

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Self-government reform moves ahead

The Constitutional Amendment Bill took still more wind out of Opposition sails.

On May 15, the last day of the Parliament's budget session, the government introduced the Constitutional Amendment Bill on *panchayati raj*, or local self-government. Whatever little steam the opposition has begun to build up over the anticipated elimination of state government prerogatives over local government institutions—an anticipation this correspondent regrets having fallen prey to as well—the tabling of the actual bill has already undercut it.

The proposed constitutional amendment, which will be brought to a vote in July, does not undermine the powers of states vis-à-vis the local institutions. Rumors that the *panchayati* would be shifted from state jurisdiction to the "concurrent list" under joint state-central aegis proved utterly unfounded. Even the idea of giving state governors, who are appointed by the center, the power to dissolve the *panchayati* under certain circumstances, a measure that was apparently entertained seriously by some sections of the ruling party, was ultimately scrapped.

What the bill does do is to make it a constitutional obligation for all states to establish a three-tier system of *panchayati*—at the village, intermediate, and district levels. (There are some 600,000 villages, 5,000 blocks, and 100 districts in the country.)

The bill mandates that all seats be filled by direct election under the direction of the Election Commission, with reservations to guarantee due representation of women and members of the lower castes and tribes, for

a fixed five-year term.

The bill further mandates the state legislatures to devolve powers and responsibilities for preparation of economic plans and implementation of development schemes to the *panchayati*. Finally, the states are mandated to provide for sound financing of the local bodies by authorizing them to collect certain kinds of taxes and by providing grants or other state funds.

Panchayati accounts are to be reviewed by a state Finance Commission, to be headed by the governor, but constituted by the state legislature every five years, and audited by the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, as he sees fit.

In presenting the bill to Parliament, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi emphasized that though the Indian Constitution mandated it, full representation of the people had not been achieved. Taking both houses of Parliament and all state legislatures together, Gandhi reminded, there are only 5-6,000 individuals representing a population of nearly 800 million!

"Once we accord to democracy in the *panchayats* the same sanctity now enjoyed by Parliament and the state legislatures, we will be opening the doors to the participation in democratic institutions of something like 700,000 elected representatives," Gandhi said.

Preliminary surveys by several of the country's English-language dailies found general approval among rural Indians for the ruling party's *panchayati raj* campaign, though the enthusiasm is often laced with skepti-

cism about whether the good idea will actually get translated into reality. "Mr. Rajiv Gandhi may send an elephant for us, but we will get only its tail," is the way one Harijan village leader put it. Or, as a bank employee in a Rajasthan village said, "It is a very good bill, but nothing may come out of it."

"I read newspapers regularly," an Uttar Pradesh farmer told the *Times of India*, and from what I understand from them, this is the first sensible step which Mr. Rajiv Gandhi has taken." Indeed, there is universal agreement that from a political standpoint the move was brilliant, bringing back into focus the prime minister of December 1985, who vowed at his party's centenary celebrations that year to challenge the stranglehold of the "power brokers" and feudal barons on India's political system—inside the Congress (I) and out.

What effect it will have on the year-end elections, where more than 450 of the 542 seats up for a vote are rural, remains to be seen. In the meantime, one thing is certain: The opposition has been left high and dry. Their own leading lights advocated exactly this move in 1978, and the "states' rights" complaint which has vanished in thin air would in any case have had little sympathy among the villagers. They are least concerned about the subtleties of the "spirit of federalism" when they have no decent roads, no clean drinking water, no schools or medical facilities within miles.

Most all the villagers from several parts of the country who were interviewed by the media—including those who identified themselves as members of opposition parties—were unanimous in welcoming the initiative, precisely because it would mean more funds for building schools and other development projects in the villages.