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Who's bothered about tribal welfare?

The Indian EXPRESS, Thursday, May 5, 2005

The proposed law suits netas and babus. Tribals must have an option to live on interest and leave their capital untouched

CHECK closely from where all the support for the Tribal Bill is coming. Tribal rights activists and a section of credible environmentalists and ecologists are backing it. Their conviction that the tribals still form an integral part of the forest ecosystem doesn't consider the impact of population boom and shrinking forest resources. One can debate the merits of their assertions but not their sincerity. Unfortunately, the same is not true of the more influential political and bureaucratic lobbies pushing the Bill.

In the political din, one cannot escape the obvious. The BJP feels it is slowing gaining control over the tribal vote banks in many parts of India and must penetrate further. The Congress is wary of losing traditional command and is keen to woo back the once committed votes. Other parties can't afford to see the issue in perspective either. If it's between the future of our forest resources and the immediate appeasement of the tribals, no Indian needs to guess which way the political clock swings. Tribals vote. Period. And when a handful of Parliamentarians dare point out that the forests may not have any electoral value but their well-being is integral to our future water and food security, they are ridiculed as upper caste elites who are anyway supposed to be anti-tribal.

Then you have the bureaucracy. The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 have been the eyesore of our babudom. They regret that these laws have largely

insulated our forest reserves from bureaucratic tinkering. Earlier, MoEF officials themselves tried to float the Biodiversity Act 2000 as an umbrella Act but failed when finally the national parks and the sanctuaries were kept outside its purview. It would be a kind of poetic justice that they are now fighting another ministry to save the same forests.

We must accept that there is no black and white situation at hand. Tribal or non-tribal, forest-dwellers are now surviving at the mercy of the *sarkari* ground staff. Almost everywhere, they need to routinely bribe them to ensure their livelihood. In Ranthambhore, it's few hundred rupees per season per person for collecting wood and grass. In the northern boundaries of Corbett, Gujjars pay in milk to have their livestock grazing inside the forests. A number of forest officials confined in me how their ground staff demanded sexual favours from women of such communities for access to minor forest produce. Forget all these, how can we justify forcing the tribals to pay the entire cost of conservation? If our forest resources are saved, the benefits reach every Indian. So it's our national responsibility to look after those who lose their traditional livelihood in the process.

But giving them back their rights to forests is a retrograde and dangerous solution. Considering the Bill address all the concerns of conservation, who will ensure everything goes by the letter of the law once the tribals get their right to hold forest land? It is reported that the

Tribal Affairs Ministry-through state-level monitoring committees sought in the Bill- wants control of the tribal areas which more or less overlap the forest map of India. While the Wildlife Act and the Conservation Act will be applicable to the tribals, any forest official on hot pursuit can face humiliation as there are provisions in the Tribal Act for a penalty of up to Rs 5,000 and 30-day imprisonment for government officials found guilty of violating tribal rights. Duality of control will anyway lead to conflict between the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

There is also the danger of “Mandalisation” of the situation. The draft Bill has the potential to create flash points all over India. The draft Bill has the potential to create flash points all over India. Except for some rare pockets, tribals are part of mixed populations that share similar lifestyles of marginal land farming, flash and burn, pastoral sustenance etc. Non-beneficiaries in the same population will fight the tribals tooth and nail. And already we have certain activists advocating similar rights for the Scheduled Caste population. Imagine the chaos waiting to unfold.

Today, only the tribals are far too many to survive in our remaining forests. Critics offer scary arithmetic: 80 million tribals roughly make for 20 million nuclear families and the provision for 2.5 hectare per family amounts to 50 million hectare forest land. This is about 74 per cent of the existing million hectare forest cover, given the growth rate, they argue, it will take just another generation to reach saturation point. Certain grey areas in the draft Bill over ancestral rights apart, senior officials in the Tribal Affairs

Ministry claim that no outsider will be brought in and settled in the forests and only existing forest dwellers will be given rights to the forest land. Even so, it’s enormous economic value we are talking about. In a number of ongoing cases, the SC is in the process of fixing the present net value of forest land which will some where between Rs 5 lakh to Rs 7 lakh per hectare. We must understand the value of our mega-diversity.

With no land use policy in place since Independence, it’s not surprising that our natural resources management has been largely messed up. Forests are no exception. We may blame our ministries but there was not much political will at work either. Just because we have not been able to find a dignified space for the tribals in the larger paradigm of conservation, we can’t suddenly leave crores of them to subsist on vanishing jungles, which, if nurtured and utilized scientifically, could yield enough economic benefits to sustain them for generations to come.

We have enough models working well in different pockets of India. There is no dearth of ground expertise and experience either. What we need is better policies and management that not only protect our forests from all interference but also tap its economic potential, which, in turn, adequately addresses the livelihood concerns of the tribals. Discouraging direct subsistence on forest resources is not denying the tribals their rights. The forests belong to them. But their future will be secure only if they have an option to live on the interest and leave the capital untouched. Provided, of course, our policy makers take the trouble of thinking beyond populist, adhoc Bills.

Tribal MPs claim Sonia to protect Forest Rights Bill

The Indian EXPRESS, Friday, May 6, 2005

AFTER leading a delegation to Congress president Sonia Gandhi on the fate of the Tribal bill, Member of Parliament V. Kishore Singh Deo today claimed that Sonia has assured that “there was no way the legislation could be scuttled by anybody”.

“Sonia Gandhi said the bill has already been approved by the National Advisory Council, the apex policy making body of the UPA,” the MP from Parvatipuram told *The Indian Express*.

Ministry sources say tabling has been delayed as some experts have objected to the nomenclature

There was anxiety among the votaries of the Scheduled Tribes (recognition of forest rights) bill, 2005, when the Cabinet did not consider it in its recent meeting. As such the bill is being fiercely opposed by conservationists and even by the Ministry of Forests and Environment, for the “sake of health of forests.”

Singh Deo said that before meeting Sonia, he and 15 other MPs had planned to launch a signature campaign in support of the bill. Now, he said, he has dropped the idea of raising a “parallel lobby” to the “tiger conservationists.”

“We have no misgivings about the passage of the bill now. All the Mps,

whether they belong to Scheduled Tribes or not, and also leaders cutting across party lines are supporting the bill wholeheartedly,” he said.

Sonia’s plainspeak on the Tribal bill has also cleared doubts about her son Rahul Gandhi’s suspected opposition to it. After Rahul attended a recent meeting of the Tiger and Wilderness Watch- a group formed by young MPs-there was speculation on his stand on the bill.

Singh Deo alleged that vested interests have raked up this “tigers versus tribals” controversy. “Tigers have not disappeared because of the tribal people. They have vanished because of the forest mafia, corrupt officials and miners,” he said.

Claming that tribals were the best protectors of forestland, Singh Deo asked, “Has anyone ever heard of any tribal eating a tiger?”

Sources in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs said tabling of the bill has been delayed as some experts have objected to the nomenclature.

The Sources said the Ministry of Law and Judiciary has also okayed the draft of the bill- some quarters had raised doubts whether the bill could create a Mandal-like situation, whereby tribals would be seen as a favoured party by others living on forestland.

Politics over new forest Bill reaches PM’s office

The Times of India, Friday, May 6, 2005

Smarting under the setback of withdrawal of STs (recognition of forest rights) Bill, 2005, from the cabinet’s

agenda on Wednesday, tribal affairs minister P R Kyndiah on Thursday wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

pleading with him to correct the historical injustice.

Kyndiah explained to the PM that grant of forest rights to tribals would not cause ecological damages as is being perceived. He said: "If the Bill is not introduced in the current session of Parliament, it would send wrong signals and may have adverse repercussions in the minds of the tribals."

Kyndiah is also calling a meeting of Scheduled Tribe MPs on Monday to explain the merits of the Bill.

Though polite in tone, the letter reminded the PM: "This is the most opportune moment when the name of this government would be etched in the annals of history with golden letters if we settle land rights of forest dwelling tribal communities."

Reiterating that forest dwelling STs (FDSTs) have been living in their ancestral habitat for ages in symbiotic relationship with the eco-system but have also been historically denied

recognition through faulty reservation process, Kyndiah said: "FDST is the most effective conservationist as he lives in forests, by the forests and for the forests."

After outlining the aims and objectives of the Bill, Kyndiah explained that he was writing the letter to "allay any misgiving that is being created by those interested in the commercial exploitation of forests and wild life, in the minds of all right thinking people through a baseless and motivated media campaign".

To drive home his argument that the Bill would not cause ecological damage, Kyndiah cited policy statements like the forest policy of 1988 and various circulars, guidelines, government orders of the environment and forest ministry all of which "have espoused the cause of tribal communities and emphasized the need for putting these communities at the centre of any conservation measure".

Court notice to Coca-Cola on Kerala panchayat's plea

THE HINDU, Saturday, May 7, 2005

Bench declines request for stay on operations

The Supreme Court on Friday issued notices to Coca-Cola company, Kerala Government and Kerala State Pollution Control Board on a special leave petition filed by Perumatty grama panchayat in Palakkad district challenging a High Court order allowing the company's Plachimada bottling unit to draw five lakh litres of groundwater every day.

A Bench, comprising Justice Arijit Pasayat and Justice S.H. Kapadia, declined the request of Counsel for the panchayat to stay the operation of the

April 7 High Court order. But the Bench said the matter would be heard soon in view of its importance.

In its special leave petition, the panchayat said that there were substantial questions of law of public importance regarding the rights of a grama panchayat to drinking water and for agricultural purposes in contrast to the right of a multinational company to extract groundwater for manufacturing aerated soft drinks.

Another issue that finds mention in the special leave petition was whether

the High Court could completely take away the panchayat's powers to manage and regulate minor irrigation, water management and development, besides health and sanitation including hospitals for the welfare of its residents.

It said the High Court had clearly erred in holding that the panchayat had no power to cancel or renew licence.

After the panchayat decided to cancel the licence granted to the company, on the directives of the High Court, the State Government asked the panchayat to appoint an expert

committee to consider the question of depletion of water and environment hazards.

On a petition from the panchayat challenging the Government's directive, the High Court by a common judgment (the company had also filed a petition) permitted the company to draw five lakh litres of ground water a day.

The High Court also said that the panchayat should renew the licence and should not interfere with the functioning of the company.

NGO to bring drinking water to desert villages

THE HINDU, Saturday, May 7, 2005

Seeks community participation at the time of acute scarcity

In a unique initiative of its kind, the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation, working on the water conservation front in the Marwar region of western Rajasthan, has taken up the task of distribution of drinking water to a few problem villages in the desert terrain. As in the case of its water conservation efforts in the past, the Foundation has sought community participation in water distribution at the time of acute scarcity.

The programme, christened Shiv Ganga Peyjal Pariyojna, initiated with the support of institutions and local donors the Foundation, seeks to supply water to the development blocks of Agolai, Balotra, Luni and Rohet.

"The Pariyojna is designed to support the government's water distribution programme while keeping with the highest traditions of Marwar to provide water in distress," Gaj Singh, former ruler of Jodhpur and chairman of JBF said launching the programme at Bijolai near Jodhpur.

As the Shiv Ganga scheme was launched in the backdrop of traditional festivities like gher dance and desert music on Thursday, a prayer went up from everybody's heart for Shivraj Singh, the son of Gaj Singh and Hemlata Raje, who is recovering from an accident during a polo match in Jaipur two months ago.

The occasion marked the presence of the Magsaysay Award winner, Rajendra Singh, the former queen of Jodhpur, Hemlata Raje and former Speaker of the Rajasthan Assembly, Gopal Singh. The programme will be implemented over the next seven weeks with the support of village committees, an array of trucks and tankers. It is targeted at a population of 70,000 villagers.

"Shiv Ganga is a direct extension of Jal Bhagirathi's own vision to mitigate the effects of devastating droughts in the region through revival of traditional resource management

systems,” noted Prithviraj Singh, the managing trustee of the JBF on the

occasion.

Villagers waiting for panchayat polls

THE HINDU, Sunday, May 8, 2005

Elections for the post of Panches were yet to be held in a Haryana village in Rai block of Sonapat district, despite the completion of panchayat polls in this district and elsewhere in the state last month.

According to the residents of the newly-created Tonki village, the election to the post of sarpanch had been held along with those of other villages in the district last month, but the election of panches had not been held so far by the Panchayat Department. The village was a part of Manoli before it was engulfed by a devastating fire which burnt down all the houses.

At that time the residents of Tonki village had approached the Deputy Commissioner pleading for the

creation of a separate village. After the Commissioner agreed, Tonki was declared a separate village by the state government. When gram panchayat elections were held on April 9, Joti Devi was declared sarpanch.

However, residents alleged that the Block Development and Panchayat Officer, Rai had failed to conduct the election to the posts of panches lying vacant in six wards of the village despite repeated representations.

On account of this delay, the department had also failed to hand over charge to the newly elected sarpanch. Official sources said that the Directorate of Panchayat department had failed to reserve the wards and this was the main cause of the delay in holding elections.

A different war: Ex-armymen block tribal ritual hunt in Orissa forest

THE PIONEER, Tuesday, May 10, 2005

COME APRIL, the sun bleached hills of Simlipal are vulnerable to a different kind of threat—one posed by humans.

It is the time of the ritualistic Akhand Shikar, an ancient tribal tradition, showcasing the skill of the ethnic lot as traditional hunters. Hundreds of tribals from all over the state and even neighbouring Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand storm the hills, armed with bows, arrows and countrymade guns, killing whatever comes their way.

The ritual goes against the spirit of wildlife conservation and the pitch has been rising for a blanket ban on the hunt. A dedicated band of ex-servicemen and green activists has succeeded in doing what the combined might of the forest department and the police failed to do over the years. Acting in close cooperation, they have turned Akhand Shikar, in the Similipal forest into a non-event this year.

Akhand Shikar, a month long event beginning mid-April each year, is

the scourge of Similipal, declared a biosphere reserve a few years ago. Tribals brandishing guns and bows and arrows march into the reserve forest killing animals at will. The hunters had been defying a long-standing ban and entering the sanctuary by dodging police cordons and forest guards.

Fed up with its failure to stop the practice, the government enrolled a team of ex-servicemen to guard the sanctuary during the shikar period. Assisted by the Sabuja Vahini, a green group, the former army-men have turned the sanctuary into an "impregnable fortress" with hardly any major incident of hunting reported from the area so far. Sources said a few stray attempts by the hunters to penetrate the security cordon were effectively repelled.

Poachers and tribal leaders, who used to support the Akhand Shikar, are maintaining a low profile this year. They

have realized that the administration is going to act tough if any violation of environmental laws in the sanctuary area is detected. Forest guards are equally wary of winking at the offenders, who got away easily in the past. Enthused with the success, the administration is now likely to launch a two-pronged attack on the shikar by stepping up its awareness drive among the tribals.

Tribals in the region may also be provided with sustainable livelihood options to wean them away from the practice, which has been the bane of the sanctuary.

According to wildlife experts, Jharkhand also faces a similar problem. Every year, tribals from the state, West Bengal and even Orissa swamp the Dalma wildlife sanctuary in mid-April for the Bishu Shikar. But the voices of dissent have been drowned as the state leadership is predominantly tribal.

After 349 days of waiting, Panchayati Raj gets its staff

The Indian EXPRESS, Thursday, May 12, 2005

THE Panchayati Raj Ministry, has finally got its staff-349 days after it came into existence as a UPA showpiece to push rural development.

Even then, according to Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, he has been allocated only 43 staff members by the Finance Ministry, against a requested 133.

Currently, Aiyar's Ministry has a staff strength of six, including Secretary Wajahat Habibullah.

"That's the way the system works. I had repeatedly sent it (request for staff) to the Cabinet and the Group of Ministers. After everything was sanctioned, it went back to the Finance

Ministry," said Aiyar, who also heads the Petroleum Ministry.

"The delay was with having to carry the whole Cabinet with me on what the Ministry should do... That has taken 349 days," he said.

On the staff numbers sanctioned, Aiyar said, "The staff-to-officer ratio is the lowest. It's a truly officer-oriented system. The Ministry of Petroleum has 400 staff members... I hope the scalpel taken to the staff proposal of Panchayati raj will now be taken to the Finance Ministry and other ministries."

Aiyar's Ministry will have a secretary, two additional secretaries, four

joint secretaries and support staff, including directors and deputy directors.

Besides Habibullah, who is taking over as Jamia Vice-Chancellor in June, working for the Ministry now are two joint secretaries, Aiyar's personal secretary Ashutosh Dixit and two support staff.

"The Ministry had less staff than a cell of a section of a division of a Ministry normally has," said Aiyar.

"During Diwali, I had to organize 400 packets of sweets for the Petroleum Ministry but only eight for Panchayati Raj, including drivers and peons," said Aiyar. With more staff in place, Aiyar now hopes to get on with the

implementation of various projects that were hit due to lack of staff.

"What can you do with six staff members? Now the National Common Minimum Programme goals can be achieved," the Minister said.

On the agenda now: a meeting of the council of Panchayati Raj ministers, pushing through task force recommendations such as the one on an electronic tracking system for funds from the Centre and a presentation before the Prime Minister after the Parliament session.

Aiyar also plans to visit villages in West Bengal and 12 other states including Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Assam.

Rural roads plan trapped in jungle laws

THE PIONEER, Thursday, May 12, 2005

THE GOVERNMENT's flagship rural roads scheme has got trapped in the labyrinth of jungle laws. This is especially so in remote and interior areas where they are needed most.

The Ministry of Rural Development has complained to the Environment Ministry that a large number of rural road proposals involving forest clearance simply fail to see the light of the day as the green authorities keep sitting on them.

In its communiqué to the Environment Ministry, the Rural Development Ministry has listed 272 such pending proposals under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna (PMGSY), though a senior official admitted that there are many more cases awaiting forest clearance.

The communiqué urging the Environment Ministry to expedite the

clearance of pending PMGSY road proposals has identified the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 as the main culprit.

"The smooth execution of the PMGSY scheme is being adversely affected by the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act in remote and interior areas where these roads are most needed," asserted the letter written by the Rural Development Ministry to the Environment Ministry on May 2.

The PMGSY, launched in 2000, aims at providing all weather roads to all rural habitation with a population of 500 or more. The scheme, which is being implemented by the Government as a popular rural economy multiplier, occupies pride of place in UPA's "*Bharat Nirman*" concept of rural development.

Under the scheme, the fund is provided by the Centre while the states responsibility is to make land available for taking up proposed road works. Wherever required, the State Governments have to obtain forest clearance from the concerned forest authority.

“The Forest Conservation Act (of 1980) is so rigid that it allows the forest authorities to keep sitting on the state’s requests for months together. Often they neither deny the clearance nor okay it and the State Governments can only watch helplessly,” said a senior official on condition of anonymity.

As a way out, the Ministry of Rural Development has urged the Environment Ministry to provide general approval for PMGSY roads by transferring the concerned forest land to the related department as allowed by the

Forest Conservation Act. “To avoid this delay and for the smooth running of the PMGSY it is requested that general approval under section 2 of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 for diversion of forest land to government /department for the activities under PMGSY may please be accorded for the effective implementation of the programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development...,” the communiqué to the Environment Ministry said.

Of the 272 pending cases reported to the ministry, the majority are from Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttaranchal. While Madhya Pradesh has reported 81 road proposals pending with the forest authorities, Himachal Pradesh has 72 such cases and Gujarat and Uttaranchal have reported 58 and 40 cases respectively.

Panchayat chief’s resignation will not be accepted

THE HINDU, Thursday, May 12, 2005

The Tamil Nadu Government has decided not to accept the resignation of the newly-elected Dalit president of the Keeripatti panchayat, V. Azhagumalai, who quit seconds after assuming office on April 24.

A submission to this effect was made by the Additional Advocate-General, A.L. Somayaji, in the Madras High Court when a writ petition filed by the runner-up in the election, P. Poonkodi, to forbear the authorities from accepting the resignation came up for hearing before Justice A. Kulasekaran.

Mr. Somayaji, concurring with the writ petitioner, told the court that “due procedures” had not been followed by the panchayat president, who handed over his resignation letter to the

Returning Officer of the panchayat, instead of giving it to the Collector “in person” or an elected panchayat.

He, however, opposed the petitioner’s interim prayer against the appointment of a Special Officer to administer the affairs of the panchayat.

Mr. Somayaji argued that an official had been appointed who discharged his duties on the date the writ petition was filed.

Therefore, no interim order restraining the Government from appointing the Special Officer could be considered by the court, he said.

Court direction sought

In his writ petition Mr. Poonkodi said that in the past nine years elections

had been held 19 times to the reserved local body and wanted the court to direct the authorities not to hold fresh polls till March 2006.

Under the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1994 there was no provision for an elected president to resign his office.

Section 37, 38 and 38 (A) provided for disqualification and Section 205 for removal.

There were specific provisions for removing him through a no-confidence motion and removal due to conviction.

Experts line up suggestions for tribal heritage

The Indian EXPRESS, Monday, May 16, 2005

P**OLITICS** may have taken over the Scheduled Tribes (recognition of forest rights) Bill in Delhi, but far away in the green depths of Bastar, focus is on tribal heritage and its preservation.

With the sole objective of marrying conservation with the right of forest to tribals, 16 experts on tribal heritage from across the country, along with ministers, officials and specialists from INTACH, have been preparing—since last Thursday—recommendations for the Central and state governments which will be instrumental in formulation of policies.

And while perceived threats to the tribal population were being discussed, the emphasis was on giving them the right to manage their habitat and keep interference from the outside world at a minimum.

On the significance of the four-day meet, INTACH chairman SK Misra said: “Tribal heritage is under serious threat. Globalisation and the invasive nature of the modern world are eating into their (tribals) habitat and cultural sensibilities.

“Unless we wake up to the perceived threat and do something to preserve it, we will lose tribals and their indigenous heritage forever.”

“This is the first time that preservation of tribal heritage is being discussed. The effort is to prepare recommendations that will help us save our national treasures,” he said.

INTACH will publish the recommendations drawn up at the conference and submit it to the Central

and state government for implementation.

Suggestions included providing tribals with mobile schools, makeshift shelters to tide over unfriendly weather, ensuring that education and infrastructure development does not mean delisting from the national tribal census, voting rights and documentation of intangible heritage.

Also in the offing are workshops on tribal heritage for school children and an annual tribal festival in Delhi, showcasing both performing and visual arts of the tribals.

Earlier, at the inaugural session, Chhattisgarh Governor Lt. Gen. (retd) KM Seth said: “Of the 8 per cent tribal population in India, at least 31.8 per cent is in Chhattisgarh.

“When I travel out of Chhattisgarh, people ask me if I come from the state that has Bastar. That is how important the tribal belt is to us.”

Professor of Linguistics from Pune, LM Khubchandani, said: “What we need today is the concept of trusteeship. We cannot treat the tribals as a specimen that needs to be studied but devise ways and means of organising intermingling of the tribals and the non-tribals.”

Samir Acharya, INTACH convenor, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, said: “When we talk about preserving tribal heritage, we have to understand that these are not people who plunder their natural habitat.

“They know they can only use the amount they need at a certain time, therefore, need to preserve it themselves.”

Panchayati raj institutionalized but not empowered, says Aiyar

THE HINDU, Tuesday, May 17, 2005

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

Equipped with a 66 member staff, Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar believes he can expedite the establishment of rural business hubs. “With a full-fledged Ministry, we can bring in a revolution in rural India”.

Mr. Aiyar was interacting with the media here on Monday, after the Union Cabinet sanctioned a Secretary, two additional Secretaries and four Joint Secretaries for the Ministry.

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

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

150 recommendations

The Minister said he had sent a list of 150 recommendations to all Chief Ministers on devolution of powers about three months ago. He presumed that these were accepted, as there was no objection.

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

Under Schedule 7, panchayati raj is listed as a State subject but I believe that the States and the Centre need to come together to implement the system.”

GoM to strengthen panchayati raj

The Panchayati Raj Ministry has proposed to set up a group of ministers (GoM) for strengthening the panchayati raj institutions. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has approved the proposal.

Those likely to be in the GoM are the Ministers for Human Resource Development, Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, Chemicals and Fertilizers, Finance, Tribal Affairs, Rural Development, Environment and Forests, besides Deputy chairman of Planning Commission. Union Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar will chair the GoM.

The terms reference of the GoM include implementation of recommendations on financial devolution, accountability and performance of panchayats, implementations of the panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, gender empowerment through panchayats.

Not applicable in J & K

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

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

“The Panchayati Raj Secretary, Wajahat Habibullah, will shortly visit Jammu and Kashmir for the purpose.”

Monthly review

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

Monsoon late by a week, crop failure looms large

The Times of India, Thursday, May 19, 2005

It's official: The monsoon's arrival over Kerala is expected to be delayed by a week. For the very first time, the Met office has come out with a separate monsoon onset forecast which predicts the weather system will hit the mainland on June 7, instead of the usual June 1.

It appears science and technology minister Kapil Sibal had sought such a forecast. India Meteorological Department (IMD) has come up with one, based on a new statistical Indian model with an error margin of three days either way. Three days earlier, or three days later.

For IMD, a week's 'deviation' is par for the course. It has no bearing on the monsoon's performance over the four-month season. That is still expected to be normal.

Scientists also maintain there is no direct co-relation between the delay and the El Nino (unusual warming of equatorial Pacific waters) effect which became visible last month. Some warming trends have been noticed in the eastern equatorial Pacific region but the effects are expected to be short-lived.

What is clear is that there is no sign of the monsoon over the Andamans yet. It usually makes its entry into the Indian Ocean, touching South Andamans, about mid-May but the wind patterns that make up this global system just aren't there.

It has been raining in the Andamans and the North-East but these are not even being labeled pre-monsoon showers. Those would come with the leading edge of the monsoon system. The flows just aren't there yet.

In the north, agricultural scientists have begun to wonder if a delayed monsoon will load summer crop worries onto a plate already full with winter crop shortfalls. Winter wheat production alone is feared to have fallen short by four to five million tonnes, pulling down rabi (winter) production.

If the monsoon plays hookey in the coming summer, the summer crop season will be strained as well. If this happens-and everyone has fingers crossed that it won't-this would be the third consecutive slap from the weather gods.

In summer 2004, an errant monsoon took its toll on the kharif (summer) crop, bringing down foodgrain estimates for the July 2004-June 2005

agricultural year from 212 million tonnes a year before to 206.39 million tonnes.

Rural drinking water scheme leaks: Minister

THE PIONEER, Thursday, May 26, 2005

Rich grab tubewells, poor remain thirsty

THE GOVERNMENT'S high-spend approach to the social sector took a battering on Wednesday with Rural Welfare Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh questioning the delivery system of the rural drinking water scheme.

In a speech at the conference of the state secretaries of drinking water and sanitation, Mr Singh admitted that serious irregularities have marred the Centre's rural drinking water supply programme. "As a result, a large number of villages shown on the paper as 'fully covered habitations' in reality remain as thirsty as ever," he said.

The minister was echoing the observation of the ninth and tenth parliamentary standing committee on rural development.

The UPA government has committed Rs 4,750 cr for the ambitious rural drinking water scheme. In keeping with the common minimum programme of the government, the budget has allotted Rs 50,000 cr to the social sector.

The minister sharply criticized corruption in distribution of way tubewells-the main source of drinking water in rural areas. "Often the tubewells sanctioned for rural habitations of Dalits and the poor end up in houses of better off, and on paper such habitations are shown as being fully covered. The records, therefore, give false coverage figure," Mr Singh told the state secretaries.

"Such habitations, though listed as fully covered on paper, slip back to partially covered or not covered categories in the subsequent surveys," he said, calling for immediate rectification in the tubewell distribution system in the countryside.

He said since the 1999 survey of drinking water supply situation in rural areas, an estimated 2.8 lakh habitations had slipped back from fully covered to partially covered and from partially covered to not covered categories.

"In order to assess the actual ground position, we have initiated the fresh habitation survey and Indian Institute of Public Administration is validating the results of the same," he said.

He said despite the government's efforts, water quality was fast emerging as a major problem in several parts of country.

There are about 2.16 lakh quality affected rural habitations in the country. This includes 5,029 arsenic affected habitations, 31,306 fluoride affected habitations, 23,495 salinity affected habitations, 1,18,088 iron affected habitations and 13,958 nitrate affected habitations.

In view of this problem, the government would soon revive the submissions on quality, he said.

Besides tackling quality problem, coverage of schools with drinking water

and sanitation facilities was another area requiring immediate attention, Mr Singh said.

“The government has decided to ensure availability of drinking water and sanitation facilities in all government schools and Anganwadis in the rural areas of the country by 2006-07,” he said. Pointing out the government’s commitment to cover all habitations by

the end of the Tenth Plan, the Rural Development Minister asked the state secretaries to gear up the work and chalk out a clear cut strategy to achieve this goal.

Mr Singh also stressed on the need of the state secretaries holding meeting every three months to review the progress made and remove the bottlenecks, if any.