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Realising Gandhi's swaraj dreams

*Rangan Dutta**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(The Statesman, 6 December 2009)

Make NREGA new

Ashwani Kumar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(The Indian Express, 9 October 2009)

NREGS social audit issue turning into people's movement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

panchayats, else no money should be given to them.

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 14 December 2009)

The system strikes back

Vidya Subrahmaniam

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOs unheeded

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Basic principle

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

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

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

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

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

(The Hindu, 17 December 2009)

NREGS helps villagers build road to happiness

Sibabrata Champatiray

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Statesman, 18December 2009)

NREGS corruption: Villagers threatened for protesting

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 12 December 2009)

Assam to use biometric cards for wage disbursement under NREGA

Digambar Patowary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brahma has announced this here on Tuesday.

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

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

(Hindustan Times, 3 December 2009)

NREGS funds to be transferred to panchayat account directly

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

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

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

(Indian Express, 16 November, 2009)

NREGA spells hope for rural masses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Times of India, 24 October 2009)

Women's MREGA participation urged

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(The Statesman: 6 October 2009)

Himachal Government launches campaign to clean up plastic waste

Gaurav Bisht

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Hindustan Times, 22 December 2009)

Terrific toilet training

Ejaz Kaiser

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

They are not alone

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

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

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

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

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

H for hygiene and health

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

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

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

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

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

How it started

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

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

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

"Now there is competition among rural panchayats to ensure their villages is the cleanest," said Lundra MLA Ramdev Ram.

(Hindustan Times, 21 November 2009)

Panchayat declared computer literate

KOTTAYAM: Veliyannur grama panchayat in Pala Assembly constituency has been declared total computer literate, the first grama panchayat to earn the distinction in the second phase of the Akshaya Programme. Making the declaration Revenue Minister K.P. Rajendran said the village has earned the distinction of first total computer literate panchayat not only in the district, but in the six districts that has come under the second phase of Akshaya programme. This includes Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha, Idukki, Palakkad and Wayand in addition to Kottayam.

P.J. Joseph, Minister for Public Works, inaugurated the district-level Malayalam computing project and the e-Krishi Project in the district on the occasion. Grama panchayat level e-payment project was inaugurated by Mons Joseph, MLA. K.M. Mani, MLA, presided over the function. Jose K. Mani, MP, District Collector Mini Antony, district panchayat president T.N. Rameshan and others spoke on the occasion.

(The Hindu, 28 December 2009)

GUVNL power to panchayats: self-collection of electricity bills

Vadodara : The Gujarat Urja Vikas Nigam Limited (GUVNL) has decided to cover all village panchayats with a population of over 3,000 in a new scheme: members will be allowed to collect electricity bills by March.

The project has already been initiated in the state and a large number of villages have been covered under it. As per the scheme, instead of GUVNL staff, panchayat members will collect the money from the families in the village. For this, the panchayat will get Rs 7 per bill. The income generated from the activity will be used for village development.

“The aim is to bring in development in the villages by assigning them responsibility. This will also improve the bill collection ratio. We have realised that there is a difference between our staff collecting the bill amount and someone from the village doing the same. The panchayat members will certainly be more convincing than our staff,” GUVNL Chief Engineer (Technical) P A Shah told The Sunday Express.

He added, “Under PGVCL, we have the maximum number of panchayats and there are all chances that

the maximum bill collection will be from the same region.”

In Madhya Gujarat Vij Company Limited (MGVCL), there are about 2,800 village panchayats. Of these, 1,600 have already adopted this new concept.

“They are more than happy to collect the bill amount as they are getting Rs 7 for monthly collection and Rs 5 for bimonthly collection per bill. The money goes to the individual bill collector as well as the village panchayat and it would eventually be used for village development,” Shah said.

In Dakshin Gujarat Vij Company Limited (DGVCL), there are a total of 1,050 villages and the average revenue amounts to Rs 23 crore approximately. This estimate is excluding the industrial usage of electricity.

“Already 868 village panchayats have been trained to use computers and billing related software. They have already begun collection,” said an official at DGVCL.

(Indian Express, 28 December 2009)

Bihar to issue ID cards to migrant workers

Patna: The Bihar government will register the names and personal information of the hundreds and

thousands of migrant workers from the state and issue them identity cards, an official said on Tuesday.

Vyasji Mishra, the principal secretary in the labour department, said migrant workers would have to get their names registered at the panchayat level.

"The panchayat will be involved in the registration of migrant workers before they leave their village to earn livelihood outside the state," he said.

Calling the move mandatory, he said the move was aimed at the safety and security of the workers. The government has been concerned over attacks on Bihar migrant workers in Maharashtra, Assam and Punjab.

(Indian Express, 9 December 2009)

Sarpanch catalyses change in villagers' attitude towards HIV/AIDS

Kendrapara: Thanks to the role of the sarpanch of a remote gram panchayat in Kendrapara district, there has been a perceptible change in the mindset of villagers towards the HIV-positive.

Unlike the situation three years back, residents of Katanabania gram panchayat under Rajkanika tehsil now interact with the families of AIDS patients instead of ostracising them, the district wing officials of state AIDS Control Society informed and credited local sarpanch Mr Dhananjay Das for the turnaround.

Having a population of 12,000, as nearly 3,000 skilled labourers, mainly plumbers and carpenters from here have migrated to metros.

With some of these migrants having contracted the disease and transmitted to the family members, the gram panchayat recorded four AIDS deaths in past three years while six locals are now HIV/AIDS carriers.

"Though initially villagers used to keep safe distance from the carriers, there has been a perceptible change in people's mindset," Mr Das said.

"The attitude of people towards the first diagnosed AIDS patient Sarat Mallick from our village deeply rankled me. After Mallick died in 2006, I made up my mind to take up the cause of AIDS carriers and spread awareness," Mr Das recalled.

"After my election as sarpanch, the members of local club Sahyog were mobilised and they did a lot in dispelling the misconception. Now at every panchayat meeting, the problems faced by HIV/AIDS carriers are taken up and measures suggested," Mr Das said.

All the patients from the gram panchayat area are covered under the Madhubabu monthly pension. "They have also been given monthly ration like rice under gratuitous relief scheme," he said. With the help of the Integrated Confidential Training and Counselling Centre (ICTC) from the district headquarters hospital, camps to test blood samples are set up at regular intervals and villagers volunteer to help organise the camp.

(The Statesman, 1 December 2009)

Remote village lit up by solar power

KARWAR: The Macchalli village of Karwar taluk finally got electricity supply, with Karwar DC Channappa Gowda inaugurating the solar light facility extended to the village under Rajeev Gandhi Akshaya Urja Yojana (RGAUY) scheme on Wednesday.

The village is about 5 km away from Amadalli village

and is located deep in the forest, above the hillock. One has to walk and then climb the steep hill to reach the village.

Every year the district administration used to spend lakhs of rupees on the RGAUY function in Karwar. But this time, the deputy commissioner planned to celebrate it in a different way, by utilizing the amount

spent on the function to extend the facility of the solar lamps to the houses and streets in the village.

With the cooperation of the Deepa Solar Lighting Systems and the Karwar taluk panchayat, the district administration was successful in lighting the houses and streets of the village. All the 14 houses in the village were facilitated with two bulbs each, while streetlights were installed near the school and temple.

Speaking at the function, the DC said the celebration of the RGAUY was meaningful, because the village which was deprived of electricity for such a long period after independence, can enjoy now solar power supply. He said the solar power was much more

feasible, as it is difficult to lay electricity lines to the remote areas and is economically not viable.

But the solar energy which is becoming popular as an alternative energy can solve the problems and can be used as alternative source to the conventional energy like hydel electricity, he said.

CEO of zilla panchayat V G Turmuri, headquarter assistant T N Narasimhamurty, tahsildar Shivanandmurty, ZP member Sujata Patil, taluk panchayat member Umakant Harikanatra were present during the inauguration.

(The Times of India, 18 November 2009)

A Kerala village set for organic makeover

Shaju Philip

Thiruvananthapuram: Farmers of Mankulam village panchayat in Kerala's Idukki district are nursing their soil to reverse the damage done to it over the years. They have begun with adopting new farming practices and bidding adieu to pesticides and chemical fertilizers over the past year. Their aim: To transform Mankulam into an organic village panchayat, a first-of-its-kind in the state, by 2011.

Once the feat is achieved, it would be another feather in Mankulam's cap. Five years ago, it had earned the status of being the first village panchayat in the country to implement a mini-hydel project in association with the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation Regional Centre for Small Hydro Power. The panchayat installed a hydel project of 110 KW to meet its power requirements and found a mention in the UN Energy report.

The effort to transform Mankulam into an organic village was initiated under the Idukki Organic Project in 2005. The project, conceived by Kerala Agricultural Development Society (KADS), an NGO floated by farmers in the district, was meant to draw as many as farmers towards organic farming. Around

2,200 farmers of 32 village local bodies in the district have so far been declared organic farmers.

Inspired by the response from the farmers of the district and considering the village's geographical features, KADS chose Mankulam. The entire panchayat area is surrounded by forests, which would make the organic makeover easy. The panchayat, spread over 12 divisions, has 4,000-odd agricultural families. The Spices Board, the State Agriculture Department, the Local Self-Government Department and the National Centre of Organic Farming (NCOF) under the Union Agricultural Ministry are also involved in the project.

Within a year, 1,006 farmers of the panchayat have enrolled for bio-cultivation practices. Of them, 243 are already eligible for the organic tag. They have brought the dominating cultivation of coffee, tea, cardamom, pepper, fruits, vegetable and tuber crops under organic farming.

(Indian Express, 7 November, 2009)

Gender disparity in panchayat work at all levels

Behrampore: Women representatives of panchayat in all tiers are lagging far behind their male counterparts in terms of knowledge, understanding and management of panchayat affairs. The likely remedy to help women catch up with their male functionaries lies in imparting special training to the elected women of the local self-government. The matter was brought to light during a symposium held here on Tuesday at the first panchayat show of the state where a number of ministers and panchayat executives shared their views on the topic ~ Role of Panchayat in Women Empowerment and suggested ways to empower elected women of the Panchayati Raj system.

The recommendation of special training for women representatives was first made by the chairperson of the state women's commission, Mrs Malini Bhattacharya. She said: "Women can be as good as their male colleagues in panchayat if proper training is imparted to them. Even the male representatives take time to learn the nitty-gritty of panchayat functioning." Her recommendation was supported by another speaker, Mrs Rekha Goswami, the minister of self-employment and Self-Help Groups (SHG). The minister iterated the need to give special training to women members of panchayat so that they can enrich

themselves with knowledge and management of panchayat affairs.

A senior district official pointed out in his speech that it was an exception to find a woman panchayat pradhan or a member who is practically guided by her husband or any male representative discharging the daily duties of a panchayat.

The panchayat and rural development minister, Mr Anisur Rahaman, who was also present at the programme, said: "The need for special training for elected women of panchayats cannot be ruled out. Only yesterday I took up the issue of training on health-related matters with officials of the health department.

Work for further training on SHGs and panchayat affairs in general is also in progress. But initially the training would include both men and women functionaries of panchayat. Re-orientation programme, if necessary, would be conducted especially for women later."

(The Statesman, 12 December 2009)

Women gram panchayats not keen in education drive

Arun Kumar

The government may have given 50 per cent reservation to women at the panchayat level, but their empowerment is still far from real in most cases. For, local MPs (read *Mukhia Patis*) still hold the reins and don't want their wives to be educated under the special scheme for such women.

As per government's own study, nearly 30 per cent of the woman public representatives at the lowest level of governance are illiterate. In case of men, it is around 7-10 per cent. Bihar ranks amongst the bottom-placed States along with Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh when it comes to literacy among public representatives at the lowest rung.

"With so much stress on decentralization of power, this is a big impediment. The public representatives need to be aware to make optimal use of various schemes like Indira Awas, marriage of girls, insurance of BPL families, and most importantly, educational programmes," said a senior official of the Human Resource Development Department official. To make the public representatives literate, the Mass Education Department has launched an ambitious literacy programme.

Under the scheme, each district was sanctioned Rs 1.24 lakh in 2009-10 for boosting literacy among public representatives at the panchayat level. This comes to around Rs 45 lakh in the State. So far, bulk

of the money has remained unspent. "In case of women, the husbands don't want them to be educated. Perhaps, it suits their interest to wield power by proxy," said the official. What is worse, there is no intention to turn a new leaf, either. The statistics is discouraging in most parts of the State, especially with regard to women, barring a few exceptions like Siwan, Begusarai, Bhojpur and a few others.

But the government is not ready to give up. Bihar was the first State, which visualised the problem at the grassroots level and worked out a mechanism. Now,

we are holding 10-day residential camps at the district level, with free food and stay, for basic literacy training to public representatives," said Director, Mass Education, Vinodanand Jha. Jha said that scheme also had an added incentive for the public representatives. "The teachers are attached with the representatives for a month to help them further in discharge of their duties. They are like Private assistants to the representatives for the period. If they have any difficulty, they can seek help," he added.

(Hindustan Times, 26 December 2009)

Bill for 50% women's quota in panchayats introduced

NEW DELHI: A Bill to amend Article 243 D of the Constitution and thus increase reservation for women from one-third to not less than half of the seats in panchayats was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Thursday. The Bill is also aimed at increasing reservation for women in the post of Chairperson and in the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes across three tiers (village panchayat, panchayat union and district panchayat).

Introducing the Constitution (110th Amendment) Bill, 2009, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Minister C.P. Joshi said the move would empower women and make panchayats more inclusive. According to the objects and reasons, women suffered multiple deprivations of class, caste and gender. The existing provisions in the Constitution facilitated women in general, especially those from the marginalised communities, to become politically active.

(The Hindu, 28 November 2009)

Training for women representatives at local-self governing bodies

PUNE: The state government has decided to undertake a state-wide programme for capability building and skills enhancement of elected women representatives in local self-government bodies like gram panchayats and zilla parishads.

The training programmes will be ready for implementation by next month and sessions will start from February while the trainers' training programmes will be taken up in January.

The chairman of state election commission, Neela Satyanarayan elaborated the programme details while addressing a meeting in the city on Saturday. Satyanarayan said, "The programme focuses on strong and effective women's representation at the local level. This would be a three-year programme

and will cover all the local self-government bodies and zilla parishads in the state."

"The trainees will be told about the administrative work at grampanchayats, economy of a gram panchayat and effective implementation of the Panchayat Raj Act. The training would also talk about the success stories of women in villages and overall personality development of women," said Satyanarayan.

The programme will bring awareness in women representatives about their roles, functions, duties, responsibilities and authority. Also, the programme is a step ahead to encourage women's participation in the process of local development.

Satyanarayan said, "Each district in the state would have a separate programme considering the social, economical and geographical whereabouts as well as the local problems. The consideration is also being given to the educational background and social standing of the women representatives. It would also have interactive sessions to make the programme more effective".

The state government would move ahead the proposal to the union government in demand of the financial assistance for its implementation. The programme is being framed with the help of Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (Yashada), Akhil Bharatiya Sthanik Swarajya Sanstha, Yashaswini and Symbiosis College.

(The Times of India, 3 November 2009)

Women panchayat chiefs to take up the cudgels against domestic violence

Anita Joshua

NEW DELHI: The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development will rope in women panchayat leaders to mobilise rural India as part of the nationwide campaign against violence against women. In particular, the effort is to generate awareness of the Prevention of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. This will be launched on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti.

Brand ambassadors

Union Minister of State Krishna Tirath said on Thursday that women panchayat leaders would act as brand ambassadors of the Act. To begin with, 25 best performing and trained among them from 14 States were selected to lead the campaign in their areas. Special attention will be paid to rural areas, as the Act has been used primarily by urban women, while

village women continue to suffer in silence out of ignorance of the law.

Incidence of violence alarming

According to the Minister, the incidence of violence against women within and outside home is quite alarming.

The campaign will be launched with a human chain by more than 5,000 women — including anganwadi workers and members of self-help groups — from India Gate to the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Friday. Besides the Delhi event, *prabhat pharies* (early morning congregations), involving local leaders and opinion makers, will be organised throughout the country, she said.

(The Hindu, 2 October 2009)

Exclusive tribal panchayat in Idukki

N.J. Nair

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: An exclusive grama panchayat for Scheduled Tribes will come into being at Idamalakudi in Idukki district.

The total population of the tribal panchayat has been estimated at 5,500. The new panchayat will have 13 divisions, with each ward having a strength around 400 people.

Sources in the State Delimitation Commission told *The Hindu* that the total number of grama panchayats in the State would come down from 999 to 977, but it has been decided to add one ward each to all grama

panchayats. By fixing the strength of local self-government institutions, the Commission has completed the first phase of the delimitation process.

While deciding to add five adjoining panchayats to the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, the commission has decided to make three panchayats part of the Kozhikode Corporation. Two panchayats will be merged with the Kottayam municipality and one each with Thripunithura, Kodungalloor and Irinjalakuda municipalities in Ernakulam district and two with Guruvayur municipality in Thrissur district. Seven grama panchayats will be upgraded as municipalities.

Thus the number of municipalities will go up from 53 to 60. The panchayats to be upgraded as municipalities are Karunagapally in Kollam, Maradu, Thrikkakara and Eloor in Ernakulam district, Kottakkal and Nilambur in Malappuram district and Neeleswaram in Kasaragod. All these panchayats have an urban nature and have witnessed a construction boom of late. The delimitation proposals have been formulated on the basis of the density of population, area and own funds generated in each civic body. The government is understood to have recommended the commission to upgrade civic bodies having more than a population of 50,000, own

income of Rs.20 lakh and 20 sq. km area. Density of population and the ratio of non-agriculture male labourers were the norms considered for upgrading panchayats as municipalities.

Proposals to amend the Panchayati Raj Act and Municipalities Act too have been drawn up. As per the existing strength, there are 16,139 wards in 999 grama panchayats. This includes 9,106 general divisions, 5,705 reserved for women, 1,750 SC and 208 ST wards.

(The Hindu, 3 December 2009)

House panel slams flip-flop on panchayats

NEW DELHI: Slamming the approach to training of panchayat functionaries, a parliamentary panel has directed the rural development ministry to stop its flip-flop and chart out a time-bound training programme to enable rural bodies to work as purposeful units of self-governance.

“Instead of charting out a flip-flop approach, a time-bound programme of training of panchayati raj institution functionaries should be prepared so that panchayats can work as units of self-government in the real sense,” the parliamentary standing committee said in its report tabled recently. The panel noted that the ministry does not even have the basic data about the number of elected panchayat members trained in states.

Dismissing the official claims that 11.95 lakh elected representatives out of 28.8 lakhs were trained, it questioned the rationale behind the ministry seeking

enhanced funds of Rs 1000 crore to train the remaining.

The committee said before asking for higher funds “the ministry has to put its house in order to take care of higher funds”. The panel recommended that the government should make a “realistic assessment” of untrained panchayat members and gear up to the task accordingly. The committee also said a “business-like approach” is essential on the issue of training of elected representatives in panchayats.

The 31-member committee comprising members from both Houses of Parliament observed that with regard to the functioning of backward region grant fund (BGRF), the achievement of major objectives of removal of imbalances “is in doubt”. The panel said expected progress has not been made on the issue of simplification of decentralised planning under BGRF.

(The Statesman, 22 December 2009)

Law panel allows additional power to panchayat secys

PANAJI: The law commission has given a clean chit to the controversial panchayat amendment bill that seeks to give panchayat secretaries “additional” power and which was recently returned by the governor.

In its report submitted to the law minister, the commission, headed by former Union minister of

state for law Ramakant Khalap, said that the amendment proposed by the government “does not encroach upon the rights of the elected bodies”. It stated that the decisions of the panchayat are naturally to be executed by the panchayat secretaries and that the sarpanch cannot be expected to function as an executive officer.

This is precisely what the Panchayati Raj Amendment Bill provided. Panch members and NGOs had protested against the amendment as they perceived excessive interference by the government in the affairs of the local bodies as the bill proposed to empower panchayat secretaries to execute the orders of the panchayat director within a specified period if the same was not complied with by the sarpanch. In other recommendations, the law commission suggested that the panchayat director be vested with powers to hear and decide appeals against any order or resolution of the panchayat or of any officer under the Panchayati Raj Act.

It also suggested the setting up of a panchayat tribunal at the district level to hear revision petitions against

any order passed by the panchayat director. Another recommendation is that the provisions of the Civil Procedure Code be made applicable to all inquiries and proceedings before panchayat tribunals or any officer under the Panchayat Raj Act. The commission also noted that section 178(2) of the Goa Panchayati Raj Act provides that the director shall forward his order or direction to the government which may confirm, rescind or modify the order.

The commission felt that this power vested in the government is not conducive to the healthy growth of an independent elected body.

(The Times of India, 5 November 2009)

Panchayat chiefs for more powers

MADURAI: Tamil Nadu Village Panchayat Presidents' Federation on Tuesday pleaded for autonomy to village panchayats. It stated that the panchayats were reeling under unavailability of financial assistance and wanted the State Government to look into their demands.

At the executive committee meeting held here, M. Muniyandi and K.S. Sheik Muhammed, president and secretary of the federation respectively, said that autonomy for panchayat bodies was not complete in accordance with the Constitution.

The federation also complained that the Pooled Assigned Revenue earmarked for panchayats had not been distributed properly. Listing out various demands, the federation insisted that power to execute Anaithu Grama Anna Marumalarchi Thittam work

should be given to the local bodies rather than contractors from outside.

It also wanted the State Government to reconsider its decision and provide assistance to financially weaker village panchayats, which was normative for many years.

The meeting called for the scrapping of Section 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act under which the panchayat presidents had been facing a lot of troubles especially after the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Following the Kerala model, the Tamil Nadu Government should also provide monthly salary for panchayat presidents, the federation said. Panchayat presidents from various districts across the State participated in the meeting.

(The Hindu, 16 October 2009)

PM for greater use of panchayat scheme

New Delhi: Announcing the decision to re-christen the UPA government's flagship National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) after Mahatma Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday lamented the less than optimal use of the Panchayati Raj set-up in the country and called for

reforms to delegate more power from states to the panchayati raj system.

“Even today in many states, the functions, funds and functionaries have not been delegated effectively to panchayati raj institutions. We need to reform the

system,” Singh said at a function to commemorate the golden jubilee of panchayati raj.

“The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution provides that the state legislatures should empower panchayati raj institutions as the institutions of local self-government and strengthen them so that they can evolve schemes for social justice and development.

But these legal provisions have not been used effectively,” he added.

UPA chairperson and Congress president Sonia Gandhi also underlined the need for minimising hurdles against panchayats and asked state governments to work towards strengthening them.

(Indian Express, 4 October 2009)

The BPOs are calling Bharat

Mini Joseph Tejaswi

College and an office job was 17-year-old Abhijit's dream. But financial problems meant he had to join his father on the farm, helping to grow paddy and sugarcane, collect fodder and sell milk. That became his life in the tiny hamlet of Baburayanakoppal, near Srirangapatna in Karnataka.

Until three months ago, when an abandoned rice mill in the village was renovated and became the office for a 100-seater BPO (business process outsourcing) unit.

Word was soon out in the village that there were jobs to be had. Though he neither spoke nor understood English, Abhijit decided to give it a shot. He applied, wrote a test, was taken in and trained. Today, he's part of the Indian BPO army, once seen as an urban opportunity accessible only to educated, English-speaking boys and girls.

Abhijit's employer B S Venugopal, a director of Mpro Solutions, says though the training takes time, it is worth the effort. "We did not expect to find readily employable talent in rural areas. They are raw with no language or communication skills but eager to learn."

A few weeks into his training, Abhijit tells TOI Crest in grammatically correct English, "It's not that a farmer's life was a bad one, but farming doesn't pay enough for a comfortable living. In my case, I had no education and didn't think I could be anything other than a farmer." Now as part of his job, he makes calls to prospective donors from a database seeking funds for NGOs. His salary is Rs 3,500 a month.

Abhijit isn't the only one taking advantage of BPOs going rural. Even as many outsourcing firms based in cities put a freeze on hiring, many new units are opening up in villages and towns in the south.

Karnataka's IT/BT secretary Ashok Kumar C Manoli says the companies are bringing technology and financial empowerment to rural youth. "The idea is to create a rural BPO cluster, which can be integrated with similar projects across the country," he says. "We want to promote jobs for rural youth who have some computer knowledge and belong to small towns with a one lakh population. To start with, each of these centres will have 100 seats," he adds.

Abhijit's colleagues at Mpro - Mahesh, Jagadish, an orphan, Soumya and a dozen others - are also taking advantage of this economic transformation. But what will they do with the extra money? Abhijit wants to help his father buy more cows. His friends, too, want to help their parents out but they also want to buy mobile phones and bicycles.

"The initiative will change the economic fabric of the countryside," Manoli says. BPOs will make youth in the hinterland financially independent as they did in the urban areas. They will have money for marriage, to pay off debts or buy sewing machines and cows. More importantly, it will stop the mass exodus of young people from villages to cities seeking employment, he says.

It is the cost of business in big cities - exorbitant

rentals, steep wages, high attrition - that has many companies looking towards the village. Mpro Solutions is the first to become operational under the Karnataka government's ambitious rural BPO scheme. The state plans to set up a hundred such units to create one lakh jobs in the next four years. A few weeks ago another centre was opened at Gundlupet, while two centres are being readied in Salgame and Shiggaon in Karnataka. Also in the pipeline are eight more in Sirsi, Huliur, Chikbalapur, Hosadurga, Pavagada, Mundargi and Devadurg in rural Karnataka.

The state is rolling out the red carpet for those adventurous enough to go rural. It's offering financial incentives of up to Rs 20 lakh and a per employee training incentive of Rs 10,000. Manoli says the response from entrepreneurs has been overwhelming. Infosys and Wipro, too, have shown interest.

Bangalore-based BPO company RuralShores, which already has a centre in Bagepalli, is in the process of entering rural areas in Tamil Nadu and Bihar. Xchanging, which acquired Cambridge Solutions, and Hinduja Global Solutions too are venturing into semi-urban places like Shimoga in Karnataka and Durgapur in West Bengal.

Other southern states too are developing business models to encourage private players to venture beyond the cities. Tamil Nadu already has rural BPO units and is planning another 100 rural units in the next few years.

Kerala is looking at a hub-and-spoke model. The government aims to set up 100 rural BPOs at the panchayat and district level in 14 districts over the next three years. The first rural BPOs have already come up in Perinad and Kadakkal in Kollam district.

Sai Seva Business Solutions, a rural BPO unit, was set up in Puttaparthi, a couple of years ago by management students of the Sri Sathya Sai University. HDFC Bank outsources part of its work on data capture and profiling of new accounts to them. Tata Business Support Services has set up a BPO in Mithapur in Gujarat, near the manufacturing unit of Tata Chemicals.

A country-wide rural BPO drive is expected to create employment opportunities for millions of rural Indians, allowing them a share in the country's \$12-billion BPO pie.

(The Times of India, 10 October 2009)

Gandhians review panchayat raj

Vijaykumar Patil

Belgaum: While government celebrated Gandhi Jayanti by paying floral tributes to the Mahatma, the gandhians here have found no reason to join the administration in the celebrations. For them, the Gandhian concept of "gram swaraj" – a democratic system that visualizes self-governance and self-reliance, is still far away as the means of development and progress continues to be luxury of the elite and influential.

This sense was widely prevalent during what was a brain storming session of Gandhians of "Gandhi Ghar" at Devagri village of Belgaum taluk on Friday. The Gandhi Ghar is essentially an ashram of gandhians. It has been a couple of decades since it was set up by

veteran Gandhian and freedom fighter Sadashivrao Bhonsale with the avowed objective of spreading Gandhian values among the rural people and work for achieving *gram swaraj*.

After offering garlands to the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, activists, including women from Devagiri, Kattanbhavi, Kadoli and adjoining areas and from Khanapur taluk sat down to take a look at the functioning of gram panchayats and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in the district. The presence of Mr. Bhonsale, social workers Ashok Deshpande, Dilip Kamat and Shivaji Kagnekar was to help assess the prevailing situation.

The sum of the discussion, which included complaints against gram panchayat secretaries and elected members, who allegedly were in connivance in committing irregularities in the implementation of the NREGS was only to defeat the objective of the scheme. At the end of the meeting, a unanimous resolution was adopted to organise a “march” to the Deputy Commissioner’s office on November 2 to protest against irregularities, which included payment of wages less than Rs. 82 fixed as minimum wages by the Government, part-payments, and denial of job cards and employment to registered members.

They would demand the Government to pay unemployment allowance to those who had been

denied employment even after registering under the scheme and issuance of job cards so that proper entries of work done and wages disbursed were recorded.

The people said the workers were getting much less than Rs. 82. Even the payment of wages was not regular. Many had not been paid for the last three months. In several cases, the payment had been partial. Interestingly, the payments were made as per the whims and fancies of gram panchayat secretaries.

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