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## Gram Panchayats to get development officers

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

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

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

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

*(The Hindu, 12 May, 2009)*

## Gram Panchayats to have data centres

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(The Hindu, 9 June, 2009)*

### Task Force to strengthen Panchayat Raj System

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

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

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

#### Meeting

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

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

*(The Hindu, 20 June, 2009)*

### New development plan for villages

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 17 June 2009)*

### Panchayat school bags ISO 9001 certification

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 29 June 2009)*

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

Aarti Agarwal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 18 June 2009)*

## State launches green drive under NREGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 31 May 2009)*

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

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

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

the programme.

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

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

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

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

hence the participatory approach," he added.

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 24 June 2009)*

## Government plans revamp of NREGS

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

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

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

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

senior official.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 9 June 2009)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whenever I find irregularities in any sector in my

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

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

\* Perturbed by the village panchayat not holding

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 27 June 2009)*

### Samithi seeks info under RTI Act

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 17 June 2009)*

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

Viju B

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 28 May 2009)*

### RTI workers campaign to enlighten villagers

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 7 April 2009)*

## Urali village prepares development plan

Radheshyam Jadhav

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Politicising garbage**

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

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

*(Times of India, 13 June 2009)*

## Foresters kept out of relief work

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 8 June 2009)*

## More voices needed to protect ecosystem

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 1 June 2009)*

### Green drive in Nerasa village

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 12 May 2009)*

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

Sanchita Sharma

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

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

employment as the biggest election issues this year.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Hindustan Times, 11 May, 2009)*

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

Sanjeev Kumar Verma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SWAN, which is also called the information

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

*(Times of India, 28 May 2009)*

## Women sarpanchs script success stories, fade away

Radheshyam Jadhav

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Times of India, 19 April 2009)*

## Haryana woman’s revolution stops public drinking

Chetan Chauhan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, the men blinked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(Hindustan Times, 03 June, 2009)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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