

Panchayat Raj: Sikkim in third slot

THE HINDU

April 5, 2006

It has set an example for the rest of the country: Mani Shankar Aiyar

NEW DELHI: Sikkim has been rated the third best performing State in implementation of the Panchayats Raj after Kerala and Karnataka. It scored 592 points out of 600 in an evaluation by the Union Panchayats Raj Ministry for 2004-05.

Sets an example

Panchayats Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar announced this here on Tuesday after signing a joint statement of conclusions with Sikkim Chief minister Pawan Chamling for strengthening the State's panchayats. "Sikkim has set an example by successfully implementing the Panchayats Raj Act in letter and spirit," he said.

Under the agreement, Sikkim will complete activity mapping within three

months, separate the State budget into State sector and Panchayat sector by October, strengthen district planning committees and issue guidelines for their functioning.

The Ministry, on its part, will provide financial and technical assistance for capacity building elected members and officials.

Rural business hubs

It will assist in setting up rural business hubs and technical assistance for recording and preserving biodiversity at the gram panchayats level, as mandated under the National Biodiversity Act.

Mr. Chamling said he would work to achieve the top rank by implementing all aspects of the Panchayats Raj Act within the next six months.

Dam good, say Gujarat tillers

Dholka (Ahmedabad): Just 60 kilometers south of Ahmedabad, farmers are counting their blessings this semi-arid region called Bhal. For generations, contended with vagaries of monsoon, on whose fickle behavior the fate of their crops rested.

But since waters from Sarder Sarovar project began reaching their fields end of 2005, villages like Kotha, Vejalka and Javaraj have seen land price double and a crop bounty grows threefold in recent months.

The water has reached here through canals, traveling nearly 250 km and eased the word scarcity from local jargon. Wheat production this year has risen from 12 mounds per acre to 35. Nitinbhai Patel, who owns a 30-acre field he has just harvested with machines from Punjab, says "Our future generations will perhaps never see droughts again."

Dajibhai Dabhi, who tends a 25-acre field, said, "Most farmers in Bhal have been ruined because of successive poor monsoons and there has been large scale migration. Hopefully, people will now start returning."

Even landless farmers have come back from dusty construction sites in Ahmedabad. Chandubhai Deviputra, who used to get work for about 100 days

a year in his village and then go to Ahmedabad for the rest of the year, says he earned Rs 60,000 as a share-crop farmer this season.

Bhupatbhai Dabhi, a rich farmer owning nearly 150 acres of land, says he used to grow only wheat but is planning to raise vegetables and pulses this year—something unheard of in Bhal.

Salinity is into parts of Bhal, surrounding the Gulf of Cambay and spread in Kheda, Ahmedabad and Bhavnagar districts. Groundwater is just 40 feet deep, yet it has become saline. Claims Bhupatbhai "Thanks to irrigation waters in Kheda from Mahi river, the yield there went up to 60 to 70 moulds per acre. With water available in abundance now, I hope to cross 100 moulds next year."

In neighbouring Sanand, just outside Ahmedabad, farmers began receiving Narmada waters two years ago. Ever since, farmers have stopped pumping water from 700 feet below the earth. Meghaji Thakore says, "I do not have to beg for groundwater from my neighbors who have bore wells."

The villagers of Chekhla have formed a water users' association. Ramesh Jani, who heads one, says, "We were tired of erratic power supply for groundwater. Narmada waters cut costs by one-third."

Karzai wants help in rural development

THE PIONEER

April 13, 2006

AFGHAN PRESIDENT Hamid Karzai expressed his keen interest in replicating India's experience in rural development through elected local bodies system and requested New Delhi to provide assistance in this direction by helping in setting up training institution like the National Institute of Rural Development.

On concluding day of his visit to Hyderabad Wednesday, Mr. Karzai, accompanied by several other Ministers, MPs and other officials of his country, spent about two hours at the NIRD campus in Rajendernagar, near Hyderabad, studying various models of rural development and technology and interacting with the faculty and other officials.

“The experience this morning is of immense importance to Afghanistan where we also have a lot of need for rural development and for the empowerment of rural people and women,” he told the reporters. He took a tour of the Rural Technology Park where the rural artisans had set up stalls for selling the homemade clothes and other handicrafts.

“The visit to NIRD in Hyderabad today is one that we will definitely take back home and try to apply there in Afghan villages and rural areas by way of implementation and research by way of panchayats Raj institutions,” he said.

Creating dispensable citizens

THE HINDU

APRIL 14, 2006

This is not merely about whether the dam should be constructed or not. It is about condoning state inaction and then blaming the victim.

THE INDEFINITE fast undertaken by Media Patkar, Jamsinh Nargave and Bhagwatibai Patidar and others who have joined them, has provoked strong reactions from both “prodam” and “pro-rehabilitation” camps. Segments of the English language press have been belligerent and hostile to anyone opposing continued construction of the dam. The condemnation of Ms. Patkar and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the derision of the Left for demonstrating sympathy with the cause of the displaced, is combined with a fervent desire that dam construction should not stop for any reason whatever. The displaced are being represented as unreasonable people, led by an obstructionist movement leader whose only agenda is to stop the dam.

The record of displacement speaks to a different truth. It is a fact that in the 1950s, when industrial and infrastructure expansion was chosen as the path to development, displacement was merely an incidental event. In fact, till the Third Five Year Plan, there is not even a passing reference to those who would be dispossessed by projects. The popular reaction to projects too was euphoric. Those who had to make way for dams, industries, roads, and mines were supported by an optimism and a faith that development would reach them too.

But that has transmogrified over the years into despair and disillusionment.

Till the anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley, the displaced were merely incidental costs generated by projects, and much of the loss was expected to be borne by the displaced. It is telling that till the early 1990s there were no figures with either the Government, or outside of it, indicating the extent of displacement generated by projects. The anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley acted as a spur to recognizing displacement as a phenomenon central to project implementation. It was 1994 before search (ICSSR) supported study worked out the extent of displacement, and estimated that about 21.3 million people had been displaced between 1951 and 1990, to make way for mines, dams, industries, and wildlife sanctuaries. This did not include figure for urban displacement. Around 30 per cent of those displaced in the 1950s and 1960s were estimated to have been resettled till 1980; and there was no noticeable improvement in the 1980s. A disproportionate percentage of the displaced were tribals and Dalits.

Disturbing figures

In a recently concluded study on development-induced displacement in West Bengal between 1947 and 2000, a team led by Walter Fernandes reported

that 70 lakh people had been adversely affected by projects; 39 lakh of them had been physically displaced, of whom about three lakh had been resettled by the projects. Thirty-six lakh people have had to fend for themselves following displacement. Tribals make up 20 percent of this number and Dalits 30 percent. Thirty-one lakh lost their land and / or livelihood without being physically relocated. In the same period, in Assam, the study estimates that around 25 lakh people have been deprived or dislocated by projects.

If these figures communicate in one language about the harshness of displacement, the Kalinganagar firing with which the year opened speaks in more graphic vein.

On January 2, 2006, police opened fire on tribals who were preventing the takeover of their land for setting up industries in Kalinganagar in Orissa. Twelve tribals were killed. A journey through Kalinganagar tracked the trouble unerringly to rehabilitation – or, more accurately, its absence. Twelve industries were proposed for Kalinganagar, of which four had been set up. Each displaced family was promised a job in the industries: a promise not even partially fulfilled. As reported in *The Indian Express*, 87 families had been evicted to set up the MESCO steel plant; five persons had been given jobs. A total of 634 families had been displaced from the site of the Neelachal Ispat Nigam Ltd., 53 people were given work. Some 430 families were displaced for Visa steel, 42 were given employment. When asked, the District Magistrate is reported to have said: “We will ask the industries to have a sympathetic look at the situation.” There was another direct cause for the “uprising” by the tribals. The State

Government had bought the land from the tribals at Rs. 35,000 an acre, and sold it to industry at Rs.3.35 lakh an acre!

In the rehabilitation colonies, death and disease stalked the displaced. At Gobarghati Rehabilitation Colony in Kalinganagar, six persons including two children, died in the five months before the firing, of water born diseases.

These were people who had been moved to make way for Neelachal Ispat Nigam. Of the 634 families shifted to the rehabilitation site, only 120 families remained in January 2006. The rest had left seeking jobs because there was nothing for them at the rehabilitation site.

One month after firing. *The Hindu* carried an interview with Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik where he was quoted as saying: “We are contemplating revising our resettlement and rehabilitation policy to make it more sympathetic and humane.” This procrastination in a State where, as Manipadma Jena writes in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, officially 81,176 families from 1,446 villages have been displaced due to development projects between 1950 and 1993, which required the acquisition of 14,82,626 acres of land.

The Hirakud dam, when it was being built between 1948 and 1957, affected 285 villages of which 249 were in Orissa. To quote Mr. Jena, “due to displacement, the livelihood of 22,141 families consisting of 1,10,000 people was disrupted. Around 4,744 families, all belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, were displaced forcibly with the help of the police. Only 2,185 families were resettled in 17 rehabilitation camps...” Intergenerational impoverishment has been the inevitable effect.

Lop-sided policy

This is the weight of the experience that the Narmada oustees carry from beyond even their own immediate vicinity. And this is the history that the state cannot say it does not know. Every time a rehabilitation policy is mooted by the state, it is in fact an admission that the process of development has got too lopsided and cannot do without a correction. But as should need no reiteration, it is not policy alone, but its practice that makes the difference. Those strident in their condemnation of the dam-affected resisters are demanding that they, the dam-affected, accept their status as

dispensable citizens. There is no call for the state to perform according to standards that the state has itself set. There is instead an anger that the indefinite fast has prevented the wishing away of the non-performance on rehabilitation and misrepresentation in official documents. In other words, along with the dispensability of the displaced, impunity is being advocated when the state breaches the dictum of the law-that the state has itself made! This is not then merely about whether the dam should be constructed or not. It is about creating the dispensable citizen, condoning state inaction, and then blaming the victim.

A desert story: Mineral water for a whole village

The Indian Express

April 17, 2006

THOUSANDS of villagers in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan do not have access to even a drop safe drinking water during summer. But the people of Kisari village enjoy a rare luxury—they drink mineral water throughout the year.

The drastic difference between the villages with a population exceeding 3,000, nearly 150 km from Jaipur, and its surrounding areas is the result of a unique community participation programme that has allowed the Kisari panchayats to set up and run its own mineral water plant in the middle of the desert.

“The water plants is managed by the panchayats with a bit of financial assistance from the water-supply department of the state government,” says Jhunjhunu SDM Rakesh Kumar Yadav. The situation in Jhunjhunu and its adjoining Churu district is so grim that more than 75 percent of its blocks have come under the dark zone. Compounding the problem is the high level of fluoride in the groundwater, responsible for several diseases among the villagers.

A few months ago, villagers of Kisari, with the help of local social workers, decided to permanently solve their drinking water problem by setting up a plant that would wash out the

impurities in the ground water and produce 30,000 litre of mineral water (dissolved minerals less than 15 parts per million) every day.

“The idea was inspired by President Abdul Kalam, who had asked the Department of Science and Technology (DST) to introduce a similar project for villages in Barmer. The Barmer projects failed to take off because of poor local support, but we decided to implement it in our village,” says Niranjan Singh, one of the members of the village board that runs the project.

With technical assistance from the DST, financial support from the panchayats and the water works department, the villagers set up the plant near their community well. It cost them around Rs 30 lakh. The water, cleansed through the reverse osmosis process, is collected in a common tank. The quota allocated to each house depends on the number of adults in the house. “Every house is charged a standard fee per adult. Un married girls and children are allowed free water,” says Singh.

While the government foots the electricity bill, the villagers pay the operation and maintenance cost. Every year, the person who bid the minimum amount (paid as monthly salary by the villagers) gets the job.

Yamuna farmers find innovative way to ferry vegetables

The Statesman

April 19, 2006

NEW DELHI, April 18: For vegetables farmers of Delhi living along the banks of river Yamuna, cutting costs of transportation of their merchandise has led to creative innovations. One may say that the only way to transport goods across a river will be by boat, but these farmers have devised a new contraption that not only meets their purpose, but, is also cost effective.

The farmers have structured unique 'boats' to carry their vegetables across the river. Though it is not technologically advanced, it serves their basic need. These spacious and tricky formations have been constructed from various thermocol sheets bound together to form a raft and are being used extensively by the farmers to load and unload the vegetables from field across the river.

Most of them believe that with the use of such creations, it has become easy to travel from one field to another. "We cannot afford a boat as it costs a lot and that is why we have constructed this makeshift raft so that we can take our vegetables and fruits easily from one place to another," a farmer stated.

Another farmer carrying vegetables across the river at the Pontoon Bridge in Mayur Vihar said, "I have been using it for the past several months. Earlier, we had to rent boats now it has become extremely easy and cheap for us. To travel from one bank to another, I have tied ropes across the river and use it to transport my vegetables with ease without the hassle of rowing."

Pieces of thermocol are collected by farmers and then tied together after filling it inside large plastic covers. "We just need to collect the thermocol to prepare the raft. However, it takes few days and around four people to get it ready," a farmers stated. Ironically, police officers believe that sailing in these types of creations increases the risk of drowning, as they often get unbalanced. There have been several instants at the banks when farmers have had a lucky escape while using them to travel across the river. "Children also often travel on them and, in their excitement, it sometimes results in untoward incidents," a police officer stated.

Rajasthan Government plan to modernize agriculture

THE HINDU

April 19, 2006

First meeting of the newly constituted task force on agriculture and animal husbandry held in Jaipur

- **Task Force is headed by agricultural scientist and chief of National Commission on Farmers, M.S. Swaminathan**
- **Rajasthan occupied leading position in the production of mustard, bajra, coriander**

JAIPUR: The Rajasthan Government intends to develop traditional farming into hi-tech agriculture with the objective of agriculture with the objective of generating new employment opportunities and creating permanent sources of enhanced income for farmers. Steps have been taken to improve crop productivity achieve these targets.

Agriculture Minister Prabhulal Saini, stating this at the first meeting of the newly constituted Task Force on Agriculture and animal husbandry here on Monday, pointed out that the emphasis on soil and water quality, agricultural marketing and processing of farm produce would pave the way for development of agricultural sector in the desert State.

The Task Force is headed by noted agricultural scientist and Chairman of the National Commission on Farmers, M.S. Swaminathan.

Mr. Saini said while Rajasthan occupied the leading position in the production of crop such as mustard, bajra, coriander and cumin, it had 40 percent share in the production of wool and meat in the country, making animal husbandry an important foundation of rural economy.

The Minister said the State Government had encouraged direct sale

of agricultural produce by amending the Krishi Upaj Mandi Act and introduced public-private partnership for improving productivity in Jaipur and Sikar districts. This initiative, launched in over 20,000 hectare area, had benefited nearly 25,000 farmers in 138 villages, he added. Dr. Swaminathan, addressing one of the sessions in the meeting, said the construction of water harvesting structures was the need of the hour in view of scarcity of irrigation waters, which was adversely affecting productivity and stability in the agricultural sector.

The agricultural scientist pointed out that water harvesting would help resolve the difficulties created by unequal distribution of rainwaters. He said a strategy for achieving 4 percent growth rate in agricultural of the agricultural renewal year to be observed from June 1, 2006 to May 31, 2007.

Dr. Swaminathan said deliberations on formulating the first-ever national policy for farmers had started in order to deal with the issues of raising income of farmers, improving and conserving land, water and bio-diversity, and protecting the rights of women engaged in farming. He said the policy would lay a special emphasis on

attracting the youth to farming as an avocation.

Dr. Swaminathan, while underlining the need to encourage farmers to sow crops consuming less

water, said animal husbandry should be promoted with the same priority and works relating to this sector should be included in the rural employment guarantee scheme.

Green revolution's wounded warriors

The Statesman

April 19, 2006

In the past 10 years, between 2,500 and 5,000 farmers committed suicide because they could not service their debt

- **More than 60 percent of the state's cultivators are in debt**
- **The debt burden per farmer has touched Rs 45,000 ~ the highest in the land**
- **Hardly any institutional lending structure in place**
- **Private money-lenders charge 36 percent interest**
- **36 percent of the state's peasants want to discontinue farming as it is not profitable**
- **76 percent of them are small and marginal, owning less than five acres**

CHANDIGARH April 18: Once the harbinger of the Green Revolution in the country, the prototypical farmer of Punjab is no longer prosperous. The golden field no longer inspire Baisakhi celebrations as more than 60 percent of the state's cultivators are in debt. In what was previously considered the nation's grain bowl, the per farmer debt has reached Rs 45,000 – the highest in the land – and there is hardly any institutional lending system. Private money-lenders take a 36 per cent interest.

According to the agricultural expert, Mr Suchha Singh Gill, of Punjabi University, Patiala, some 36 percent of the state's peasants want to discontinue farming as it is not profitable, with their

incomes falling far short of justifying the huge investments they make.

With land getting fragmented and its productivity going down, fertilizer and irrigation becoming more expensive and the minimum support price not rising, the real income of farmers has dipped considerably. Most of them feel that cultivation is no longer a viable option, particularly because 76 percent of them are small and marginal,

Sociologists feel that that factor such as expensive family ceremonies, like marriages, are also responsible for pushing the farmers into the debt trap

owning less than five acres. The number of suicides by farmers because of their

increasing debts was between 2,500 and 5,000 during the past 10 years. Mr. Gill corrective measures were taken immediately. Sociologists feel that such social factors as expensive family ceremonies, like marriages, too, have forced debt on farmers. However, in the peripheral rural areas of cities like Chandigarh, Ludihana and Amritsar, a new trend is discernible. Farmers there are selling their land, the price of which has skyrocketed. "I was in debt as there was no return from agriculture.

thinks that the situation will reach an alarming stage unless effective I sold three acres, paid off my debts and switched over to dealing in real estate to find myself doing well again," said Mr. Avatar Singh of Mianpur in Ropar District, near Chandigarh.

But farmers in most parts of Punjab are not so lucky as the prices of their land has not increased very much, leaving them looking for an alternative source of livelihood.

Import – hit Punjab farmers on stir track

The Statesman

April 19, 2006

CHANDIGARH, April 18: Farmers' organizations yesterday prevented *ryots* from selling their produce in markets across Punjab in protest against import of wheat and lower minimum support price (MSP) for the food grain.

The boycott called by Bharitya Kisan Union (Rajewal), BKU (Lakhowal) and BKU (Ekta) was described as "successful and peaceful" by BKU (Rajewal) general secretary Mr. Balbir Singh Rajewal.

"Our activists are persuading farmers not to sell their produce for the next two days. The boycott call is successful as farmers are taking back their wheat crop from the gates of grain markets in the state," he said after first day of the two-day boycott.

Transactions, however, took place on food grain brought as of yesterday, he said. Several grain markets, including

Khanna and Bathinda, had been receiving about a lakh quintals of wheat everyday during the peak season of procurement. Describing agriculture minister Mr. Sharad Pawar as "anti-farmer," Mr. Rajewal said the minister was not bothered about farmers of Punjab, although their contribution to the national food grain pool was 40 per cent and 60 per cent for rice and wheat, respectively.

"If the government can spend Rs 950 per quintal on import of wheat then why could it not give the same price to farmers here," Mr. Rajewal asked.

Punjab's food and civil supplies minister said the state government had appraised the Centre of the situation and demanded immediate announcement of the enhanced MSP for wheat, which was Rs 650 per quintal now.

Biotech co faces MRTPC heat on Bt-cotton royalty

The Times of India

April 21, 2006

New Delhi: Biotechnology major Monsanto faces the risk of being barred this season from charging an exorbitant royalty for its controversial Bt cottonseed.

Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission (MRTPC) will decide on Friday applications filed by Andhra Pradesh two farmer bodies seeking an interim order restraining Monsanto and its Indian sub-licensees from charging royalty in the form of "trait value."

Fearing an adverse order, Monsanto has already reduced its royalty from Rs 1,250 to Rs 900 per 450 gm pack of Bt cottonseed, which is genetically modified to make the crop resistant to a pest called bollworm.

Though science and technology minister Kapil Sibal has lauded Monsanto for reducing its trait value to Rs 900, cotton farmers are not satisfied with it as it is still eight times more than the royalty of Rs 108 charged by the same company in US.

Monsanto also suffered a setback when a statutory body, the office of Director General of Investigation and Registration (DGIR), indicted the American company last month for engaging in India trade practices that are "restrictive" as well as "monopolistic."

It was on MRTPC's reference that DGIR gave a finding that Monsanto had imposed "unjustified costs" on farmers

last season by adding trait value of Rs 1,250 to the price of a pack of Bt cotton seed that would otherwise have been sold anywhere between Rs 300 and Rs 500.

Monsanto has so far been able to get away with such "price manipulations," as DGIR put it, because of the monopoly it enjoyed over the last three years in the fast growing segment of Bt cotton. It was only this month that the Centre gave clearance to two Indian companies to produce Bt cotton using Chinese technology.

The applications due to be taken by MRTPC on Friday have acquired urgency because the two-month annual season for buying cotton seed, whether of Bt variety or otherwise, has just begun.

The quantum of trait value being charged by Monsanto will be examined in the wake of mixed reports on the performance of Bt cotton on the ground and the high incidence of suicides among cotton farmers in states such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and MP.

If MRTPC restrains Monsanto from charging trait value, then the price of Bt cotton is expected to fall by about 50 percent from last year's price range of Rs 1,550 to Rs 1,800. As a result, more farmers are expected to take to Bt cotton, which currently accounts for about 15 per cent of cotton production in India.

200 slums razed in Bhatti Mines

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

April 21, 2006

THE Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) today demolished more than 200 *jhuggis* in Indira Colony and Balbir Nagar at Bhatti Mines. The drive is a result of a Supreme Court order to relocate slum dwellers by May-end.

The drive started at 10 in the morning today and continued till late in the evening.

A large number of police personnel

were present along with a unit of the Rapid Action Force. According to a resident, the MCD did not give them enough time to remove their belongings.

MCD officials said residents with a ration card and an identity card are being relocated to Bawana. In all, 1,100-1,200 families from the two colonies would be relocated to Bawana.

