

## Seeds of Panchayati Raj sown in Lanka

**P.K.Balachandran**

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Sri Lanka's ruling party, Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is likely to propose that power be devolved to District Councils rather than the provincial Councils as is the case now, according to media reports.

There is also an offer to replace the present Executive Presidency by an Executive Prime minister, responsible to parliament.

The SLFP's proposal is expected to be announced on May Day, before formally presenting it to the All Party Representative Conference on devolution set up by President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The proposal envisages a second chamber at the Centre called the Senate. The Senate will comprise the chairman of the District Councils and 0 others appointed by Rajapaksa. There are 22 districts in Sri Lanka.

But the executive powers of a District Council will be held by a District Minister appointed by the President. And the District Minister will be a member of the Central Council of Ministers.

The SLFP is in favour of grassroots level democracy on the pattern of the Indian Panchayati Raj system. Rajapaksa has been inspired by the ideas of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Indian Sports Minister Mani Shankar Aiyer both of whom pushed through Panchayati Raj.

The SLFP's proposal has already been criticized by the opposition United National Party.

These parties are for the continuance of the Province as the unit of devolution. It

was the UNP which had instituted the Provincial Councils system way back in 1988. And the Tamils have been demanding a large amount of provincial autonomy in lieu of full independence.

The Muslims are eager not to counter the Tamil demand for provincial autonomy because a good number of them live in the Tamil-speaking north and east.

The minorities want the Executive presidency to stay, albeit in an amended form. This is because an Executive President, elected directly by an all-Island vote, will be depending on the vote of the minorities also. An Executive Prime Minister, indirectly chosen from the ruling party in parliament, may not need minority support. To that extent, he may not care for the minorities.

## **Kerala shows the way**

The Kerala government, at the forefront of e-governance initiatives, has taken the inspiring step of launching a programme, in partnership with UNESCO, to provide gram panchayats in the state with their own web portals in Malayalam. This is an important step and recognition of the exciting possibilities for e-governance in rural India, where, if imaginatively deployed it can make a significant difference to the quality of life of the people. In early stages, e-governance in India was introduced largely at the Central and State Government levels from where it has been percolating downward to rural areas. The alternative to the top-down approach is that of providing e-governance to local bodies and building upwards. Happily, as the Kerala experiment demonstrates, State Government increasingly recognize the potential of information technology to transform the rural landscape and have begun initiating steps to introduce it even in remote areas. The majority of the population lives in villages, many in conditions of impoverishment, and e-governance can be an important tool for empowering them. In general, the importance of e-governance to a country like India can hardly be underestimated for it can be the sword that can slice the Gordian knot of the many ills that plague governance, including the problem of providing citizens access to Government services and information. As is known, e-governance substantially streamlines the functioning of the administration by cutting red tape and, by reaching citizens

directly, eliminates corruption and ensures transparency and accountability. No doubt, rural folk profit from these general attributes of e-governance even as there are specific ways in which they take advantage of it. For example, farmers can access information and services that can help enhance their productivity, enabling them thereby to improve their price realization even as loans are disbursed through the Internet. Also of importance in rural areas is the computerization of land records, which does away with the corruption that has often characterized their keeping hitherto. As the example of e-medicine demonstrates, there are many ways in which information technology can deliver modern services to rural areas that have been difficult to provide till now. Quite simply, e-governance offers a short cut. The prospect of e-governance in rural areas is stimulating for another reason, for it can be an important experiment in democracy: Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj in India—a decentralized form of Government with self-governing villages at the base—can find part expression in citizen participation encouraged by e-governance. For IT introduces a communication process that is two-way and that allows citizens to significantly influence policy even as it evolves.

## Call for strengthening campaign to create clean, green villages

**Staff Reporter**

**The Hindu, May 5,2007.**

President A.P.J.Abdul Kalam on Friday called for strengthening the campaign to create clean and green villages.

Presenting the Nirmal Gram Puruskar-2007 here, the President said developed villages lead to developed India. "The fact that the number of awardees and participants has gone up this year, illustrate that the movement for a clean and green India has penetrated the minds of the people. I congratulate the Ministry of Panchayat Raj for bringing this transformation at the grassroots level towards clean and green villages leading to developed villages," Dr Kalam said.

He also administered an oath to the representatives from States to sustain the clean and green movement.

The president gave away Nirmal Gram Puruskar to 4,945 Gram Panchayats and 13 Block Panchayats from 22 States. Maharastra walked away with 1974 awards, the highest this year. From Tamil Nadu, 282 Gram Panchayats won the awards, while 137 Gram Panchayats won the awards in Andra Pradesh 206 from Kerala and 381 from Gujrat were also presented the awards.

Earlier, Union Minister for rural Development Raghuvansh Prasad Singh said in just three years the awardees have increased from 40 to more than 4,500. The Nirmal Gram Puruskar is for the best village and role models of rural sanitation.

## Lifting the shroud

Mita Kapur

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### **An eco-friendly project in Rajasthan not only Fuels creativity but generates income and gives women a purposeful sense of self.**

Sharda cannot remember when she got married. She thinks she was nine years old then. She has an eight-year-old son. Tending the goats, working in the fields, cooking cleaning, sitting with other women in the village was her life. Bhanwari has lived the same life, having brought up four children. Chanda's eyes sparkle behind her ghunghat. She is only 25 but has borne four children and cannot remember when she had her first child. So what is new? We've heard these tales before—it has enraged some of us, some may have clucked over the fate of rural women in their plush drawing rooms, some have formed NGOs to empower such women. We've heard this before too.

When human ingenuity, nature's bounty and a world that wear a shroud come together to work in tandem, creation takes on a new momentum. Its coming into being lifts the shroud, clears the dust, lets that glimmer of hope filter in for Chanda, Sharda, Bhanwari and many more. Eighty women in four villages in Taal Chapar district of Rajasthan work for two hours everyday to make fashion and household accessories from weeds that grow randomly on the roadside and in the desert scrub areas. Akda—the weed's bark is peeled, dried, dyed in natural colours and wrapped around a frame to create bangles in vibrant colours. Turquoise blues, indigos, brunt oranges, sunny yellows, elegant whites,

flaming reds—name the colour and it's there.

#### **The earthy look**

The design of each bangle varies, in contrasting colours, in the way the weed is woven around it, with beads struck on them, with rope used for the earthy look. Coloured thread recycled from waste material is brought from the market at Rs. five or Rs. 10, to be used for making not just bangles but also table mats, coasters, rugs, baskets, bags and funky earrings. It's fascinating to see a pair of earrings made out of a weed's branch, just dipped into breathtaking aqua, inverted and a hook strung through it, leaves et al. A model on a ramp in Paris will soon be wearing this pair. Munj, another grass that grows wild in this area, is dried and dyed into bright hues to create mats, durries and stylish bags. Working hours have to be during the day, using sunlight, since these villages don't have electricity. The women get paid Rs. 20 for two hours of work—a sum that a beldaar (a labourer) earns for an eight to ten hour backbreaking day. Five bangles are made by one person in this time. With their heads bent sincerely over their work, the women looked happy: "we want to continue this work, it's much better than sitting at home; we want to learn more," their earning goes into running the house. They don't have the liberty to spend it on themselves—such thoughts don't exist in their psyche.

A need-based existence for the marginalized stares in the face—a stark contrast with the colours they weave into dreamy designs.

After Khadi's revival and its success story, Bibi Russel came to Taal Chapar on the Chief Minister's behest. Bibi had wondered what she'd be able to do here since there was no textile in this area but took it up as a challenge. For her it was like lapsing into a time machine—with no electricity, no T.V, no Internet, “no samosas either”. But Bibi is confident this project will work wonders and the products will sell in the international market. “The Taal Chapar project will be better than the Khadi project.”

Whatever Bibi makes in Bangladesh is also being sold in the same market. She quips, “I'm creating competition for myself.” Besides creating a craft that is so closely linked to nature, she had to think beyond Rajasthan to create designs, patterns that are unique and have never been marketed before. It wasn't an easy process. She spent her first two visits to these villages “just talking to the people, trying to make them trust and believe in me.” To teach women in these villages the skill, Bibi has her project managers who stay there to monitor, train create every bit of the products.

She works late into the night to come up with new patterns for bangles, earrings, mats etc. Doing the rounds of all four villages each day is routine.” Now that they've learnt the skills, there is a regular income; they're having fun working. They come dressed in their best to work in this small room but it's the feeling that they have...

The salt content in the water in this area of Rajasthan made processing very difficult for Bibi. She took the weeds

back to Bangladesh to research on the dyeing and colouring to come up with products made of weed, grass and recycled thread. She wants each home to become a manufacturing unit to enable them to derive sustainable income with a monitoring head to ensure constant demand and supply. The project is funded by the government but the marketing of the products rests solely on Bibi and her efforts. At a recent exhibition in Jaipur, a test run of all Taal Chapar products proved to be a success—they were the only stall that sold out completely.

### **Proving a point**

“When I walk through the corridors of the world, they question me at all the big dos, for me it's essential to prove to them that this ‘Asian lady’ will achieve all this by living in a jungle.” Working three hours in Bangladesh helps me save one life, she says. Bibi has plans to work in Gujarat to revive handmade textile but is waiting for the appropriate opportunity. She has worked at the grassroots in Africa and now wants to turn her attention to reviving hand embroidery in Afghanistan before it dies out. Scheduled to make a speech along with Bill Gates as a U.N.Ambassador in Germany, Bibi was excited: “Bill made millions doing different angles. I will make sure these women earn up to Rs. 100 per day and that it carries on.”

In Bangladesh, Bibi has six villages, working to meet export orders of 20,000 water hyacinth bangles every month and she evinces, “I Don't want people to say I'm doing more varieties here. The forest department and Rukmini Haldia with their modern approach will work to perpetuate this project.” An eco-friendly project that fuels creativity generates

income and gives women a sense of self. Those bags made from munj ropes could well be sitting on the glass shelves of some up market boutique in a metropolis. A fine effort in here—one can see it when Bibi walks into the room and all the women flock around her—“she’s nice, we like her, but don’t understand her language,” they laugh.