

## An open letter to the Goa Chief Minister

### **Conspiracy to curtail powers of panchayats**

The Goa Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2009 is being re-introduced with modifications in the earlier Bill. A Draft Model Panchayat Act (DMPA) was circulated to all the States by the Union Ministry of panchayati Raj in the month of April 2009 requesting for suggestions/ comments within three weeks. Given this situation, would it not be fair for the Government of Goa to wait for the final version of the Act and then carry out necessary amendments to further improve upon the existing Goa Panchayati Raj Act, 1994? The persistence of the Goa Government in re-introducing the controversial Goa Panchayati raj (Amendment) Bill, 2009 with insignificant cosmetic changes is no consolation to the people of Goa.

The crux of the issue is the overriding powers that are increasingly being vested in the hands of government officers and semi-government corporations over a constitutionally elected village panchayat which is recognised as an institution of self government by the constitution of India. The government of Goa must have the courage to publicly admit that all it desires is that the panchayat raj institutions are disempowered to the extent of remaining as mere sales agents for government schemes and programmes, and scavengers to remove garbage in the village. 'Self-governance' is taboo for the state government. If not, it would have discovered alternate democratic ways of ensuring that justice is done to persons aggrieved by the arrogance or negligence of the village panchayat.

It appears that the government is not interested in dispensing justice but creating short cuts to arm twist the village panchayats into succumbing to political manoeuvrings and pressures. The government seems to be determined to create turbulence in the functioning of the local bodies so that accountability in governance may not be fixed on specific individuals in office. This and other undemocratic actions of the present government will only contribute to the growing list of events in Goa's saddest political history. Why is the government attempting to vest powers in bureaucrats to execute the functions of the village panchayats?

The Goa Government must encourage public debate on the Goa Panchayati Raj Act before any further amendments are incorporated.

Any move by the state government to finalise the Regional Plan and enact laws without acknowledging the due constitutional rights of the panchayats would be unfair. Village panchayats must wake up and assert their rights against any policies of the government that infringe upon the rights of the local self-government.

We, hereby appeal to the government that this Goa Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2009 be withdrawn in the interest of strengthening self-governance in this state. We also hope you will understand the pain and anguish of the Goan people arising due to the grievous side-effects of faulty and lop-sided policies of the state government."

— Soter D' Souza, Director, Centre for Panchayati Raj  
— Peaceful Society, Goa