

Village Panchayats



Providing public amenities

In a village, a hand pump needs to be repaired. In another part of the village, drainage water is spilling over and the road is muddy. Who will solve these problems? Whether it is roads, hand pumps or streetlights, they belong to people in the village as a whole. They are called **public amenities**. Who will provide these amenities? Who has to take care of their maintenance? For this purpose, we have panchayats in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas.

- ◆ Name the public amenities in your locality.
- ◆ Discuss in your class the various schemes implemented by your panchayat or municipality.

Democracy at the village level

All the public amenities can be provided by the government departments. But they follow orders from higher ups and eventually from the authorities in the state capital. In such an arrangement, the people of the village will have no say or role. Further, the needs of the villagers are best understood by them and they can also solve their problems more easily than others.

More important than all this is enabling ordinary people of the villages to participate in public affairs. That is why we have elected village panchayats and municipalities to provide basic amenities at the local level.

At the base of this system of democratic functioning would be the '**gram sabha**' consisting of all the voters in a village. The gram sabha is expected to review the functioning of the gram panchayat and participate in taking decisions about village welfare. All the villagers elect the members of the gram panchayat and the sarpanch who conducts the day to day work of the panchayat.

Gram Sabha

In the last chapter, we read about democratic government and the need to ensure participation of all people in public affairs. While it is not possible for all people to participate in state level or national level decision making, it is possible at the village level. This is done through the Gram Sabha or assembly of all the villagers who are voters. We have begun experimenting with this arrangement in our country during the last few years.



Fig. 13.1: Gram Sabha

Kanakamma is keen to attend the Gram Sabha as she has been informed that she will get coupons which will enable her to get her ration card. She did not know what the meeting was for and what would happen. Out of the 70 persons in the meeting, 20 were women who had come to get their coupons like Kanakamma. The sarpanch began the meeting and read out a report of the work done by the panchayat in the last year and the work that it was proposing to take up in the coming year. He ended by telling the people, “I hope all of you approve of this.” The people had not listened to it carefully and every one clapped their hands. Then he read out the list of people who are ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) who would be eligible for various kinds of government assistance.

As soon as he completed, Kanakamma stood up and asked that her name be included in the list as she had no land or other employment or resources. The sarpanch promised to look into this.

Kanakamma felt happy that she had participated in the Gram Sabha. In the end, the coupons were distributed to the women who needed a ration card.

This is probably an example of the gram sabhas taking place today. People do not get proper information about the meetings and very few people come for them. Those who come take little interest in the proceedings. However, democracy requires active participation of all the villagers in the gram sabhas. All people should discuss the report

of the previous year’s work and say whether the work was actually done and was satisfactory. They also need to discuss the proposed work for the next year and say if any other work needs to be done, or what is the best way to do it. When the lists of BPL people are read out, all people have to ensure that only genuinely poor get the benefit of the schemes. Similarly, the Gram Sabhas have to oversee the work being done under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and other schemes.

But in practice, the Gram Sabha does not meet or the few people who participate do not take active interest in the proceedings.

- ♦ If you live in a village, discuss with your parents as to how the gram sabhas function. Find out if people get information about the meeting in advance, how many men and women come for the meeting, whether people from the other

hamlets of the panchayat come for the meetings, if the issues that are to be discussed in the meetings (agenda) are announced beforehand, whether the issues are discussed by the villagers properly or just approved.

- ♦ Why do you think these points are necessary for the healthy functioning of Panchayati Raj democracy?
- ♦ Can you write some slogans asking people to participate in the gram sabhas?

Formation of Gram Panchayats

Gram panchayats are formed through elections. These elections are conducted by state election commission.

Voters' List

All residents of a village who are 18 years old or above have to enroll their names in the voters list. Usually, a government employee visits every house to check whether there are any changes in the list. They also invite suggestions for additions or deletions to the list.

- ♦ Can you think of some reasons why additions or deletions to the voters list become necessary?
- ♦ Find out if all members of your family who are above 18 years are enrolled in the voters list.
- ♦ Find out from your teacher who updates the list and when.

Wards

A village is usually divided into a few 'wards' (streets or colonies) in such a way that all the wards have almost equal number of voters. Each ward elects one member to the village panchayat, called 'Ward Member'. This ensures that people from all localities of the village are represented. A panchayat will have at least five ward members and may have as many as 21 ward members. Any person who is 21 years or above can contest the election. As per State Election Commission decision those who are contesting as sarpanch and ward members should deposit sum amount.

Reservations in Gram Panchayats

It is often very difficult for women to get elected as ward member or sarpanch. These bodies are therefore dominated by men. As a result, the needs and views of half the population go unrepresented. Keeping these problems in mind, it has been decided by the Parliament that 50% of all panchayat ward members and sarpanches will be women and their places are **reserved** for them.

Similarly, there is a reservation policy for SCs/ STs/ BCs to ensure that persons from all sections of the society get elected to the panchayat. Thus, panchayats function as representative institutions of all people in the rural areas.

Elections

Normally, elections to Gram panchayats take place once in every five years. During these elections, every voter casts two votes – one to elect the ward member and another to elect the sarpanch. The person who gets the maximum votes is declared elected.

If you live in a village, find out the following:

- ♦ How many ward members are there in your panchayat?
- ♦ How many voters are there in your house?
- ♦ In which ward is your house?
- ♦ Name your ward member.

Find out from your parents about who stood for elections from your ward and what happened during the last elections. Present your findings in the class.

Sarpanch, Upa-Sarpanch and Secretary

The sarpanch is the head of the Gram Panchayat. He has the responsibility of implementing all the decisions of the panchayat and looking after the day to day working of the panchayat. The sarpanch is elected directly by the voters residing within the village. The sarpanch is also responsible for the income and expenditure

of the panchayat. As such, the sarpanch has a lot of responsibility. In many villages, we see some active sarpanches who have changed the fate of their villages.

Upa-Sarpanch: The sarpanch and ward members elect one of the ward members as the deputy or *upa-sarpanch*. The *upa-sarpanch* acts in the absence of the sarpanch.

Secretary and Executive Officers

Each panchayat also has a Secretary, who is a Government employee. His/her job is to maintain accounts and minutes of the meetings. Major panchayats, which have high income, also have an executive officer appointed by the government.

What does a Panchayat do?

The village panchayats are responsible for provision of public amenities like maintenance of village roads, construction and maintenance of drains, supply of drinking water, street lighting, cleaning streets, running ration shops etc. They are also responsible for over seeing the functioning of schools, anganwadis, women and child welfare progra-mmes etc. The panchayats have to plan and execute development work such as minor irrigation, watershed management, land reform measures in the village.

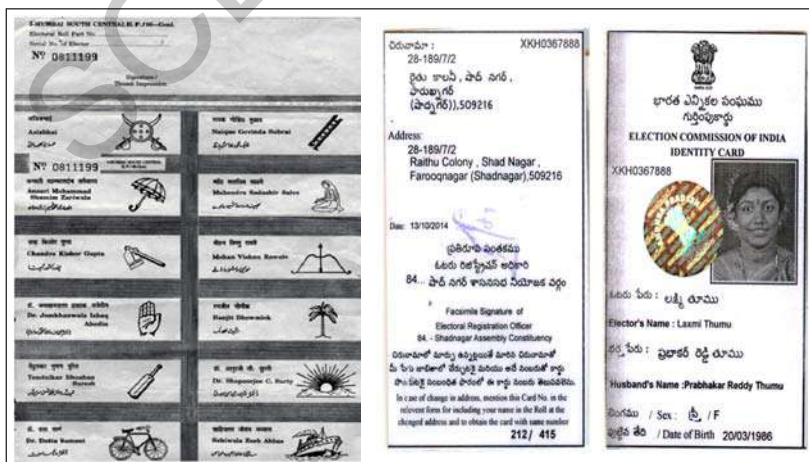


Fig. 13.2: Model Ballot and Voter I.D.

Several states have given more powers and functions to the gram panchayats. However, some states like Telangana have not given several important functions to them. Some of them relate to control over markets and fairs, land improvement, minor forest produce, small scale industries, housing for weaker sections, electrification, programmes for weaker sections, PHCs and dispensaries etc. Unless such functions are also given over to the gram panchayats, they cannot really address the problems faced by the villagers and effectively plan the development of the villages.

A meeting of the panchayat takes place every month. For each meeting, at least half of the members of the panchayat should be present. Otherwise, the meeting will have to be cancelled. The meeting usually begins by reading out the report of the last meeting (this is called ‘minutes of the last meeting’). Then, the sarpanch has to report about all the work done during the previous month and how much money was spent on them. In case the members feel that some work was not properly done, they can discuss it. The ward members can also propose new work for their wards or enquire about non-completion of approved work.

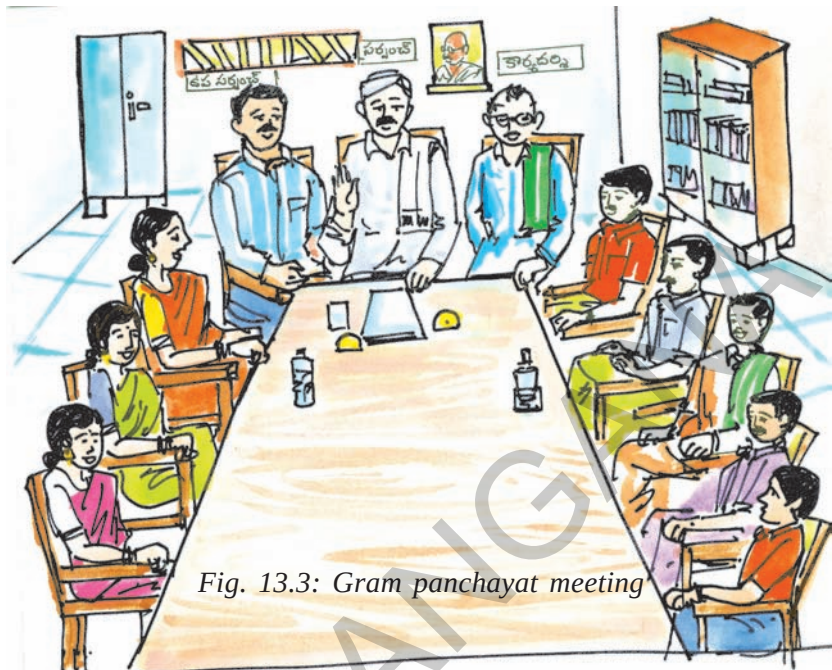


Fig. 13.3: Gram panchayat meeting

Every year, before the month of April, proposals from different wards are discussed and a budget is prepared for them. The sarpanch and the Executive Officer check if funds are available for these proposals. After this, the annual plan of the panchayat is prepared and discussed in the Gram Sabha and finalised after incorporating their suggestions. This finalised plan is submitted to Mandal and Zilla parishads for approval and sanction of funds. After the funds are received, the sarpanch starts the work and supervises its completion.

It is often seen that in many panchayats, the sarpanches prepare plans on their own and get them approved without much discussion. Then, the funds allocated for the work may be misappropriated, as very few people know about the plan, budget and actual work done. For this reason, it is necessary that all members of the panchayat participate in the planning and oversee the implementation of the programmes.

- ♦ Go to your panchayat and find out when the last meeting took place and what was discussed in it.
- ♦ Why do you think is it necessary for at least half the members to be present in all the meetings of the panchayat?
- ♦ What would you suggest for the annual plan of your ward?

Funds for the work of Gram Panchayats

Where do the gram panchayats get funds from to carry out their programmes?

Gram panchayats have the power to levy some minor taxes in the villages including house tax and land cess. They get about one third of their income from these sources.

However, for a bulk of their resources, they depend upon grants from the state and the central governments, which is meant for the implementation of specific programmes. Some funds are made available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

From the experiences of the gram panchayats, it emerges that these funds are far from sufficient for any substantial development of the villages. Panchayats have very little funds for the work they themselves plan and decide upon.

Mandal Parishad and Zilla Parishad

In the previous section, we read about gram panchayat. About 20 gram panchayats come under a Mandal Parishad. All the Mandal Parishads in the district come under the Zilla parishad. The members of the

Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituencies (MPTCs) are elected directly by the villagers and some are nominated. The Zilla Parishad members too are similarly elected. The Zilla Parishad and the Mandal Parishad coordinate the activities of the panchayats in the district and the mandal, approve their plans and coordinate the allocation of funds.

Jangamma of Hazipally

Hazipally is a small village in Ranga Reddy District. Jangamma, the sarpanch, led the panchayat to build several concrete roads and underground drains. She persuaded all the villagers to build latrines in their houses, schools, anganwadi and gram panchayat. The panchayat under her leadership built water storage tanks to provide drinking water to the entire village. Apart from this, the village has an underground drainage system like the city. The panchayat has also ensured all the eligible benefits from the schemes intended for them. In recognition of these



Fig. 13.4: Jangamma getting award of Nirmala Grama Puraskar from Pratibha Patil President of India (2008)

efforts, Hazipally received the 'SHUBRAM' award in November 2008 from the state government and Nirmala Grama Puraskar in December 2008 from Mrs. Pratibha Patil, the President of India.

(Note: These awards are given to villages who have built toilets in every house and office/ school and have completely stopped open defecation. Many villages of the state have received these awards. Find out about such villages in your area.)

- ◆ Identify the public amenities available in Hazipally.
- ◆ What is special about the roads and drainages of Hazipally?
- ◆ What is the condition of latrines, drainage and water supply in your village and school?

Are there any villages which conduct Gram Sabha successfully?

There are many villages which have succeeded in involving the people in participatory development programmes through the Gram Sabha.

In Telangana, Gangadevipalli of Warangal Rural District, Rama - chandrapuram of Karimnagar District and Ankapur of Nizamabad District are some of the success stories. Similarly, Hiware Bazar of Ahmadnagar district in Maharashtra is a good example.

Gangadevipalli Panchayat

Through the Gram Sabhas, eighteen different committees were formed in Gangadevipalli village like Drinking Water Committee, Sanitation Committee, Health Committee, Communications Committee etc. These committees are providing good services to the villagers. This village has attained:

- ◆ 100% enrolment in schools
- ◆ 100% literacy
- ◆ Supply of protected drinking water to all families
- ◆ Observance of family planning by all eligible couples
- ◆ Vaccination of all children
- ◆ 100% families enrolled in bank saving schemes
- ◆ Total sanitation in the village
- ◆ Complete ban on the consumption of liquor

Every villager would definitely find a role on at least one of the 18 committees. Any issue of development of the village has to be necessarily discussed in the Gram Sabha. All are bound by the resolutions of the Gram Sabha.



Fig. 13.5: Gangadevipalli Gramasabha

- ♦ In which district is Gangadevipalli?
- ♦ How many committees were formed in Gangadevipalli?
- ♦ What is your opinion about Gangadevipalli panchayat?
- ♦ Why did Gangadevipalli panchayat turn successful?
- ♦ How do you compare your Gram panchayat with that of Gangadevipalli?

Keywords

Gram sabha Public Amenities Election Local self-Government

Improve your learning

1. Suppose you are a representative in your local government body, what issues would you raise?
2. Do you think common people are able to participate in the process of decision making in your panchayat or municipality? Give some examples to illustrate your answer.
3. Why do you think only a few people attend the Gram Sabha meeting?
4. Why are BPL lists read out in the Gram Sabha meetings?
5. Find out about the problems being faced by dalit panchayat members and Sarpanches in your area and write a short essay about it.
6. Do you think Panchayats should raise more tax from the village to carry out development works or depend upon government funds?
7. What challenges do dedicated sarpanches face?
8. Collect and tabulate the particulars of Ward Members, Deputy. sarpanch, sarpanch, and Village Secretary of your gram panchayat.
9. Read the para under the title 'Gangadevipalli Panchayat' of this chapter and write your comments.



Project:

1. Invite the sarpanch or President of the Mandal Parishad to the school to discuss the functioning of the panchayat system. Prepare some questions to ask them about the functioning of the panchayats.
2. Interact with your ward member/ sarpanch to understand their work. Prepare a poster on some important works of the panchayat and display it in the school.
3. How do you feel when you find Litter in the surroundings of your school? Divide into groups for the school's cleanliness and plantation of trees and conduct the programme 'Clean and Green' by each group a day.