

RURAL ADMINISTRATION (PANCHAYATI RAJ)

INTRODUCTION

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

GRAM SABHA

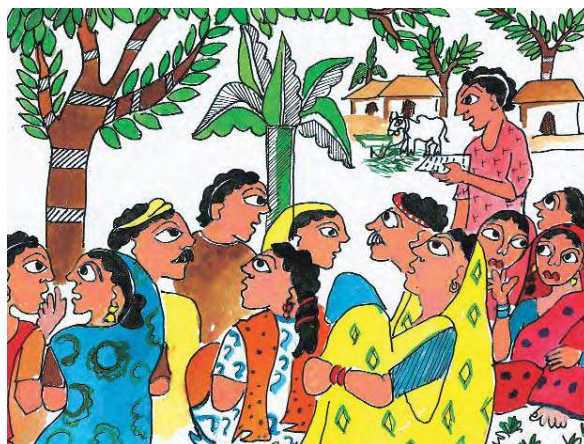
The Gram Sabha meeting begins with the Panchayat President (who is also called the Sarpanch) and the members of the Panchayat (the Panchs) presenting a plan on repairing the road that connects the village to the main highway. After this, the discussion moves to the subject of water and water shortages.

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.

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 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's. 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 teacher 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.

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.



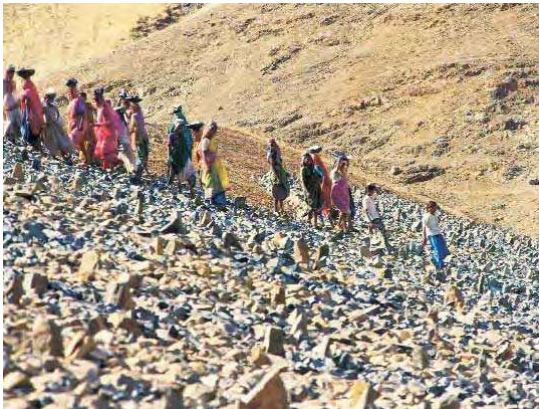
Two village Panchs from Maharashtra who were awarded the Nirmal Gram Puruskar in 2005 for the excellent work done by them in the Panchayat

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 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.



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

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. The Panchayati Raj system 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.

