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100 days guaranteed employment assured

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rural job scheme will be a winner with more funds

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, July 8, 2009)

Rs. 100 cr. for NREGA schemes in Shimoga

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Hindu, July 17, 2009)

Centre asks states to ensure timely payment to NREGA workers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, July 24, 2009)

Middlemen in NREGA

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, August 5, 2009)

NREGS wage to be Rs 100 in September

M Gunasekaran

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, September 1, 2009)

Panchati raj in state needs real devolution of power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 18 September, 2009)

Panchayat act amendment will empower secretaries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, July 24, 2009)

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

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

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

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

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

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

lakh and would be earthquake proof and flood resistant.

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

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

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

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

(The Hindu July 6, 2009)

Panchayats to power new literacy mission

Anubhuti Vishnoi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Indian Express, August 06, 2009)

Revamped literacy mission to focus on educating women

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 23 August 2009)

Women are more effective

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

possible, as constitutional amendment is a long process.

(The Times of India, September 12, 2009)

Quota for women in panchayats to be raised to 50%

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, Aug 29, 2009)

50% quota in panchayats: Activists concerned

Samarpita Banerjee,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)

Kerala gives 50% quota for women in panchayat

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 18 September, 2009)

Women leaders as crusaders for rural development

Radheshyam Jadhav

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)

Three Bhagalpur women awarded for remarkable literacy campaign

Avijit Biswas

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

The three women, who braved odds to attain their

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

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

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

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

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

offered the rooftop of her house for running literacy classes.

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

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

(The Hindustan Times, September 9, 2009)

Women panchayat chiefs sensitised to their rights

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

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

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

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

(The Hindu, September 25, 2009)

Caste panchayats, the bane of villagers

Palak Nandi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, September 18, 2009)

Gruesome rulings of caste panchayats **Kshitiz Gaur**

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

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

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

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

community banned the family from participating in social functions.

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

(The Times of India, September 18, 2009)

Khap panchayats seek legal claws

Divya A

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 9 September 2009)

Panchayats to compile biodiversity registers

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

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

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

Mandatory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Hindu, August 28, 2009)

Panchayat's initiative towards cleaner environment

M. Srinivas

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

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

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

No polythene covers

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

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

Security

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

(The Hindu, July 17, 2009)

Wall built in Mahuva village to battle salinity ingress

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mavji Bhaliya.

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

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

(The Times of India, August 30, 2009)

Involve tribals in forest management: Study

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

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

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

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

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

tribal villages.

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, August 27, 2009)

50 villages selected for overall development

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, August 5, 2009)

“Panchayats should sensitise people to human rights”

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

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

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

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

Technical session

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

Interactive session

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

(The Hindu, September 11, 2009)

SEMCOM students to make Anand villagers computer literate

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, September 23, 2009)

Government to Centre: no panchayat Act for Delhi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Indian Express, August 21, 2009)

49 villages up in arms over civic merger

Sandhya Nair

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Times of India, 31 July 2009)

Gujarat villagers to boycott panchayats

Amrita Didyala

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Indian Express, September 24, 2009)

‘Panchayat chief not presenting village accounts’

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

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

Roads in bad shape

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

had been indulging in conversion.

Conversion

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

Inquiry

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

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