Grassroots Democracy – Part 2
Local Government in Rural Areas

CHAPTER 11

The real India lives in its villages.

– M.K. Gandhi

The Big Questions

1. *What are Panchayati Raj institutions?*
2. *What are their functions?*
3. *Why are they important in governance and democracy?*

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Let us now see how the government functions at the local level. In this chapter, our focus will be on local government in rural areas; we will move to urban areas in the next chapter.

India is a country of enormous size and diversity. We have about 600,000 villages, 8,000 towns and over 4,000 cities. Our population has crossed 1.4 billion, almost two-thirds of which live in rural areas. How do we govern ourselves in this complex society?

Let us take a trip to Lakshmanpur, a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas. It has 200 houses and a population of about 700, most of whom are farmers. People cultivate



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their lands and rear cows or goats. Some have relatives serving in the armed forces; a few younger villagers have migrated to the city in search of jobs. What are the needs of this village — maybe water for the fields, repairing the main road if it got damaged by heavy rains, or maintaining the village's primary school? How will the villagers take decisions about such matters that affect their daily lives? And where will they get the resources to meet those needs? What will happen if there is a dispute about land or if some of the crop is stolen? Many such questions can arise in a village. Can people run to the State or the national capital for every such issue?

Panchayati Raj System

Like every village in India, the Lakshmanpur people have a system of **local** government called 'Panchayat', which refers to a village council. Panchayats bring governance closer to the people, making it possible for them to actively participate in decision-making processes. That is why the Panchayat system, also known as **Panchayati Raj**, is a form of **self-government**. Panchayats play a vital role in addressing local issues, promoting development and ensuring that the benefits of government schemes reach the grassroots level.

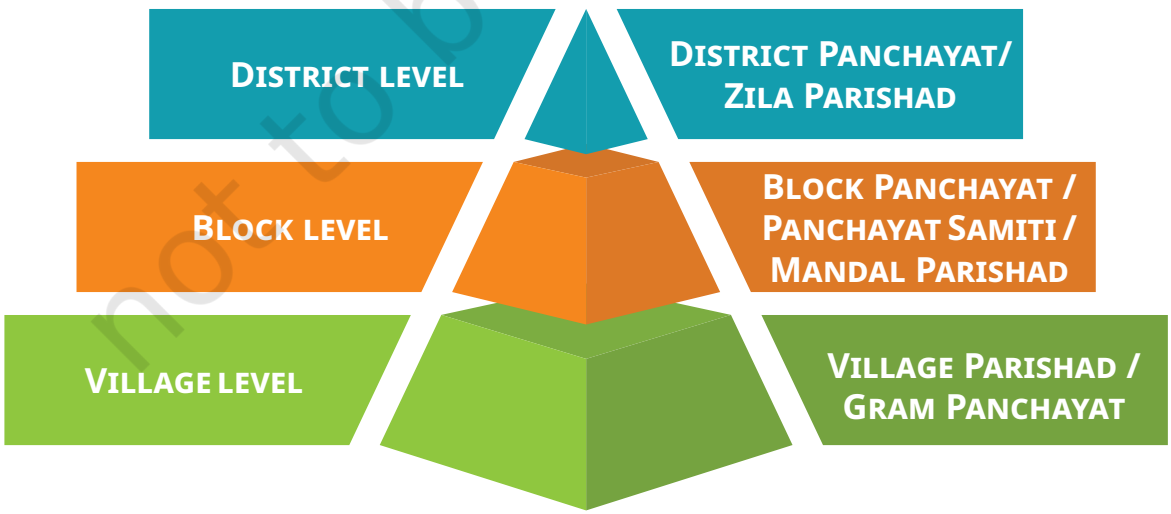


Fig. 11.1

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As is clear from the diagram, the Panchayati Raj system works at three levels — from bottom up — the village, the block and the district. This is called a **'three-tier system'**. Together, these institutions' responsibilities cover almost all aspects of life in the district, from agriculture, housing, maintenance of roads, management of water resources, education, health care and social welfare to cultural activities.

Gram Panchayat

Let us begin with the base of Fig. 11.1 on page 164 — the Gram Panchayat, which is closest to the people in rural areas. Its members are elected directly by the Gram Sabha, which is a group of adults from a village (or group of neighbouring villages) who are enrolled as voters. In the Gram Sabha, women and men discuss all matters related to their area and take decisions. Each Gram Panchayat elects a head or president called the 'Sarpanch' or 'Pradhan'. In recent years, more and more women have become Sarpanchs.



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Exemplary Sarpanchs



Dnyaneshwar Kamble is a transgender person who was elected Sarpanch of Tarangfal village in the Solapur district of Maharashtra in 2017. Kamble's motto is *lok seva, gram seva*, that is, 'Service to the village is service to the public.' Kamble defeated six other candidates to become the Sarpanch.



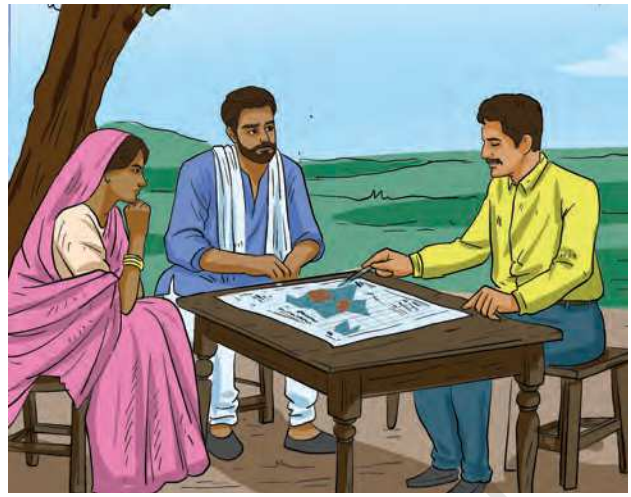
Vandana Bahadur Maida, a member of the Bhil community from the village of Khankhandvi in Madhya Pradesh, defied patriarchal norms to become the first female Sarpanch of her village. She convinced women in the village to attend the Sabha meetings and addressed critical issues like education and sanitation, earning recognition far and wide. Vandana's journey shows how women can play a leading role in transforming rural India.



Hiware Bazar, a village in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, used to be affected by frequent droughts and poor agricultural yield. After **Popatrao Baguji Pawar** became its Sarpanch, he started applying Anna Hazare's model of rainwater harvesting, watershed conservation and massive tree planting of lakhs of trees, all of which contributed to the recharge of groundwater. With the collaboration of the villagers, Hiware Bazar became a green and prosperous village in a few years. Shri Popatrao Pawar was awarded the Padma Shri in 2020.

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The Gram Panchayat is assisted by a Panchayat Secretary who performs administrative functions such as calling meetings and maintaining records. Most Gram Panchayats are also assisted by an officer called 'Patwari' in many parts of India, who maintains the villagers' land records. In some cases, the Patwari keeps maps that are generations old!



THINK ABOUT IT

How do you think can these old maps be helpful for us? Can they tell us something about the past and the present?

Child-Friendly Panchayat Initiative

Panchayats are supposed to listen to everyone's voice — including the voice of children. The Child-Friendly Panchayat Initiative creates opportunities for children to express their ideas and opinions on matters that concern their wellbeing. Steps are being taken in several States to encourage the participation of children in Bal Sabhas and Bal Panchayats on a regular basis, while village elders try to find solutions to their concerns.

In Maharashtra, for example, a few Bal Panchayats have worked to eliminate child labour and child marriage. They have brought many children back to school. The Bal Panchayat members get together to convince parents and other adults to send their wards back to school, and not to arrange marriages for girls who should be studying.

Several Gram Panchayats have won awards for taking child-friendly initiatives. Here's an example from Sikkim:

Sangkhu Radhu Khandu Gram Panchayat, in west Sikkim, has given a lot of importance to children's needs and rights.

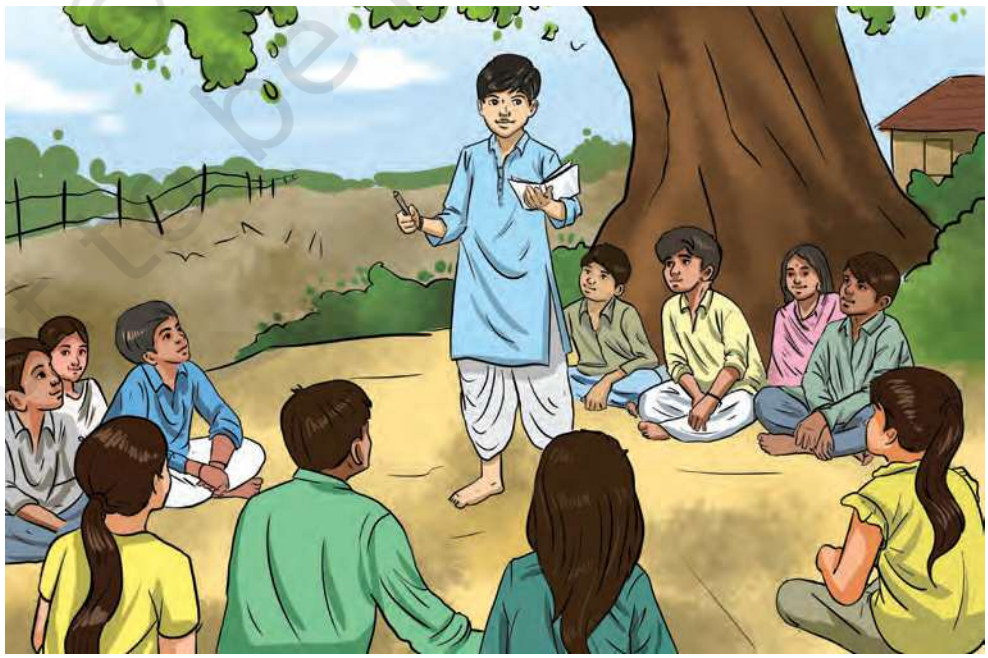
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The Panchayat has built compound walls for schools to make them safer for children. To ensure that students get hygienically cooked midday meals, the Gram Panchayat has constructed kitchens in the schools. It is for these efforts that Sangkhu Radhu Khandu has been declared a child-friendly Gram Panchayat.

Let us also look at another example from Rajasthan:

The 'Children's Parliament', an offshoot of Bunker Roy's 'Barefoot College' initiative a few decades ago, empowered underprivileged children in Rajasthan's rural areas through education and democratic participation. Children aged 8 to 14 are engaged in governance processes, learning about democracy and social responsibility through night schools and parliament-like elections. The 'Parliament' followed formal procedures, including voter ID cards and campaigning. Elected representatives formed a 'Cabinet', overseeing school management and advocating for community needs. The initiative fostered leadership skills and social awareness, enabling children to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. Children actively addressed issues such as access to education, sanitation and



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social equality, contributing to community development. The Children's Parliament initiative received many accolades, including the World's Children's Honorary Award in 2001.

LET'S EXPLORE



As a class activity, let four or five students form a Bal Panchayat and the rest of the class imagine they are the villagers. What issues will the Gram Sabha discuss? What challenges could it encounter? What solutions will it propose?

Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad

Similar institutions exist at the block level and the district level, which are above the village level. Their names are listed in the pyramidal diagram we saw in Fig. 11.1 on page 164. The Panchayat Samiti at the block level is the link between the Gram Panchayat and the Zila Parishad at the district level. The members of these institutions are elected by the local people, but they may have other members like Sarpanchs of the villages in the area and local members of the State Legislative Assembly.

The composition of the Panchayat Samitis differs from State to State, but their role in strengthening the participation of local people remains the same. They coordinate matters across Gram Panchayats, for instance, by collecting development plans from all Gram Panchayats and putting them together to present them at the District or State levels respectively. This facilitates the allotment of funds for such development projects and for government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, which promotes the construction of all-weather roads in rural areas.

At all the three levels, special rules have been made so that disadvantaged sections of the population can make their needs and problems heard. These institutions also have a provision for reserving one-third of the seats for women.

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THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think it is important for the government to pay more attention to the needs and problems of the disadvantaged sections of society?

LET'S EXPLORE



- What similarities and differences do you notice between the governance system at the Central level and at the Panchayat level? *(Hint: refer back to Chapter 10 if required.)*
- If you get an opportunity to meet a few Panchayat members, what questions would you like to ask them? Discuss in small groups to create a questionnaire. Meet some Gram Panchayat members or invite them to your school. Ask them the questions in your questionnaire and write a short report.

Let us remember that the structure and functions of the Panchayati Raj institutions differ a little across States. This is because the States have authority over those institutions. But their objectives are the same — it is to enable villagers to take an active part in the management and development of their villages and the local area.

The *Arthaśhāstra* is an ancient text of governance written by Kauṭilya (later also known as Chāṇakya) some 2,300 years ago. Among other things, it describes how a state should be structured and run, how the economy can be made prosperous, what the duties of the ruler are and how to conduct war. Kauṭilya, an expert in statecraft, also explains how a whole administrative structure should be put in place from the village to the regional capital:

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"The king shall establish a *sangrahaṇa* (a sub-district head quarters) for every 10 villages; a *kārvaṭika* (district headquarters) for every 100 villages; a *droṇamukha* for every 400 villages; and a *sthānīya* (provincial headquarters) for every 800 villages."

In today's language, what are the names we would give these four categories? Is it not amazing that a similar structure was thought of so long ago?

Before we move on ...



- → The local government in rural areas is organised into a three-tier system.
- → Democracy in the Panchayati Raj system works both through direct participation of people and through their elected representatives.
- → The Panchayati Raj institutions give people in rural areas a measure of self-governance, so they may manage their issues and collaborate in development plans.

Questions, activities and projects

1. Test yourself — without looking at the text above, can you name the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj system? What are the key functions of each of the three tiers?
2. Write a letter to the Sarpanch regarding the issue of plastic bags lying on the roadside in the village.
3. In your view, what type of person should be a Gram Panchayat member?
4. Let us suppose that you study in a village school. The school is located next to a highway and students find it difficult to cross the road when they come to school or leave at the end of the day. What are the options to solve this issue? Which institutions in the Panchayati Raj can help you? What can the students do?

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Noodles

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*‘Noodles’ is our abbreviation for ‘Notes and Doodles’!

