

# Campaign by NGOs seeking more power for municipal governance

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## Need for ombudsman to redress grievances against municipal officers mooted

A Correspondent

**MUMBAI:** Over 30 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) launched a campaign here on Wednesday under the banner of 'Vote Mumbai: Time to Set it Right.'

It was aimed to increase the powers and accountability of municipal governance.

Lok Satta, a national organisation committed to reforming governance in India, is spearheading the 'Vote Mumbai' campaign.

Among their several demands, the participants called for a directly-elected mayor who would serve as the chief

executive officer, a central planning agency for the metropolitan and an ombudsman to redress grievances lodged against municipal authorities.

With all authority of bodies like the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority and the Airports Authority of India being vested in State and Central agencies, they are not accountable to the Municipal Corporation, said Anant Shende, co-ordinator of the Maharashtra chapter of Lok Satta.

A brochure circulated during the campaign claimed that as Municipal Commissioners were appointed by the State,

the Mayor was only a figurehead.

"We're all sitting on a time bomb. By 2020, Mumbai is expected to have a population of 2.4 crore," Mr. Shende warned.

"If the system of governance was not changed, the July deluge would pale in comparison to the problems Mumbai will face".

The group would convey their ideas on Mumbai's governance to legislators by October, so that it could be taken up for discussion during the November-December Assembly session, Mr. Shende added.

Municipal elections are due in Mumbai in 2007.

"This [movement] is about Mumbaiers reclaiming their sovereignty and republic," Jayaprakash Narayan, national co-ordinator of Lok Satta said. "Successful reform in Mumbai could lead the entire country into an era of good governance."

The 'Vote Mumbai' campaign also suggested forming a ward committee, headed by a corporator, at the level of each municipal ward.

The committee should have the power to collect taxes and disburse funds. It also called for a 'citizens' charter.' Visit the group's website at [www.votemumbai.org](http://www.votemumbai.org).

# An NGO at the service of rural poor

Tirupati-based samiti is implementing government schemes

B. Sivakumar

**CHENNAI:** The Rashtriya Seva Samiti (RASS), a non-governmental organisation headquartered at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, has been in the forefront of implementing schemes of the Central and State Governments for women and children.

Started in 1981 as the Rayalaseema Seva Samiti to cater for the needs of the drought-prone region, its name was changed 10 years ago after the NGO's activities expanded to other States.

According to G. Munitratnam, general secretary, RASS is managing crèches for children of women farm workers in villages not covered by anganwadis at and around Tirupati. Thirty children up to the age of six are taken care of by a teacher and an assistant, given supplementary nutrition and educational tools, and kept in a clean environment free of cost. The scheme is funded by the Union Human Resource Development Ministry.

Under the Child Sponsorship Programme, children are provided with clothing and education material up to a particular age. Funded by the Government and international agencies, the poorest of the poor children from villages are given aid for education up to matriculation. Special grants are given by international agencies on the birthdays of the children and on festival days.

More than 6,000 children have benefited by the programme started in 1999.

At Tirupati, RASS has formed women's self-help groups in



**CARING HANDS:** A crèche managed by RASS at Tirupati.

more than 200 villages. The members are given financial assistance to set up businesses of their choice. They are asked to save Re. 1 every day and aid is given to them. Petty shops, leaf plate making units, and other small units have come up in these villages. Mr. Munitratnam claims that nearly Rs. 12 crore has been given as loans to the members and repayment is prompt.

The products of the SHGs are marketed by the producers with RASS guidance.

Mr. Munitratnam says gam-

etry. Nearly 500 children have benefited from these two schools.

Youth interested in agriculture are trained in the use of modern implements and practices under the Acharya Ranga Krishi Vigyan Kendra.

Nearly 1,000 youths have benefited under the programme, for which a nominal fee of Rs. 50 is charged.

RASS has started implementing a programme, 'Sahaya Gram,' for the physically handicapped.

It has promoted a concept of model village on 20 acres to help

• Creches for farm workers' children at Tirupati

• SHGs formed in 200 villages

• Increased awareness leads to lower school dropout

all sections of the handicapped.

The scheme provides health services on wheels to the community and creates awareness of the importance of education. It lays stress on immunisation and child care and corrective surgery, and gives mobility aids. At a computer training centre set up at Tirupati, youth are trained for six months in various programmes free of cost.

## Work in naxal areas too

Mr. Munitratnam says the organisation has set up women's SHGs even in naxal-prone areas in Orissa.

The organisation's finances are audited and test audits by the Comptroller and Auditor-General are also conducted.

Among the honours conferred on the organisation are the FICCI award for outstanding work in rural development (1997), The Government of India National Award for good work in the field of disabled welfare (1994), the Jannalal Bajaj Endowment Award for service to disadvantaged groups and the rural poor (1989), the Rotary India Award for improving rural employment (2004).

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