



The Gram Panchayat

The villagers of a certain area in the village called ward elect a representative called Panch (ward member). All residents of 18 years or more of a big village or a group of small villages form a Gram Sabha. Each villager of 18 years or more is a member of the Gram Sabha and has the right to vote. The members of the Gram Sabha elect a Sarpanch. All the ward Panchs and the Sarpanch form the Gram Panchayat with the Sarpanch as its head. The Gram Panchayat is elected for five years. The whole system is called as Panchayati Raj. 'Raj' means rule.

The word 'Panchayat' literally means a council of five members. Since ancient times in India, this council of five elected members was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the affairs of the village and its decisions were respected and followed by all people.

The Panchayati Raj system is a process through which people participate in their own government. The Panchayati Raj system is the first level or tier 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. Thus the local people have a greater say in their own development.

The Panchs or the Sarpanch may not be educated enough. A secretary of the Gram Panchayat is appointed by the government to help or assist them. This person is not elected by the people. The secretary of the Gram Panchayat is also the Secretary of the Gram Sabha. The Secretary is responsible for calling the meeting of the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat and keeping the records of the proceedings. He serves as a link between the people and the state government.

To bring equality and ensure justice, seats are reserved in a Gram Panchayat for members belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

The Work of a Gram Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat meets at regular intervals. Its main task is to implement development programmes for all villages that come under it. It has to improve the condition of the village and villagers by providing basic amenities like roads, drainage, water, schools and street lights. So its work includes :

- (a) Construction and maintenance of roads, drainage, water sources, school buildings and other common property resources;
- (b) Providing clean drinking water and water for irrigation;
- (c) Providing health centres, reading rooms (libraries), organising fairs, etc. for the welfare of the people;
- (d) Executing government schemes for generating employment in the villages;
- (e) Levying and collecting local taxes.

Sources of Funds for the Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat requires funds (money) for doing the above work. It derives its income from several sources :

- (a) Taxes on houses, shops, fairs and sale/purchase of cattle and property;
- (b) Government scheme funds through various departments of the state government;
- (c) Donations given by villagers for community works etc.


A Gram Sabha Meeting

At the Gram Sabha meeting the Sarpanch and all the Panchs were present. The Sarpanch presented a plan of repairing the road that connects the village to the main highway. A member of the Gram Sabha raised the issue of acute water shortage in the village. The water level has gone below the hand pump pipe under the ground. There was hardly any water in the taps. Men and women had to go several kilometres to the river to fetch water, that too, unfit for drinking. So, there is a fear of epidemic. Members suggested various ways — piping water from the river and making an overhead tank, deepen the handpumps, clean the wells etc. But funds were not enough for the same and these were temporary solutions.

One member asked for a permanent solution which was a twofold programme of conserving water and recharging (refilling) the ground water in the rainy season. She told that more ground water was being drawn than was seeping into the ground. The government was also providing money for the recharging of ground water. The recharging includes planting of trees, constructing check dams and tanks. Everyone asked the Gram Panchayat to work on this guideline



A Gram Sabha meeting



Then the secretary read out the finalised list of the villagers who were Below the Poverty Line (BPL). Several members of the Gram Sabha objected on some names included in this list as those people were not poor. A woman told that the names of some very poor people were not included in the list. The Sarpanch assured to survey again and then present the list.

In the Gram Sabha meeting 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 the money or favouring certain people. It keeps an eye on the elected representatives (Panchs) and makes them responsible to the persons who elected them. Thus, Gram Sabha is a more powerful body than the Gram Panchayat.

Three Levels of Panchayats

The idea of people's participation in the Panchayati Raj System extends to three levels. At the village level it is called the Gram Panchayat. At the second or the Block level it is known as the Panchayat Samiti or Janpad Panchayat.



Watershed management (recharging of ground water) transforms barren land into a green meadow in just two years.

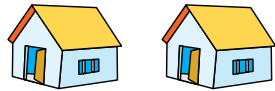
A Panchayat Samiti has many Gram Panchayats under it. Above the Panchayat Samiti, at the highest or district level, is the **Zila** (District) Panchayat or **Zila Parishad**. The **Zila Parishad** actually prepares plans for the development of the whole district, of which village is a part. With the help of the Panchayat Samitis, it regulates the money distribution among all the Gram Panchayats and implements programmes. It also makes the technical services available through B.D.O. (Block Development Officers) and other experts.

The Idea in the Panchayati Raj system is to provide more and more space for people to participate and raise their voices. That is why Panchayati Raj system is termed as local self-government. It upholds the democratic principle of our country — as a government that is by the people, for the people and of the people— even at the lowest levels. However, each state in the country has its own laws with regards to Panchayats (within the guidelines given in the Constitution).

The Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha implement the schemes at the grassroot levels. They also ensure the participation of the people and nurture future leaders of India at the state and national levels.

Nyaya Panchayat

There is one Nyaya Panchayat for every three or four villages. Each Gram Panchayat elects a member to the Nyaya Panchayat. The Nyaya Panchayat is headed by a Sarpanch. It hears minor civil and criminal cases. It provides **speedy justice** and resolves minor disputes of the villagers. Nyaya Panchayat is the extension of judicial system at the village level.



Village Panchayats



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Village Panchayats



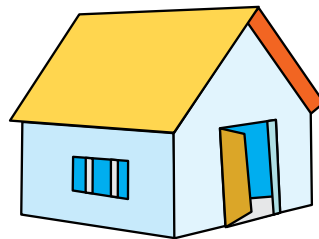
Panchayat Samiti



Panchayat Samiti



Panchayat Samiti



Zila Parishad

The three-tier Panchayati Raj system

Role of Women in Panchayati Raj

One third of the seats were reserved for women in 1993 under the law in the Panchayati Raj system at the village, block and district levels. Now many women head the Gram Panchayats, Janpad Panchayats and Zila Panchayats. This reservation ensured women's participation in the decision-making process. It also has ensured the conduction of special programmes for the upliftment of women.

Panchayati Raj in Different States

Within the guidelines given in the Constitution each state in the country has its own laws and processes with regard to Panchayats. For example, names of the Panchayats may be different in different states. The Sarpanch may be elected directly by the members of the Gram Sabha or by the Panchs.

 **Key Words**

- » Panchayati Raj : the system of local government at village level.
- » Gram Sabha : the lowest unit of Panchayati Raj at village level.
- » Gram Panchayat : a local body looking after the administration of one village or a group of villages.
- » Panchayat Samiti : local government at block level.
- » Zila Parishad : local government at district level.
- » Panchs : members of the Panchayat .
- » Sarpanch : head or president of a Panchayat elected by the Panchs or directly by the members of the Gram Sabha.
- » BPL : below poverty line — a government programme that identifies people who are extremel poor and helps them.

SUMMARY

- ▶ All the residents of 18 years or more of a big village or a group of small villages form a Gram Sabha.
- ▶ Members of a Gram Sabha elect a Sarpanch and several Panchs from their respective ward.
- ▶ The Panchs and Sarpanch form the Gram Panchayat with the Sarpanch as its head.
- ▶ The Gram Panchayat takes decisions for the development of the village and the villagers. The decisions are finally passed by the Gram Sabha.
- ▶ The Gram Panchayat provides basic amenities like roads, drainage, water, schools, street lights etc. It also implements various government schemes for health and employment.
- ▶ The Gram Panchayat gets funds from taxes and government scheme funds.
- ▶ At Block level, the Panchayati Raj System is known as the Panchayat Samiti and at district level it is known as Zila Parishad.
- ▶ There is one Nyaya Panchayat for every three or four villages to resolve minor disputes of the villagers.
- ▶ One-third of the seats were reserved for women in 1993 in the Panchayati Raj System at the village, block and district levels.
- ▶ The idea in the Panchayati Raj system is to provide more and more space for people to participate and raise their voices.

Exercise Time

A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. _____ is elected by the villages of a ward.
a. panch b. sarpanch c. member d. samiti
2. Local government at distict level is called the _____.
a. panchayat Samiti b. Zila Parishad c. municipal committee d. all of these
3. Nyaya Panchayat resolves _____ disputes of the villagers.
a. minor b. major c. of these d. none of these
4. _____ is more powerful.
a. Gram Sabha b. Gram Panchayat c. Gram Parishad d. Zila Parishad
5. _____ of the seats are reserved for women in the Panchayati Raj System.
a. one half b. one third c. one fourth d. half



B. Fill in the blanks :

1. All villagers of _____ years or more are the members of the Gram Sabha.
2. The people _____ their representatives to the Gram Panchayat.
3. The _____ of the Gram Panchayat is appointed by the Government.
4. Local government at district level is called the _____.
5. _____ of the seats in a Gram Panchayat are reserved for women.

C. Match the following :

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. District level of Panchayati Raj | a. Panchayat Samiti |
| 2. Members of a Panchayat | b. Sarpanch |
| 3. Middle level of Panchayati Raj | c. Gram Panchayat |
| 4. Panchayat president | d. Zila Parishad |
| 5. Lowest level of Panchayati Raj | e. Panchs |

D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :

1. The Sarpanch is appointed by the Government.
2. The term of the Gram Panchayat is five years.
3. The Panchayat Samiti operates at the highest level of the Panchayati Raj system.
4. The secretary is the link between the Government and the Gram Panchayat.
5. The Gram Panchayat can levy and collect taxes on houses, shops, etc.

E. Answer in one word or one phrase :

1. Who is the president of the Gram Panchayat ?
2. What is the Panchayati Raj system called at the block level ?
3. How much seats are reserved for women in the Panchayati Raj system ?
4. What is the lowest level of the Panchayati Raj ?
5. What is the minimum age to have a right to vote ?

F. Answer these questions briefly :

1. How are the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat related ?
2. What are the sources of income (funds) of the Gram Panchayat ?
3. What work does the Gram Panchayat do ?
4. What are the advantages of the local self-government ?
5. What is recharging of ground water and how is it acquired ?

G. Answer these questions in detail :

1. Explain how the three level Panchayati Raj system is organised.
2. Discuss the main functions of the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat.

PROJECT WORK

- Set up a Panchayat assuming your class as a Gram Sabha.