

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Toward 'local self-government'

Rajiv Gandhi's decision to grant 'panchayati raj,' or local self-government, has far-reaching implications for India.

At a conference of state chief ministers in the capital May 5, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi spelled out the government's resolve to move decisively to resurrect the mostly moribund institutions of local government throughout the country, the village *panchayati raj* institutions, or governing councils made up of five elected officials. A kind of village communal system that has existed for centuries in the subcontinent, *panchayati raj* was embraced by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle as the appropriate vehicle for self-government in independent India. But, placed under the states' jurisdiction, they were gradually eclipsed. Now, a constitutional amendment to strengthen the *panchayati* system will be introduced in the current session of Parliament for debate and discussion prior to passage in the late summer monsoon session, Mr. Gandhi announced.

Though it shouldn't have been a surprise—at the PM's insistence "decentralization" has been a major concern in the Eighth Plan formulation, and he himself has been discussing it in "grassroots" forums; opposition chief ministers, and the opposition generally, were apparently taken aback by the government's resolve to move swiftly.

Without doubt, the move—which will end the states' control over the *panchayati* institutions and establish a direct link, financial and otherwise, between the local governing bodies and New Delhi—will have a potentially enormous electoral impact. Indeed,

taken together with the May 1 launching of a massive \$1.4 billion rural employment scheme in honor of Jawaharlal Nehru to provide a job to at least one person in each of the 44 million families estimated to be living below the poverty line, the *panchayati* initiative can be fairly said to have pretty much sewn up the coming general election for the ruling party.

Ironically, it has only been in the opposition-ruled states of West Bengal and Karnataka that the *panchayati* institutions have retained their clout. Opposition politicians fear that the ruling party seeks to use the *panchayati* system against those state governments and as a voteback machine for itself, but the more interesting effects may well be in shaking up the baronies in states ruled by the Congress-I party, where the *panchayati* have been squashed.

Though the proposed constitutional amendment has not yet been made public, it reportedly contains four provisions. First, the *panchayati raj* institutions would be moved from the state list to the "concurrent list," implying both state and central jurisdiction over their functioning. Second, funding would be transferred from the states to the national Finance Commission (which determines central allocations to the states) for issue of statutory awards. Third, regular *panchayati* elections will be mandated under the direction of the National Election Commission instead of the states. And fourth, a uniform policy of reservation of seats on the *panchayati*

ati for women and members of scheduled castes at all levels and all over the country.

And as Rajiv Gandhi has himself emphasized repeatedly, the fact that no more than one out of every ten rupees for poverty alleviation reaches the hands of the poor is a thorough indictment of the present state of affairs.

Though *panchayatis* had been introduced in some states prior to 1940, it wasn't until the Community Development Program in 1952, that the concept was seriously taken up as a vehicle for development work as well as self-government. But, despite the launching of a "new era" for the *panchayati raj* institutions by Prime Minister Nehru in 1959, and again in 1977-79, when it became the subject of a central government study and new recommendations for its revival were issued, little or nothing ensued.

A committee under economist G.V.K. Rao, appointed in 1985, has recommended that a three-tiered *panchayati raj* system (at village, block, and district levels) be revived nationally, with regular elections, and that the district (with a population of 100,000) be the basic unit for policy planning and implementation. In 1986, another committee made further recommendations. Two more working groups have studied the matter, in addition to the administration's grassroots workshops with both administrators and with current *panchayati* office-holders over the past several years.

Presently the *panchayati raj* institutions vary greatly from state to state, though they do exist in some form almost everywhere. In most instances, the village *panchayatis* have some nominal power to tax. But in many areas they were long since taken over by local landlords or other powerful interests and ceased to represent the whole population's interests.