about Rs. 15 lakh, including grants from the government. Asogan said, “All that we need is not only money but also powers for self-governance, and our new venture is in that direction. It has freed us from depending too much on the regular power supply.”

Courtesy: newindiaexpress.com

KERALA: Gram Panchayat Arranges Loan for BPL Families

Mangattidom Gram Panchayat near Koothuparamba in Kannur district has accomplished a novel task by providing subsidized micro finance from a leading bank to people living below the poverty line for renovating their old houses or building new low-cost houses. The scheme also provides micro financial assistance for building small grocery shops, and dairy and tailoring sheds through self-help groups, known as 'kudumbashree' units, to enhance the earning capacity of those belonging to weaker sections.

The scheme, which has been launched in 23 panchayats in Kannur district and four panchayats in Kasaragod district, was inaugurated at Magattidom Gram Panchayat on 24 July last year by granting 75 loans through the Mattannur branch of the State Bank of Travancore (SBT). Under the SBT 'Bhavanashree' scheme, 1,345 houses have been

constructed – 1,061 in Kannur and 284 in Kasaragod - with the bank sanctioning Rs. 424 lakh for Kannur and Rs. 108 lakh for Kasaragod. Mangattidom Gram Panchayat, which won the Swaraj trophy for the best gram panchayat last year, tops with 178 beneficiaries, Keezhur-Chavassery Gram Panchayat comes next with 116 beneficiaries and the third place goes to Kodombelur Gram Panchayat in Kasaragod district with 103 beneficiaries.

With the repayment of instalments spreading over a period of 15 years, the beneficiaries can pay back the loans in weekly or monthly instalments of Rs. 75 to Rs. 400. The interest amount of nearly Rs. 10,000 will be borne by the panchayats. The SBI Life Insurance Company has covered the beneficiaries under its home loan insurance policy.

Published by:



INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST,

Upper Ground Floor, Core 6A, India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003.

Tel: 91-11-24647873, 24653780;

Telefax: 91-11-24648724

Email: isstdel@isst-india.org

Website: www.isst-india.org

Branch Office: 601 North Block, Manipal Centre, 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore - 560 042

Editor: UMA NANDY

Assistance: GRACE FERNANDEZ

Layout, Graphics and Design: VISHAL K. GOYAL