

Treat panchayats as first tier of democracy: Jairam

Special Correspondent

GUWAHATI: Union Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh on Sunday called for considering elected representatives of panchayats as the "first tier of democracy" and not as the "third tier of development."

Speaking at the 'Gramonayan Sammelan' here, Mr. Ramesh said that if the State governments were really interested to see the villages progress, then they should be ready to decentralise power and give it to the panchayats. He said that for the financial year 2012-13, his priority would be on providing safe drinking water and ensuring sanitation in rural areas. He pointed out that out of six lakh villages in the entire country, only 25,000 are Nirmal Gram villages. He threw a challenge to Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, who shared the dais, to turn all the 2,489 Gram Panchayats into Nirmal Gram Panchayats over the next five years. Assam has 25,590 villages. Mr. Ramesh assured Mr. Gogoi that there would be no dearth of funds and that he had requested Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to provide more funds for rural drinking water and rural sanitation schemes.

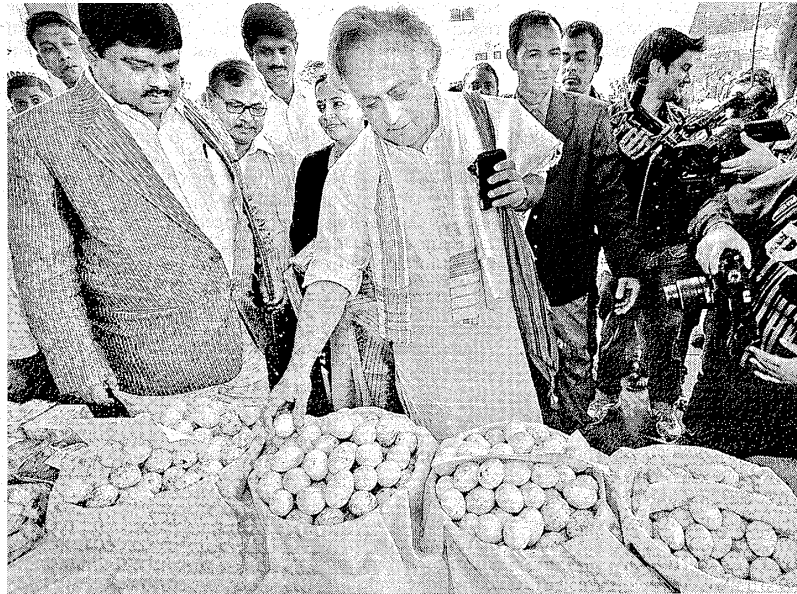
Fight corruption

The Union Minister urged elected panchayat representatives in Assam to fight against corruption in implementation of the schemes and press for social audit to ensure that funds meant for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and other rural development schemes were not misappropriated for purchase of Boleiros and Pajeros.

Mr. Ramesh, however, lauded the Tarun Gogoi government for construction of 11,000-km length of rural roads over the past 10 years. This, he said, was a considerable achievement as Assam gets a working season of only five months and the monsoon rains hamper works during the remaining months.

Rural development

Mr. Gogoi said his government had been laying stress on development of rural areas as without the progress of villages, neither Assam nor the country could progress. Development of Guwahati or various towns could not be the



RURAL ROAD MAP: Union Minister for Rural Development Jairam Ramesh and Assam Panchayat and Rural Development Minister Rockybul Hussain (left) have a look at eggs at an exhibition in Guwahati on Sunday.

— PHOTO: RITU RAJ KONWAR

measure of the State's progress, he said.

Panchayat and Rural Devel-

opment Minister Rockybul Hussain announced that the State would observe "Pan-

chayat Day" every year to highlight progress in rural areas.