UNIT - III









Local Government and Administration



Chapter 4

Panchayati Raj

What happens after people elect their representatives? How are decisions made? Let's look at how this takes place in rural areas. Here, we look at the Gram Sabha, which is a meeting where people directly participate and seek answers from their elected representatives.



It's a special day today! Everyone's rushing to get to the Gram Sabha! Do you know why? Because the Gram Sabha is holding its first meeting after the election of the new Gram Panchayat.

The Gram Sabha is a meeting of all adults who live in the area covered by a Panchayat. This could be only one village or a few villages. In some states, as in the example above, a village meeting is held for each village. Anyone who is 18 years old or more and who has the right to vote is a member of the Gram Sabha.

The people of Hardas village are keen to find out what their new Panchayat leaders have planned for the village.

Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha meeting begins with the Panchayat President (who is also called the Sarpanch) and the members of the Panchayat (the Panchs) presenting a plan on repairing the road that connects the village to the main highway. After this, the discussion moves to the subject of water and water shortages.

Every village Panchayat is divided into wards, i.e. smaller areas. Each ward elects a representative who is known as the Ward Member (Panch). All the members of the Gram Sabha also elect a Sarpanch who is the Panchayat President. The Ward Panchs and the Sarpanch form the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat is elected for five years.

The Gram Panchayat has a Secretary who is also the Secretary of the Gram Sabha. This person is not an elected person but is appointed by the government. The Secretary is responsible for calling the meeting of the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat and keeping a record of the proceedings.

A villager called Tijia begins the meeting by saying, "The water problem in Hardas has become very acute. The hand pump water has gone well below the point up to which the ground has been drilled. We hardly get any water in the taps. Women have to go to the Suru river which is 3 k.m. away to get water." One of the members suggests piping water from the Suru and making an overhead tank in the village to increase the supply. But the others think that this will be expensive. It's better, they feel, to deepen the handpumps and clean the wells for this season. Tijia says, "This is not enough. We need to do something more permanent as groundwater levels seem to be going down every year. We're using more water than is seeping into the ground."

Another member, Anwar then tells everyone that he has seen ways of conserving water and recharging (refilling) it in a village in Maharashtra where he'd once gone to visit his brother. It was called watershed development and he had heard that the government gave money for this work.

In his brother's village people had planted trees, constructed check-dams and tanks. Everyone thought this was an interesting idea and the Gram Panchayat was asked to find out about it in detail.

1. What is a Gram Sabha?
2. In the meeting of the Gram Sabha so far what are the problems that are being discussed? What sort of solutions are being suggested?

The next item on the agenda for the Gram Sabha is the finalisation of the list of people below the poverty line (BPL) which had to be approved by the Gram Sabha. As soon as the list is read out people begin to whisper. "Natwar has just bought a colour T.V. and his son has sent him a new motorcycle. How can he be below the poverty line?" Soorajmal mutters to the person sitting next to him. Saroj says to Sukhi bai "How did Birju's name get on to the list? He has so much land. This list should have



The Gram Sabha is a key factor in making the Gram Panchayat play its role and be responsible. It is the place where all plans for the work of the Gram Panchayat are placed before the people.
The Gram Sabha prevents the Panchayat from doing wrong things like misusing money or favouring certain people. It plays an important role in keeping an eye on the elected representatives and in making them responsible to the persons who elected them.

only poor people. And Om Prakash is a landless labourer who can barely make ends meet, yet his name is not on the list." "You know that both Natwar and Birju are friends of Amirchand. Who can counter Amirchand's power?" Sukhi bai says, "Amirchand was the earlier Zamindar (landowner) of the village and still has control over a lot of land. But we should get Om Prakash's name put in."

The Sarpanch (Panchayat President) notices people whispering and asks if anyone has anything to say. Saroj tries to provoke Soorajmal to ask about Natwar and Birju. But he keeps quiet. Amirchand is sitting in the Gram Sabha keeping an eye on everyone. Then Saroj gets up and says that Om Prakash's name should be in the BPL list. Others agree that he and his family are very poor. The Sarpanch asks how his name had been missed out. The person who did the survey of BPL families says, "Om Prakash's house was locked when I went there. He may have gone somewhere to look for work." The Sarpanch gives instructions that Om Prakash's family income be looked at and if it is less than what has been decided by the government, his name should be included in the list.

1. Was there a problem with the BPL list that the Gram Sabha was finalising? What was this problem?
2. Why do you think Soorajmal kept quiet even though Saroj asked him to speak?
3. Have you seen any similar incidents when people are unable to speak for themselves? Why do you think that happened and what prevented the person from speaking?
4. How can the Gram Sabha prevent the Panchayat from doing what it likes?

The Gram Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat meets regularly and one of its main tasks is to implement development programmes for all villages that come under it. As you have seen, the work of the Gram Panchayat has to be approved by the Gram Sabha.

In some states, Gram Sabhas form committees like construction and development committees. These committees include some members of the Gram Sabha and some from the Gram Panchayat who work together to carry out specific tasks.



Two village Panchs from Maharashtra who were awarded the Nirmal Gram Puruskar in 2005 for the excellent work done by them in the Panchayat.

The work of a Gram Panchayat includes

1. The construction and maintenance of water sources, roads, drainage, school buildings and other common property resources.
2. Levying and collecting local taxes.
3. Executing government schemes related to generating employment in the village.

Sources of funds for the Panchayat

- Collection of taxes on houses, market places etc.
- Government scheme funds received through various departments of the government – through the Janpad and Zila Panchayats.
- Donations for community works etc.

Let's see what the Hardas Gram Panchayat was able to do.

Do you remember the options that were suggested to solve the water problem in the Gram Sabha of Hardas village? When the Hardas Gram Panchayat held a meeting, this point was brought up again by some of the members (Panchs). This meeting was attended by the Sarpanch, Ward Members (Panchs) and the Secretary.

Gram Panchayat members first discussed the suggestion to deepen two handpumps and clean one well, so that the village would not go without water. The Sarpanch (Panchayat President) suggested that since the Panchayat had received some money for maintenance of handpumps, this could be used



Watershed management has transformed this barren slope to a green meadow in just two years.



for completing this work. The members agreed and the Secretary recorded their decision.

The members then went on to discuss the options for a long-term solution. They were sure that the Gram Sabha members would ask questions at the next meeting. Some Panchs asked whether the watershed programme would make a substantial difference to the water level. A lot of discussion followed. In the end it was decided that the Gram Panchayat would approach the Block Development Officer and get more information on the scheme.

What decisions were taken by the Gram panchayat?

Do you think it was necessary for them to take these decisions? Why?

From the above description, write down one question that people could ask of the Panchayat in the next Gram Sabha meeting.

Three Levels of Panchayats

After reading about what happened in the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat in Hardas village you can understand that the Panchayati Raj System is a process through which people participate in their own government. In rural areas, the Gram Panchayat is the first tier or level of democratic government. The Panchs and the Gram Panchayat are answerable to the Gram Sabha because it is the members of the Gram Sabha who elected them.

This idea of people's participation in the Panchayati Raj system extends to two other levels. One is the Block level, which is called the Janpad Panchayat or the Panchayat Samiti. The Panchayat Samiti has many Gram Panchayats under it. Above the Panchayat Samiti is the District Panchayat or the Zila Parishad. The Zila Parishad

actually makes developmental plans at the district level. With the help of Panchayat Samitis, it also regulates the money distribution among all the Gram Panchayats.

Within the guidelines given in the Constitution each state in the country has its own laws with regard to Panchayats. The idea is to provide more and more space for people to participate and raise their voices.

Ask your teacher to invite any of the elected persons such as the Panch, Sarpanch (Panchayat President) or member of the Janpad or Zila Panchayat and interview them on their work and the projects undertaken by them.

QUESTIONS

1. What problem did the villagers in Hardas village face? What did they do to solve this problem?

2. What, in your opinion, is the importance of the Gram Sabha? Do you think all members should attend Gram Sabha meetings? Why?

3. What is the link between a Gram Sabha and a Gram Panchayat?

4. Take an example of any one task done by a Panchayat in your area/ nearby rural area and find out the following:
   a. Why it was taken up.
   b. Where the money came from.
   c. Whether or not the work has been completed.

5. What is the difference between a Gram Sabha and a Gram Panchayat?

6. Read the following news item.
   Nimone is a village on the Chauphula-Shirur Road. Like many others, this village has also been facing a severe water shortage for the last few months and villagers depend on tankers for all their needs. Bhagvan Mahadeo Lad (35) of this village was beaten with sticks, iron rods and axes by a group of seven men. The incident came to light when some villagers brought a badly injured Lad to hospital for treatment. In the FIR recorded by the police Lad said that he was attacked when he insisted that the water in the tanker must be emptied into the storage tanks constructed as part of the water supply scheme by Nimone Gram Panchayat so that there would be equal distribution of water. However, he alleged that the upper caste men were against this and told him that the tanker water was not meant for the lower castes.
   Adapted from *Indian Express, May 1, 2004*
   a. Why was Bhagvan beaten?
   b. Do you think that the above is a case of discrimination? Why?

7. Find out more about watershed development and how it benefits an area?

