

Minimum Cost for Basic Security

As per the vision of the *Panchayati Raj*, basic governance with community participation should start from a village. Currently, there are about 3 million elected *panches* across rural areas. With a view to ensure real and meaningful local governance at village/ward level in India, it is proposed that there should be one male and one female *panch*, each, with minimum High School qualification for every 250 people of India, in rural as well as in urban areas. And the maximum age

of male *panches* should be fixed as 30 years and that of the female *panches* should be fixed as 45 years. Thus, there would be 8.8 million *panches* (4.4 million male *panches* and 4.4 million female *panches*) for 1.1 billion people. These *panches* should be elected at local level (village level/municipal ward level) for rural and urban localities, whereas in posh colonies, these could be nominated by concerned residents' welfare associations, if willing candidates for election of *panches* are not available among the local residents. These *panches* should be elected or nominated for every three years and should be eligible for re-election or re-nomination only once more, thus their maximum tenure as a *panch* should be capped by six years. They may be paid @Rs.3000/- per month. Therefore, the total cost per annum for paying 8.8 million *panches* would be around Rs.316.8 billion per annum. Conditions of minimum qualification and maximum age limit will also help in creating vast employment opportunities for unemployed educated youth of the country, who in the transition period of their career, can earn sustainable allowance as well as render useful help in developing their localities and, in the process, building up the whole nation, with their vast reservoir of unbounded energy and untainted enthusiasm.

The limit of the two terms for the post of *panches* will ensure that more and more youth will be aware about the policies of the Government, and this enhanced awareness will awaken their minds, thereby rendering them more conscious about the rights and responsibilities of the citizens. When this feeling percolates among more and more people, it will instil the feeling of empowerment among masses. The main idea of proposing higher age limit for the female *panches* is to enable them to take up the responsibility of the duties of the *panches*, when they are free from their even bigger responsibilities of

successfully rearing their children which even their male counter-parts cannot carry out with as much success as they can accomplish. It will also keep the arena open for women for participation in governance of their localities, for a longer duration. Also, the females grow in stature in their families as well as in their communities with age; it is more applicable in rural areas. Further, with advancing age, females become bolder and better equipped to deal with the vagaries of the society, and thus can play more effective role in the development of their communities with minimum personal inconvenience. In this manner, the job of a *panch* can be performed by the females without venturing far away from the place of their residences. It will also enable them to earn; help the needy in their localities; help in expediting development of their area as well stay close to their families, all of which can be accomplished simultaneously.

Besides the aforesaid *panches*, let there be *head-panches*, too, at village/ward level, say one *head-panch* for every 500 people for rural as well as urban areas. There should be no minimum educational qualification or maximum age limit, for these *head-panches* as sometimes people are useful to their community even without formal education, by their sheer experience and also command respect in their locality. Let one term of these *head-panches* be for six years and they be eligible for re-election or re-nomination only once more beyond which they should not be allowed to hold the office of a *head-panch*. These *head-panches* should also be elected at local level (village level/municipal ward level) for rural and urban localities, whereas in posh colonies, these could also be nominated by concerned residents' welfare associations, if willing candidates for election of *head-panches* are not available among the local residents. These *head-panches* may also be paid @Rs.3000/- per

month. Therefore, the total cost per annum for paying 2.2 million *head-panches* would be around Rs.79.2 billion per annum.

Elected or nominated *panches* and *head-panches* will be accountable as well as instrumental in extending help in governance of the people in many ways, some of which are listed below:

- (i) Looking after the general security of the people of their territory, besides keeping an eye on the law and order situation in their territory.
- (ii) Reporting births and deaths in their territories.
- (iii) Keeping real-time census of the people living in their areas.
- (iv) Guiding people regarding various government schemes related to social welfare, education, health, employment, etc.
- (v) Assisting government/private bodies in the recovery of electricity, water, and other dues.
- (vi) Communicating with the civil and the police administration regarding problems of the people of their areas.
- (vii) Reporting to the Government regarding lacunae in delivery of commodities meant for the people of their areas, under the aegis of proposed comprehensive social security package.
- (viii) Reporting to the Government regarding lacunae observed in satisfactory operation of schools and primary health centres in their localities.

- (ix) Reporting to the Government regarding lacunae observed in satisfactory operation of various social welfare works taking place in their localities.

Head-panches should also be entrusted with the task of monitoring and coordinating functioning of the elected or nominated *panches* and reporting to the Government regarding any malfunctioning observed in their working. In case of malfunctioning noticed in the working of the *panches* and non-reporting the same to the Government in time, the *head-panches* should be held responsible.

However, I would like to add that the election or nomination of *panches* and *head-panches* should be held at local level without allowing them to fight election or seek nomination under the banner of any political party. A political party may have its own ideology for governance, but the question of providing food, shelter, education, healthcare, etc., to all the people, is beyond any kind of debate or ideology. And these *panches* and *head-panches* would be instrumental in monitoring that the benefits of the comprehensive social security package reach all the people of the country adequately, irrespective of their political ideology.

Further, it is contended that the payment of remuneration to *panches* and *head-panches* is necessary because only then they would feel morally obliged to devote their time to the cause of local governance without looking for ways to make a cut from the government-aids which are sanctioned for the development of their areas. Otherwise, in the absence of reasonable remuneration, many would justify to themselves as well as to the local populace that the cut from the development-aid is justified as it can be considered as a mere compensation for them for their services to the community.

If we add up the total expenditure of the GOI on payment of salaries to 8.8 million *panches* and 2.2 *head-panches*, we arrive at a figure of Rs.396 billion per annum. However, as per some estimates power thefts in our country are huge and of the order of about 27 percent or even more, which if translated in revenue terms, add up to Rs.810 billion (considering cost of electricity @ Rs.4/- per unit and total generated electricity as 750 billion units in 2008-09). I suppose losses due to power thefts can be reduced substantially with the help of these *panches* and *head-panches*, if they are entrusted with this responsibility, and if we are able to reduce power thefts even by 50 percent, we can save up to Rs.405 billion annually, which is more than the projected expenses on appointment of 8.8 million *panches* and 2.2 million *head-panches*. Feasibility of savings on account of curbing power thefts are discussed in detail, later in this book, in the section “*Savings from Reforming Electricity Sector*”.

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