Empowerment of women in PRIs: Issue and Challenges
Prof. Ranbir Singh

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) had been set up in 1959 for the democratic decentralization of development administration. The women could get only insignificant representation in these as they had been denied reservations in these bodies. Only the provision for the co-optation had been made. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 gave them not less than one-third reservations in the PRIs at all the levels. This has been enhanced to 50 percent in some of the states. However, some studies on the impact of this Amendment have pointed out that this has enhanced their representation but has not provided genuine empowerment to them. A field study of Uttarakhand (Neha Kirti and M.Padalia, "Women Empowerment in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Uttarakhand after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act," in Ranbir Singh and Surat Singh (eds.), Local Democracy and Good Governance, New Delhi, 1911) has reported that it would be more appropriate to say that it was in reality “Empowering Men through Women.”

The reservation of seats for women has actually empowered the male members of their families. An empirical study of Himachal Pradesh has found that women representatives have failed to acquire an independent identity as decision makers. Likewise, a study of Haryana (Rekha Chaudhary, “Empowerment of Women in the PRIs of Haryana” in Ranbir Singh and Surat Singh, op.cit.) also reported that most of women have not been empowered as yet due to lack of education, awareness and confidence in them. A study in Rajasthan (Arun Chaturevedi, "Working of Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan: A Review in Surat Singh (ed.) Decentralized Governance in India, New Delhi, 2004) shows that the participation of women has increased but their role in decision making has still to go a long way. These studies lend enough support to the following conclusions of an empirical study on empowerment of women (Surat Singh, Haryana Institute of Rural Development, (HIRD) Nilokheri) for the National Institute of Rural Development Hyderabad in 2004:

- The reservation has led only to formal and not real empowerment of women in the panchayats.
- The participation of women in meetings is far from satisfactory. But they did get cooperation from their family members. Their role in preparing budget and plan was also not to the desired extent. Their role in the mobilization of funds for SGSY and identifying beneficiaries in the Gram Sabha was highly dissatisfactory.
- The involvement of elected women leaders in decision-making was found to be insignificant both in panchayats. This state of affairs is the reflection of male dominated character of the rural society of Haryana.

- Elected women representatives are not able to mobilize funds and raise additional income in the panchayats through levy of taxes because they neither have the capacity nor the will to do so.
- They are also unable to use the powers given to them by the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act (1994) as sarpanch of gram panchayat, chairperson of panchayat samiti and president of the zilla parishad effectively due to the nexus among the elected male representatives and the officials.

A sizable proportion of the women representatives in panchayats has been able to get status but not power. One-third reservation for women in panchayats is not going to empower them until the attitude of their male counterparts and the official functionaries becomes positive. Only those women representatives have been genuinely empowered who were educated, articulate, and psychologically strong and were not only not having an an unstinted support from their families but also having linkages with political leaders. The women with experience in social work and politics, too, have been empowered. The Tirupati Declaration on Women Political Empowerment (December, 2008) made the following recommendations:

1. Encourage the involvement of women in decision-making at all levels and achieve gender balance in the appointment of women and men, with full respect for the principle of equitable population distribution, including as judges, civil servants, ambassadors, assembly speakers, union and state level ministers, chief ministers and governors etc.
2. The capacity building of these bodies needs special attention. The provision should be made for special training to the women representatives.
3. The flow of funds from various sources towards the rural development and the poverty alleviation programmes should be linked with the performance of PRIs. The outlays and the outcome should be assessed and monitored accordingly, by the Central and State Governments.
4. The participation of women and self-help group members should be encouraged by the State Governments.
5. The PRIs should be encouraged and promoted in the implementation of various developmental programmes and activities
6. Develop national capacity to undertake policy-oriented and gender-related research.
7. Apply positive measures to give all women equal access to capacity-building and training programmes to enhance their political participation.

In this context, it will be worthwhile to re-produce the following recommendations of the

(Contd. on page - 7)
ANDHRA PRADESH

World Bank team inspects job scheme in Vizag: Representatives from the World Bank accompanied by researchers from Yemen visited rural parts in Visakhapatnam district as a part of their socio-economic study. The World Bank representatives and Yemen researchers have studied the scheme pattern and dependency of the people on the scheme.

BIHAR

Plus two schools in each panchayat for girls’ education: Chief Minister Nitish Kumar said on 24 January that the State government has decided to open a plus two school in every panchayat in the State to encourage education particularly among girls. The spread of education among girls by opening such schools in all panchayats would help in stabilising the population of the State, he told Melinda Gates, head of the US-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Patna.

Bids for 159 panchayat sarkar bhavans: Under the State government’s plan to build panchayat sarkar bhavans in all the 8,442 panchayats in Bihar, tenders were invited for constructing 159 buildings in 93 blocks on 3 January. The government aims to construct these buildings in 1,435 panchayats in the first phase, according to Panchayati Raj minister Bhim Singh. The buildings will serve as secretariat for the village councils, which will help build panchayats’ administrative, planning and financial management capacity, mobilize communities to increase people’s knowledge of their rights and responsibilities and facilitate their access to government resources to finance the community’s priorities. Singh said that as per the tender, each building will cost Rs 86 lakh and be completed in one year. The local area engineering organization has been made the nodal agency for the purpose.

GOA

South Goa zilla panchayat urges government to set aside Rs. 20 crore for development works: At a meeting held on 29 January, the South Goa zilla panchayat passed a resolution proposing that Rs. 3 crore would be dedicated to development works for the welfare of the ST and SC communities. It further proposed that Rs. 8 crore be reserved for rural infrastructure development and an additional grant of Rs. 9 crore under octroi. Other resolutions passed included a proposal to hold an awareness camp for farmers at Nuvem, purchase of sports goods for each member worth Rs. 10,000. Zilla panchayat also passed a resolution to hold vocational training courses across the ZP constituency at the village panchayat level. Criticizing the government for its indifferent attitude to the demands of the ZP members, ZP chairperson Nelly Rodrigues pointed out that when she went to follow up the matter with the finance department regarding the purchase of a new office vehicle for the chairperson, she was told that the proposed file had gone missing and she was asked to produce another file containing relevant documents.

JAMMU & KASHMIR

Army increases patrolling to protect panchayat members: After recent attacks on elected panchayat members, Army has increased patrolling across Kashmir to instill sense of security among panchayat leaders. “Panches and sarpanches are representatives of the people. It is the responsibility of all of us including Army to protect them. We have increased patrolling so that overall security is provided to them,” GOC 15 Corps Lt Gen Om Prakash told reporters on sidelines of a visit to the headquarters of the counter-insurgency unit, Rashtriya Rifles, in south Kashmir’s Shopian district. As per the reports, Hizbul Majahideen (HM) was behind attacks on village council members and heads in the valley and he too endorsed, “yes, State police has said that the HM had carried out some attacks”.

Chief Minister reviews panchayat empowerment: Reviewing status of devolution of powers to panchayats in a session with officers of 14 departments of whose various functions have been transferred to panchayats, Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah on 29 January announced that the polls to Block Development Councils would be held soon. Chief Minister said that the commitment of government for an empowered 3-tier Panchayati Raj system in the State is firm and final. “We are creating an atmosphere in which panchayats will be responsible for plan formation and implementation of development schemes at halqa, block and district panchayat levels”, he said adding that BDC elections are in offing which will further catapult the process of involvement of panchayats in the plan formation and development. Chief Minister said that Jammu and Kashmir with difficult topography, remoteness of areas and hilly terrain requires a well defined and powerful panchayat system to attend to the public needs. He said that the government is actively working on a proposal of providing honorarium, insurance and security cover to panchayats.

Governor for providing ‘secure environment’ to panchayat representatives: Calling for providing a secure environment to the panchayat members, Jammu and Kashmir Governor NN Vohra on 25 January said that the establishment of Panchayati Raj and devolution of powers to elected representatives in municipal administration would fortify decentralized democratic framework at grassroots level in the State. The Governor maintained that the security forces can not even think of lowering their guard, under any circumstances, till sustained peace prevails along the borders with Pakistan.
He also called upon the State's administrative system to work with renewed promptness, efficiency and accountability. In his Republic Day speech, the Governor observed that grassroots empowerment would involve the masses in the planning and implementation of various schemes. He added that the effective establishment of rural and urban self-governing bodies in each of the three regions of the State would be a landmark in the governance history of Jammu and Kashmir.

Militant's hand in killings: Reiterating police’s commitment to ensure safety and security of panches and sarpanches in the State, Director General of Police, Ashok Prasad said that the police was analyzing the threat perception to the panchayat members at different levels. "We are assessing the situation in different areas at various levels to frame a strategy for ensuring security to panches and sarpanches. It is a long process and would take some time to complete the assessment based on sensitivity of different areas", the DGP said. Ruling out the possibility of providing individual security to more than thirty thousand panchayat members, Prasad said that the police investigations in the past have pointed a direct militant hand in killings of the grassroot representatives. "Providing security to each and every panch and sarpanch is not possible for the police, however, wherever we feel there is threat to certain individuals, we will take steps to ensure their safety", he added. "Our investigations have revealed that militants carried out attacks on panches and sarpanches like in Kulgam and Sopore etc., as they are soft targets", the DGP said.

Panchayat members exodus: Militant attacks on panchayat members in north Kashmir have prompted scores to flee their homes, announce their resignations and seek the extremists' mercy through the media. Suspected militants killed a 70-year-old sarpanch, Habib Ullah Mir, on 11 January and critically injured a woman member, Zoonia Begum, in Sopore, leaving thousands of panchayat members worried about their fate. Around two dozen panchayat members from two Sopore villages came to Srinagar on 16 January, announcing their resignations through media outlets and begging the militants for a pardon. Manzoor Ahmad said that he was too afraid to return home. "My wife too has come with me. I apologise for contesting the elections and want the militants to pardon me,” he said. Around half the 364 panchayat members in Sopore's Zainageer belt have fled their homes, said Bashir Ahmad Malik, Valley secretary of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Conference, the apex body of rural body representatives. "They have gone to live with their relatives in other places or districts. The fear is spreading to other areas as well,” Malik said. "I have been receiving calls from our members from various parts of the Valley, saying that they are scared. Many of us are planning a rally in Srinagar to publicly announce our resignations," Asadullah, a sarpanch from Sopore, said that he too had gone into hiding. "All the promises the government had made for our safety have proved hollow,” he said. Chief Minister Omar chaired a high-level meeting to review law and order, especially the security of panchayat members.

JHARKHAND

CWC seeks key panchayat’s help to curb trafficking: The Child Welfare Committee (CWC) in the State has given suggestions, which will help curb child trafficking, to the Social Welfare Department and sought involvement of panchayat members in the process. According to Mahesh Madhwani, a CWC member, a toll-free number in the department is necessary so that a victim can get help immediately. “As the childline has got a toll free number 1098, similarly we want a number where children in need or any third person can call up for help. This will help the child get basic needs, including proper shelter,” he said. He added that involvement of panchayats will make the process effective in the rural areas. Rajasthan already has its Panchayat Vigilance Committee that identifies families of trafficked girls so that they can be rehabilitated. “In Jharkhand, it’s on paper but not implemented yet,” he said. CWC suggested that rescued girls could be inducted as home-guards.

KERALA

E-voting likely for 2015 panchayat polls: The State Election Commission is considering a proposal to provide e-voting facility to pravasi Malayalis in the local self-government elections in 2015, said State Election Commissioner K Sasidharan Nair. The State Election Commission authorities had a preliminary discussion with the agency that executed the first e-voting facility in the Gujarat local bodies elections."The Commission can implement it only after discussing with all political parties and technical experts from the field," Nair said. The State government has already decided to provide voting rights
Panchayats may have control over hoardings in their area

The Karnataka government has come out with draft model bye-laws to regulate erection and display of advertisement hoardings in gram panchayat limits with an aim to curb illegal display as well as generate revenue for rural local bodies.

The Karnataka Panchayat Raj (Gram Panchayat Control over Erection of Advertisements and Hoardings) (Model Bye-laws), 2012, make obtaining of licence mandatory for erection and display of advertisement hoardings in panchayat limits.

Though many panchayats had been collecting fee for allowing advertisement display, the process lacked stipulated framework and hence, the bye-laws, the government said.

These draft rules are framed under Section 316 read with Section 311 of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993. While Section 311 empowers the government to make rules, Section 316 authorises the government to make model regulations and bye-laws that are to be adopted by panchayats. The government can direct the panchayats to adopt these regulations and if they fail to adopt them, the government itself can enforce the regulations in such panchayat limits under Section 316.

Janardhana S. Maravanthe, member of Maravanthe Gram Panchayat in Udupi district said, "Panchayats had been collecting fee for display of advertisements through pravasis in the next local body elections. With e-voting, the pravasis can cast their votes from the cities or countries they work. But, the Commission has to ensure a free and transparent mode of voting through internet."

"To provide security cover for internet voting, the latest cryptographic technology has been used for e-voting," said Rajeev Sood, managing director of Scytl. The people can cast their votes through internet kiosks and smart phones. The system was successful in the local body elections in Gujarat and this technology has been used in 15 countries, he added. If it becomes a reality by 2015, Kerala would be the first State to have gone for full-swing e-voting. Gujarat had experimented with e-voting in the local body elections in 2010, but it was limited to select urban centres. Nair said that Municipalities Act and Panchayat Act had to be amended to include pravasis in the voters’ list for local body elections.

KARNATAKA

‘Drunken’ revenue department officers assault town panchayat member: G V Anand, president of the Gudibande Town Panchayat standing committee of Kolar district was allegedly attacked recently by Revenue Department officers, who were under the influence of alcohol. Gudibande police said that the taluk Revenue Department village accountants, revenue inspector and the BJP local leader were the attackers. On January 29, at around 10 pm, two lorries from a quarry owned by Anand were stopped by the Revenue Department staff. The driver was threatened and spoken indecently by the staff, who confiscated not only important transport documents, but also quarry permit.

Bogadi gram panchayat president caught on graft charges: The police on 30 January arrested Maniyamma, president of Bogadi gram panchayat, Mysore district on graft charges. Maniyamma slid Rs 5,000 cash beneath the pillow, when Lokayukta police, led by Dy SP Rashmi swooped on her house at Bogadi. Nagamma had bought a site in the dimension of 18ft x19 from Kummala in October 2012. She had applied for change of ownership in khata. Maniyamma had demanded Rs 1,000 towards the request and had also succeeded in getting it. Three months elapsed, but there were no signs of getting the khata done for Nagamma. When enquired, Maniyamma again demanded for Rs 5,000. Depressed, Nagamma finally lodged a complaint with Lokayukta superintendent of police S M Jagadish Prasad.

MADHYA PRADESH

Mega training for Panchayati Raj workers: Over 6000 panchayats representatives participated in the training to 3-tier Panchayat Raj office-bearer in Bhopal on 21 January. The office-bearers of zilla, janpad and gram panchayats interacted to know about better implementation of rural development works at the event to be organized under the auspices of Panchayats & Rural Development Department. Chairpersons of zilla and janpad panchayats, sarpanches and upsarpanches of 23,000 gram panchayats also attended the programme. An exhibition was installed at the venue where new technique for construction of gram panchayat buildings.
was displayed. Information about the Panchayat & Rural Development Department’s important schemes was given at the exhibition.

Gram panchayat to get national award for MGNREGS: Sakadehi village panchayat in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh has been selected for the National Award for outstanding work under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Village panchayat Sakadehi in Betul is one of the eleven such village panchayats in the country that have been selected for this award. It is noteworthy that the gram panchayat having a population of only 2,136 constructed 14 Kapildhara wells under MGNREGS, made available irrigation facility in 17 hectares and provided 860 saplings for plantation under Nandan Phalodyan to eight beneficiaries during year 2011-12. Besides, drinking water facility was provided to 25 families through Nirmal Neer drinking water well. The panchayat additionally developed two sports grounds in the village to provide playfield facility to children. Apart from this, a 20-member women’s self-help group has been associated with plantation activities to create livelihoods to them. Sarpanch Hemlata Wadiva is proud of her panchayat’s achievement. She said that the transport was smooth in the villages under Sakadehi panchayat by constructing CC roads in the villages under Panch Parmeshwar Yojana. Construction of two gravel roads by the panchayat under MGNREGS has provided better transport facility to people of three villages. The panchayat provided 17,131 mandays worth of employment to 304 families.

MANIPUR

Panchayat Sammelan calls for stronger systems: The Manipur State Panchayat Parishad (MSPP) and the Directorate of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Manipur jointly organized the 29th Manipur Panchayati Raj Sammelan at Manipur Panchayat Bhavan, Porompat on 30 January. Delivering the keynote address, Bhubol Singh General Secretary of MSPP said that the 29th Sammelan was organized to discuss issues faced by the elected representatives of the 4th panchayat elections and to set up a new and strong Panchayati Raj system so that the villages of the State can prosper.

MAHARASHTRA

Zilla parishad sends notices to 707 staffers: The Nasik zilla parishad has issued notices to 707 employees who have failed to provide caste validity certificates to the administration. If the employees fail to comply with the notices, they may be terminated, officials said. Over the years, 7,839 employees have either been recruited or given promotions on a caste basis. The 707 employees that have received the notices belong to various categories and are employed in different departments. Submission of validity certificates is a mandatory procedure. The highest numbers of erring employees are from the education department, which also has the maximum number of employees considering its nature of work. This is followed by the employees from health department.

ZP president proposes dress code for education officials: The teachers’ union wing of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) has opposed Sandhya Gotmare, zilla parishad president’s proposal to have a dress code for certain education officials. The non-teaching staff employed at the education office include cluster heads and extension officers, whose job is to monitor progress at schools in rural areas. Currently, there is no dress code for the staff members. Sharad Bhandarkar MNS State vice president, an education official, said, “there is absolutely no need to have a uniform. He emphasized that the implementation of an uniform will lead to corruption.

ODISHA

Maoists kill former panchayat member: Maoists gunned down Kamal Lochan Khara, former panchayat

Prevented from hoisting tricolour on Republic Day in Nanded

K amal Gendaji Nanure, 24-year-old dalit woman sarpanch of Yelur village in Kandhar taluka from Nanded district of Maharashtra has alleged that the leaders of Maratha community including the deputy sarpanch, shoved her aside and hoisted the tricolour on January 26, thus preventing her from hoisting the national flag Republic Day celebrations. On January 31, Nanure submitted a written complaint with District Collector Dhiraj Kumar and SP Vitthal Jadhav. However, she said that no action had been initiated till date. Of the nine panchayat members, eight are Marathas. Nanure, who belongs to Matang caste, is the sole member representing the backward communities. The post of sarpanch was reserved in the last elections. The Maharashtra government resolution passed in January 2003 says, “if a woman heads the gram panchayat, the flag should be hoisted by her. In case of her absence, another woman ranking next to the sarpanch should do it”. Nanure said that she had convened a meeting of panchayat members on January 21 where the gram sevak explained flag hoisting rules. The gram sevak said that as a sarpanch it was her right to hoist the flag. She said when she confronted the panchayat members later in the day, the deputy sarpanch told her that her job was limited to signing documents. Nanure said her mother had faced the same treatment when she had headed the panchayat for a term about 15 years ago. “They never allowed her to hoist the flag. She tolerated because she was illiterate. I am educated and I can’t tolerate such humiliation,” Nanure said. Her parents work as farm labourers. District Collector Dhiraj Kumar said that the police had started an inquiry. “....if there is any deliberate attempt on basis of caste, to not allow her the honor of flag hoisting, we will book the culprits under relevant sections of the SC/ ST (prevention of atrocities) Act,” he said.
PANCHAYAT RAJ UPDATE                                                                                                 FEBRUARY 2013

UTTAR PRADESH

‘Save Village’ movement started ahead of panchayat polls in May: Trade unions, social organizations and political parties have joined hands to start ‘Save Villages’ movement ahead of upcoming elections to village panchayats in May 2013 in Punjab. A clarion call was given to actively participate in upcoming panchayat elections. Activists of farmer union BKU Ekta, Panchayat union Punjab, Panchayati Raj JE association, Punjab sewa Dal, Bharti Gyan vigyan samiti, International democratic party (IDP), CPI(ML)Liberation, Aam Admi Party taking part in the joint convention at Sangur on 27 January decided to awaken the masses about the rights of panchayats and act against political parties trying to dilute these rights for vested interests.

PUNJAB

‘Save Village’ movement started ahead of panchayat polls in May: Trade unions, social organizations and political parties have joined hands to start ‘Save Villages’ movement ahead of upcoming elections to village panchayats in May 2013 in Punjab. A clarion call was given to actively participate in upcoming panchayat elections. Activists of farmer union BKU Ekta, Panchayat union Punjab, Panchayati Raj JE association, Punjab sewa Dal, Bharti Gyan vigyan samiti, International democratic party (IDP), CPI(ML)Liberation, Aam Admi Party taking part in the joint convention at Sangur on 27 January decided to awaken the masses about the rights of panchayats and act against political parties trying to dilute these rights for vested interests.

UTTAR PRADESH

Stop crimes against women, Akhilesh Yadav to write to panchayat heads: More than 1,300 of the 1,723 rape and attempt to rape cases registered in Uttar Pradesh in the last 10 months are from villages and small towns, these figures prompted worried Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav to write to all panchayat heads in the State. The letter, is likely to ask panchayat leaders not only to educate girls and women but also to tackle reckless young men, a senior official disclosed. With the global spotlight on the vulnerability of women in India, after 16 December Delhi gang-rape the Uttar Pradesh government is also examining its own record. Women’s helpline 1090 has reported a large number of complaints in just four months.

PANCHAYAT NADU

Panchayat president killed in country-bomb attack: K. Shankar, panchayat president of Sethupattu gram panchayat that comes under the Kundrathur panchayat union was killed in a country-bomb attack near Tambaram on 31 January. He was travelling with his younger brother K. Vasu in a hired car on Tambaram-Manimangalam-Sriperumbudur Road when the incident took place. According to police officers of Sriperumbudur sub-division, Kancheepuram district, the gang hurled four country-made bombs into the car. Shankar, Vasu and the car driver — whose identity could not be established — tried to abandon the car and flee. But the men attacked them with knives. The driver was spared. Shankar died on the spot.

Panchayat head arrested for helping water mafia: Harur Town Panchayat President K Cauvery was arrested on 7 January at water starved Harur in Dharmapuri district for hobnobbing with the local mafia which caused alarming depletion of ground water by running illegal packaged drinking water business. She helped reopen a water bottling plant sealed off by executive officer of the same panchayat following a High Court order. Cauvery was arrested and remanded in judicial custody along with P Rukmini, who ran the illegal water bottling plant flouting all laws on extracting ground water. The police action was recommended as it was violation of orders by the district collector and the High Court. It was a criminal act, said Harur Village administrative officer.
When Dalit Women Challenge the Power Structure

BHARAT DOGRA

In many villages, a particular kind of power-structure has been working and has been socially accepted for many years. This power-structure dictates from which communities the leadership will emerge, and which communities are expected to submit to their leadership. Sometimes the leadership remains confined to just one or two dominant families for years.

Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provided an opportunity to challenge this dominance of a few families in the villages. When reservation for dalits or the most oppressed sections is provided legally, then at least the election of a candidate to the main leadership post is ensured. However, doubts remain whether the dominant leadership will co-opt the new dalit leadership. On the other hand, exciting possibilities of an independent role by the new dalit leadership are also visible in many villages across the country.

The possibilities of significant changes become even more visible when the new emerging leadership among the dalits and most neglected or oppressed communities comes from women. Such new leadership at the panchayat level should get all encouragement.

Kamla Devi is one such dalit panchayat leader who has opened up new possibilities of social change in her panchayat by challenging the old power-structure. At present, she is the sarpanch of Tilonia panchayat (Ajmer district in Rajasthan). This panchayat had been dominated by a single family for over five decades. When this panchayat’s sarpanch post was reserved for dalit women in the elections held three years back, Kamla Devi perceived this as an opportunity to pursue long- overdue changes by standing for the post of sarpanch. This was not an easy decision for Kamla as the dominant segments had decided to retain an active involvement in elections despite the reservation for dalit women. Their thinking was that if the existing laws force us to accept a dalit woman sarpanch, they should still try to ensure that such a candidate gets elected who’ll work according to their dictates.

However, Kamla was not willing to play a submissive role. She wanted an independent role and she had already started on this journey by earlier getting elected as panchayat samiti member. She worked hard to fulfill her promise of starting a school in a hamlet. Kamla says, “two things are really important for her - work honestly and try her best to stand by the promises she made during her election campaign”. Her honesty and determination won her strong support particularly from women and youths. Despite her very low resource base, she could win the election for the post of sarpanch with an impressive margin of 1,070 votes. Despite several adverse circumstances, Kamla has been able to speed up the development work in the form of work on several link-roads and ponds. The panchayat office cum information centre has been well-constructed. Gram sabha meetings are held regularly here. The work relating to the protection of pasture land has been particularly useful. I noticed the free movement of several village women in and out of the panchayat office which indicates that the election of a woman as a sarpanch also facilitates the inter-action of rural women with the panchayat.

Kamla faced many problems while working according to her set agenda, for instance, removing encroachments with grit and determination. Despite a lot of opposition and even an attempt of attacking her, Kamla’s courage led to the successful removal of encroachments from a playground.

Similarly Naurati Bai, a dalit woman who is sarpanch of Harmara panchayat (Ajmer district) faced many problems when she was dealing with the similar issue-removing encroachments. But she could get success with a lot of courage.

Naurati had already earned a well-deserved reputation of a dedicated social worker while working with the Barefoot College and the women’s groups affiliated to it. She also learnt to work on a computer at the Barefoot College, a skill which also helped her a lot later during her tenure as a sarpanch.

Naurati could speed up development work in her area. For example, several link roads, tank and its face wall were constructed. She also worked for getting more pension and houses for the poor in her village.

MGNREGS or rural employment guarantee scheme progressed very well during her tenure. Last year, she undertook work worth nearly Rs. 80 lakh and Rs. 55 lakh were disbursed as daily wages. Panchayat office cum information centre has been constructed so carefully that without sacrificing quality, over one lakh rupees were saved.

When I was going towards Naurati’s very modestly constructed home, I came across a very palatial house, which is an indicator of the existence of the wealthy segment, side-by-side in this village. And it is good to know that today in the remote villages, such honest women leaders have been able to create a mark as grassroots leaders and they have been relentlessly trying to change the face of Indian villages.

Contd. from page - 1

National Seminar on Women Empowerment organized by the HIRD, Nilokheri on March 2-3, 2010:
1. Women panchayat leadership should be strengthened through capacity building.
2. There should be combined efforts on the part of civil society, government, training centres and research institutes for creating awareness in elected women panchayat leaders.
3. The education system should be geared to promote women education and for ensuring proper socialization for changing the mindset of the youth.
4. The role orientation of the panchayat representatives should be changed so that they could take up the task of women empowerment.
5. Strong political will is required for taming the khap panchayats. The HIRD should organize orientation workshops for the elected panchayat representatives so that they could challenge their authority.
6. The panchayats should be strengthened by giving them functions, functionaries and funds.

It may be concluded that women should be educationally, socially, economically and psychologically empowered. The conservative, neo-feudal and patriarchal culture too will have to change. This requires a massive campaign by all the stakeholders for the women empowerment. If the above steps are taken through the concerted efforts, the objective of inclusive governance can be achieved and the gender justice can be ensured. Let us be optimistic about it.

(The writer is former Dean, Department of Social Sciences and Academic Affairs, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra)
**NATIONAL SCENARIO**

**Involve Panchayati Raj institutions in food delivery**

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has written to chief secretaries of all States to ensure that the system of food delivery be firmed up by active involvement of Panchayati Raj institutions. "It is mandatory not just to have food as matter of right but also to ensure proper nutrition. Schemes are already available but we have to see and remove the discrepancies in existing schemes. Providing food should not only be based on quantity but on calories of energy," NHRC has recommended. "There is need to dovetail with employment generation schemes and other interventions to ensure sustainable livelihood", it added.

The Commission had constituted a core group on Right to Food, comprising experts from across the country. This happened after NHRC took cognizance of starvation deaths in Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput districts of Odisha as starvation constitutes a gross denial and violation of right to life. NHRC also had a day-long national conference on ‘Right to Food’ in New Delhi in January to analyse the right to food in terms of availability, accessibility, adequacy and sustainability.

### 30 lakh panchayat members to be roped in for road safety drive

Soon, elected panchayat representatives would be roped in to spread awareness about safe driving and road safety issues. Road Transport and Highways Ministry has zeroed in on them since 63 per cent of total accidents across the country occur in rural areas. The status report on road accidents prepared by the ministry in 2011 shows that rural areas reported 2.66 lakh accidents in comparison to 2.31 in urban areas. Roads in rural areas accounted for 63.4 per cent fatalities, while corresponding figure in urban areas stood at 36.6 per cent.

The administration has prepared a separate list of Gram Sabha members holding the post for not complying with the rules, in order to ensure sustainable livelihood. "There are 188 such members and this is a separate list which has been prepared for not complying with the rules," added the official. In the district, of the 73 members whose names have been forwarded, maximum of them are from Khed taluka, followed by Daund and Haveli.

"In a review from 2008-12, we have two members from 2008, three from 2009, four from 2010, 48 from 2011 and 16 this year," said officials. Development officers prepared the list after assessing each case and after conducting inquiry for each case. Action is taken after complaints are registered with the office by development officers.

"There were several cases which were being heard. The final list has been forwarded and after a hearing the district collector and divisional commissioner will decide about the fate of the Gram Sabha members and sarpanches," said the official.

### 73 Gram Sabha members face suspension

As many as 73 Gram Sabha members from various villages in Pune district of Maharashtra face suspension for non-performance in several areas, as per a report card prepared by the Pune Zilla Parishad. The report for the year along with a list of pending complaints from 2008 was forwarded to the collectorate recently. The members have been listed for violating the rules regarding encroachments, misuse of position, misappropriation of funds, having three children and not constructing toilet blocks in their homes. A list submitted to the collectorate has recommended that at least 40 per cent of those mentioned be definitely suspended. "The action is to be taken by the district collector and Divisional Commissioner under the Bombay Gram Panchayat Act. We have just forwarded this year’s list and of the total 117 complaints under review, 73 names have been forwarded for action," said senior ZP officials.

After elections, members have been found to have violated norms especially about encroachments on government land and have also been found involved in fund mis-appropriation. Some have even contested election despite having three children.

The administration has prepared a separate list of Gram Sabha members holding the post who did not get mandatory toilet blocks constructed. "There are 188 such members and this is a separate list which has been forwarded for not complying with the rules," added the official. In the district, of the 73 members whose names have been forwarded, maximum of them are from Khed taluka, followed by Daund and Haveli.

"In a review from 2008-12, we have two members from 2008, three from 2009, four from 2010, 48 from 2011 and 16 this year," said officials. Development officers prepared the list after assessing each case and after conducting inquiry for each case. Action is taken after complaints are registered with the office by development officers.

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**Select Reading**


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