

PANCHAYATI RAJ

Panchayati Raj: This is the first tier or level of democratic government. The word 'Panchayat' means an assembly five people. This is an age old system in villages of the Indian subcontinent. In modern context, the government has decentralized several functions to the Panchayati Raj. This has been done to include people at the lowest levels in the decision making process.

Three Levels of the Panchayati Raj

There are three levels in the Panchayati Raj which are as follows:

Gram Panchayat or Village Level Panchayat

Panchayat Samiti or Janpad Panchayat or Block Level Panchayat

Zila Parishad or District Level Panchayat

- Gram Panchayat
- The Gram Panchayat is composed of elected members. A Gram Panchayat can have members from several small villages or from a single large village. The tenure of a Gram Panchayat is for five years. Fresh elections are conducted after every five years.
- **Panch or Ward Member:** A Gram Panchayat is divided into many wards. People of each ward elect a member. This member is called the Panch or Ward Member. A Panch has to look after the needs of his constituency.
- **Sarpanch:** All the Panchs elect a leader who becomes the Sarpanch or the Panchayat President. The Sarpanch presides over the meetings of the Gram Sabha.
- **Secretary of Gram Sabha:** The Secretary of Gram Sabha is not an elected member. He is appointed by the government. The secretary calls the meetings of the Gram Sabha and keeps a record of the proceedings.
- **Gram Sabha:** The meeting of all the adults of a Gram Panchayat is called the Gram Sabha. Anybody who is more than 18 years of age and belongs to the Gram Panchayat can attend the Gram Sabha.

Functions of Gram Panchayat

Construction and Maintenance of Public Facilities: The Gram Panchayat looks after the construction of water sources, roads, drainage, school buildings and other common property resources. These facilities are important for the villagers.

Levying and collecting local taxes: The Gram Panchayat levies and collects local taxes. For example; the Gram Panchayat collects taxes from the village market.

Executing government schemes related to generating employment in the village: The government carries out various programmes for generating employment in the village. Funds for such programmes come through the official machinery. The Gram Panchayat looks after execution and implementation of such programmes. MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee) is an example of employment generation programme.

- Sources of funds for the Panchayat
- Collection of taxes on houses, market places etc.
- Government scheme funds received through various departments of the government – through the Janpad and Zila Panchayats.
- Donations for community works.
- **Functions of Gram Sabha:** The Gram Sabha functions to provide checks and balances on the working of the Gram Panchayat. During the meeting of the Gram Sabha, all the attendants have the right to raise questions if they find some wrongdoing. For example; while finalizing the BPL (Below Poverty Line) list, the Sarpanch may include the name of a rich person or exclude the name of a poor person. Similarly; funds for installing hand-pumps may not have been properly utilized.

- Panchayat Samiti or Block Panchayat
- This is the local government body at the tehsil or taluka or block level. All the villages under a tehsil (block) form the Development Block. The Block Panchayat works as a link between the Gram Panchayat and the Zila Parishad.
- **Constituency of Block Panchayat:** The Block Panchayat is composed of ex-officio members, co-opt members, associate members and some elected members.
- The ex-officio members include all the sarpanchs of the panchayat samiti area, the MPs (Member of Parliament) and the MLAs (Member of Legislative Assembly) of the area and the SDO (Sub Divisional Officer) of the subdivision.
- The co-opt members include representatives of women and SC/ST (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes).
- The associate members include a farmer of the area, a representative of the cooperative societies and a representative of the marketing services.
- The Panchayat Samiti is elected for five years. It is headed by the Chairman and Deputy Chairman.

Zila Parishad

The Zila Parishad makes the top tier of the Panchayati Raj system. It is headed by an officer from the IAS (Indian Administrative Service) cadre. Its function is to look after the working of all the Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats under the district. It also executes various welfare programmes in the district.

Importance of Gram Panchayat

Gram Panchayat gives power in the hands of the people. It is believed that people are the best judges of local needs and problems. Moreover, everything cannot be tackled by the Prime Minister or the Chief Minister. So, people should be given some degree of power to tackle the problems of their locality.