

First litigation-controlled panchayat

After its pioneering efforts in universal literacy, Kerala has scored another first with Cheriyanaad gram panchayat in Alappuzha district being declared the country's maiden litigation-controlled and legal-literate panchayat. Starting on a modest note in 1988, the campaign for the case-free panchayat has seen about 1,500 disputes settled since then, which included 676 cases disposed of through conciliation by the specially set up panchayat court. The local government has received the support of the judges of the Kerala High Court, the state Legal Services Society and several serving and retired legal luminaries in the quest for making the village virtually litigation-free. "The cases settled included both civil and criminal. Many of them we could settle within the panchayat itself, where a specially designated sub-committee heard both sides and brought about conciliations. In the end, those who came as foes would disperse shaking hands over a cup of tea," Cheriyanaad panchayat president V. K. Vasudevan observed.

A predominantly agrarian panchayat of about 7,000 families, the process has been generally welcomed by the people though many of them had initial doubts about its success. "Now, they know that they had been able to save money and time which would have wasted on court cases if they went for litigation over petty disputes," a panchayat official remarked.