

WHAT IS GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCTION

Every country needs a government to make decisions and get things done. These can be decisions about where to build roads and schools, or how to reduce the price of onions when they get too expensive or ways to increase the supply of electricity. The government also takes action on many social issues, for example it has several programmes to help the poor. It does other important things such as running postal and railway services.

The government also has the job of protecting the boundaries of the country and maintaining peaceful relations with other countries. It is responsible for ensuring that all its citizens have enough to eat and have good health facilities. When there are natural disasters like the tsunami or an earthquake it is the government that mainly organises aid and assistance for the affected people. If there is a dispute or if someone has committed a crime you find people in a court. Courts are also part of the government.

Perhaps you are wondering how governments manage to do all this. And why it is necessary for them to do so. When human beings live and work together, there needs to be some amount of organisation so that decisions can be made.

Some rules have to be made that apply to everyone. For example, there is a need to control resources and protect the territory of a country, so people can feel secure. Governments do this on behalf of their people by exercising leadership, taking decisions and implementing these among all the people living in their territory.



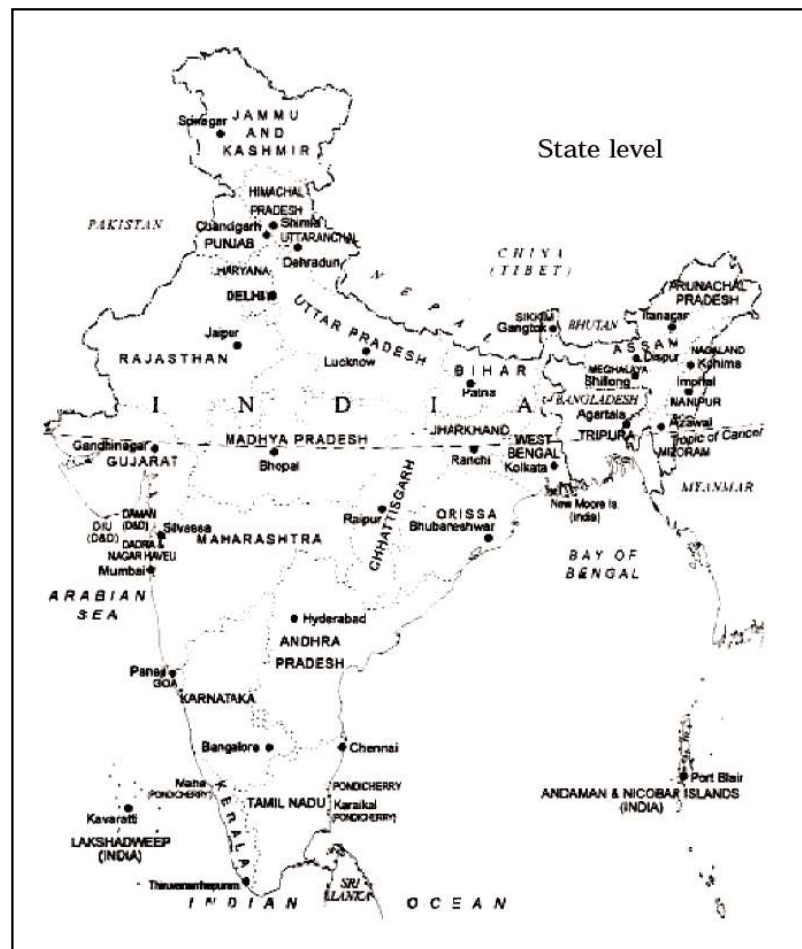
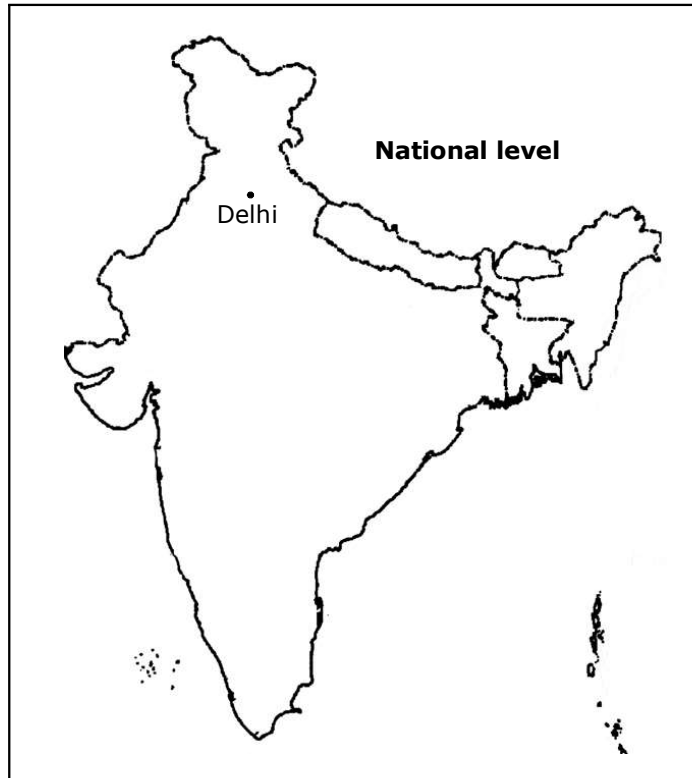
Some examples of institutions that are part of the government: The Supreme Court, The Indian Railways and Bharat Petroleum.

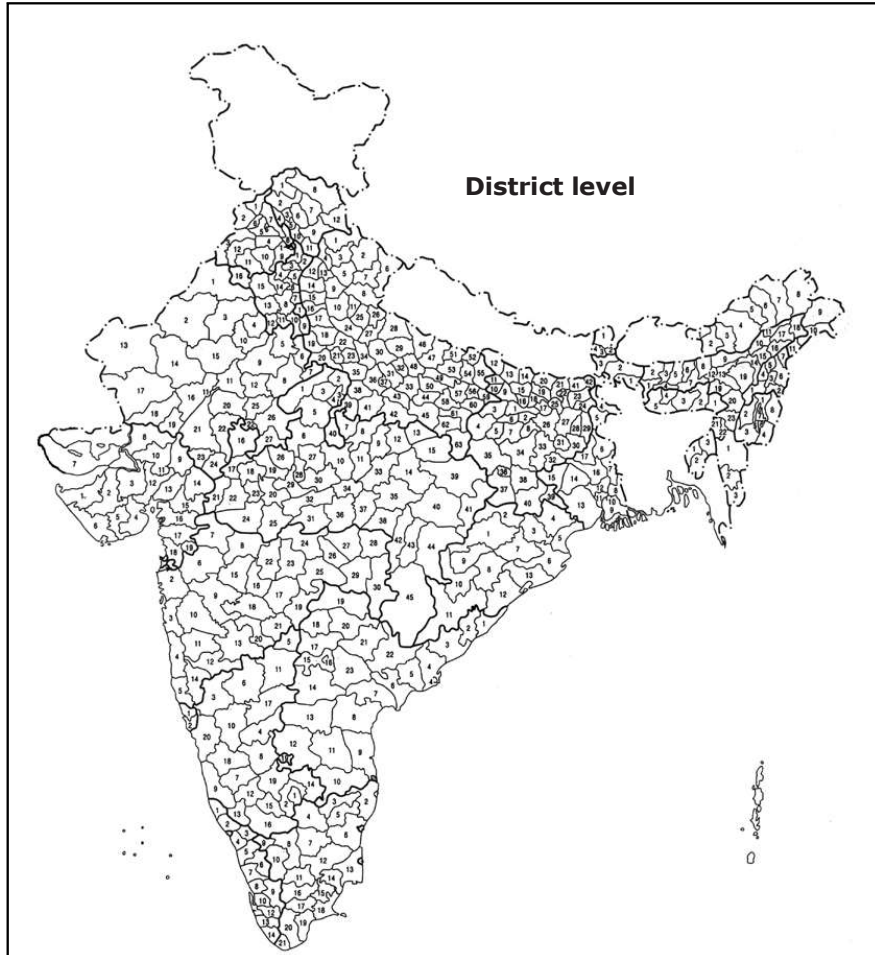


LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Now that you know that the government is responsible for so many different things, can you think of how it manages to do all this? The government works at different levels: at the local level, at the level of the state and at the national level. The local level means in your village, town or locality, the state level would mean that which covers an entire state like Haryana or Assam and the national level relates to the entire country. Later in this book, you will read about how local level government functions, and when you go into the next few classes you will learn about how governments function at the state and central levels.

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LAWS AND THE GOVERNMENT

The government makes laws and everyone who lives in the country has to follow these. This is the only way governments can function. Just like the government has the power to make decisions, similarly it has the power to enforce its decisions. For example, there is a law that says that all persons driving a motor vehicle must have a licence. Any person caught driving a vehicle without a licence can either be jailed or fined a large sum of money. Without these laws the government's power to make decisions is not of much use.

In addition to any actions that governments can take, there are also steps that people can take if they feel that a particular law is not being followed. If a person feels, for example, that they were not hired for a job because of their religion or caste, he or she may approach the court and claim that the law is not being followed. The court can then give orders about what should be done.

TYPES OF GOVERNMENT

Who gives the government this power to make decisions and enforce laws?

The answer to this question depends on the type of government there is in a country. In a democracy it is the people who give the government this power. They do this through elections in which they vote for particular persons and elect them. Once elected, these persons form the government. In a democracy the government has to explain its actions and defend its decisions to the people.

Another form of government is monarchy. The monarch (king or queen) has the power to make decisions and run the government. The monarch may have a small group of people to discuss matters with, but the final decision-making power remains with the monarch. Unlike in a democracy, kings and queens do not have to explain their actions or defend the decisions they take.

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS

India is a democracy. This achievement is the result of a long and eventful struggle of the Indian people. There are other places in the world where people have also struggled to have democracies. You now know that the main feature of a democracy is that the people have the power to elect their leaders. So in a sense a democracy is rule by the people. The basic idea is that people rule themselves by participating in the making of these rules.

Democratic governments in our times are usually referred to as representative democracies. In representative democracies people do not participate directly but, instead, choose their representatives through an election process. These representatives meet and make decisions for the entire population. These days a government cannot call itself democratic unless it allows what is known as universal adult franchise. This means that all adults in the country are allowed to vote.

But it was not always like this. Can you believe that there was a time when governments did not allow women and the poor to participate in elections? In their earliest forms governments allowed only men who owned property and were educated, to vote. This meant that women, the poor, the property-less and the uneducated were not allowed to vote. The country was governed by the rules and regulations that these few men made!

In India, before Independence, only a small minority was allowed to vote and they therefore came together to determine the fate of the majority. Several people including Gandhiji were shocked at the unfairness of this practice and demanded that all adults have the right to vote. This is known as universal adult franchise.

Writing in the journal *Young India* in 1931, Gandhiji said, "I cannot possibly bear the idea that a man who has got wealth should get the vote but a man who has got character but no wealth or literacy should have no vote, or that a man who honestly works by the sweat of his brow day in and day out should not have the vote for the crime of being a poor man..."



Voting in a rural area: A mark is put on the finger to make sure that a person casts only one vote.