

How We Govern Our Communities

Communities, both urban and rural, require public utilities such as water supply, electricity, roads, educational institutions and health-care facilities. These are also called *civic amenities*. The responsibility of managing and controlling civic amenities lies with the government. The people of every village, town and city elect representatives to govern their community. In other words, people themselves govern their community through their representatives. This system is, therefore, called local self-government. In India, the local self-government body for a rural area is called the *panchayat*, and the local self-government body for an urban area is called the *municipality*.

Advantages of Local Self-Government

- Local people and their representatives are in the best position to understand the problems of any village or town. So, problems are not neglected, and people help to solve them quickly as it is for their own good.
- The experience of dealing with problems makes the local people self-reliant and responsible. This enables them to act responsibly during emergencies. For example, during cyclones or floods, they can start rescue and relief work before help arrives from the state or central government.
- Local self-government reduces the work of the central and state governments by taking care of civic amenities at the local level.

Panchayati Raj

In ancient India, villagers managed their affairs through a body called panchayat. The term panchayat comes from the word *panch*, which was used for the five village elders who settled disputes and took decisions. Today, all local self-government bodies for rural areas are called panchayats. They are formed as per fixed rules.

For ease of administration, the states in India are divided into districts. The districts are further divided into blocks, each of which has a number of villages under it. Panchayats exist at all of these three levels. This system of local self-government at three levels is called *Panchayati Raj*. In this system, a village has *Gram Panchayat*, a block has *Block Samiti* (also called *Panchayat Samiti*) and a district has *Zila Parishad*.

How are the panchayats formed? The panchayats at the three levels are formed by members who are elected by the people. For panchayat elections, the

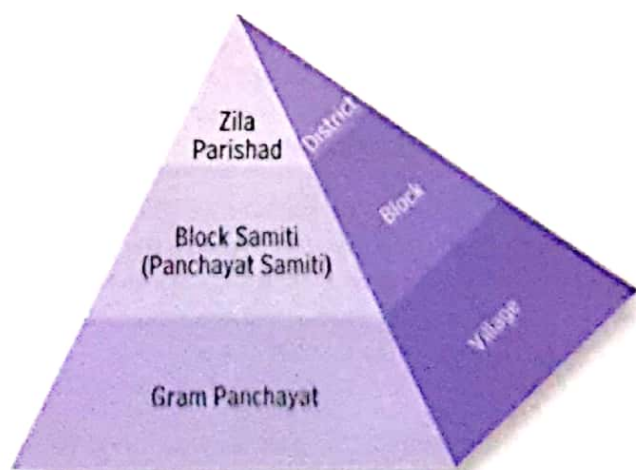


Fig. 5.1 The structure of Panchayati Raj

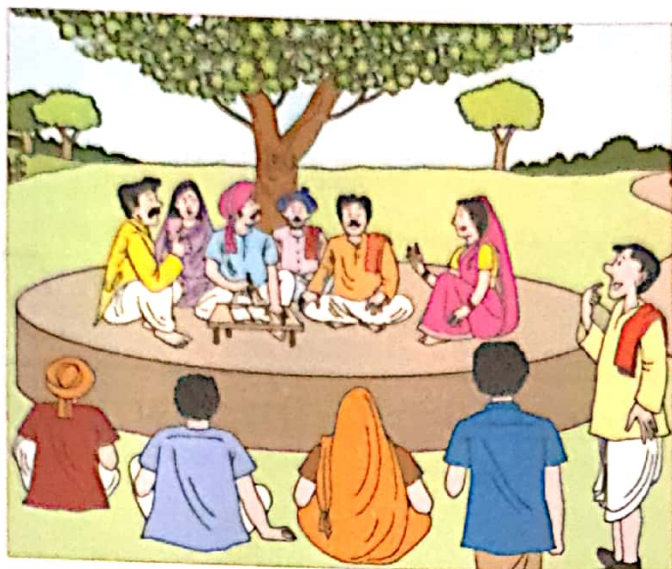


Fig. 5.2 Gram Sabha in session

area under the panchayat is divided into smaller areas called *constituencies* or *wards*. Each of these elects one representative. The members are elected for a term of five years. Some seats are reserved for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes.

Apart from elected members, local MLAs and MPs become members of the Block Samitis and Zila Parishads. Also, all the heads of the Gram Panchayats of a block become members of the Block Samiti. Similarly, all the heads of the Block Samitis of a district become members of the Zila Parishad. These members are called *ex officio* members, as they become members because of the office (post) they hold.

The state government has a representative in all the panchayats. It appoints a *panchayat secretary* to the Gram Panchayat. The *block development officer* (BDO) is the government's representative in the Block Samiti. And an officer of the rank of a *district magistrate* (DM) is appointed to the Zila Parishad. These officers ensure the proper functioning of the panchayats.

Functions and sources of income of the panchayats
The panchayats mainly work in the areas of education, agriculture, animal welfare, water supply, roads, cottage industries, etc. You will learn more about their functions later in this chapter.

To do their work, the panchayats need money. They get some from the state government. They also raise money from taxes on property, fairs, etc.,

and from registration fees for the sale of property and cattle.

Now that you know in general how the panchayats are formed, their functions and sources of income, let us learn a bit more about the panchayats at the three levels.

Panchayat at the Village Level

The village panchayat consists of the *Gram Sabha*, the *Gram Panchayat* and the *Nyaya Panchayat*.

Gram Sabha Every villager above the age of 18, whose name is on the voters' list, is a member of the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha elects the members and the head of the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sabha reviews the work and accounts of the Gram Panchayat. It can also remove corrupt or inefficient members of the Gram Panchayat. In this way, the Gram Sabha allows all adult villagers a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

Gram Panchayat The Gram Panchayat takes decisions and organises the work of the panchayat. It consists of members elected by the Gram Sabha. The *mukhiya*, who is also elected by the Gram Sabha, is the head of the Gram Panchayat.

The Gram Panchayat looks after agriculture, small industries, irrigation, drinking-water supply, housing, education, health care and roads and bridges in the village. It records births and deaths. It may also set up markets, organise fairs and sporting activities, and maintain radio and TV sets for the community.

Nyaya Panchayat The Nyaya Panchayat is the village court. Its members are called *panch*, and it is headed by a *sarpanch*. They are elected by the Gram Sabha. The Nyaya Panchayat hears and decides minor cases. It can fine and punish the guilty within certain limits. It helps villagers to get speedy justice at very little cost.

Block Samiti

States with a population of more than 20 lakh have Block Samitis. Members of a Block Samiti are elected by the people of the block. The Block Samiti also has some *ex officio* members. The members of the Block Samiti elect a chairperson, called *pramukh*, and a vice-chairperson, called *up-pramukh*, from among themselves.

The Block Samiti supervises the work of the Gram Panchayats within the block. It also looks

after development work in the block. It arranges for: primary and adult education; health care and vaccination; safe drinking water and sewerage; and seeds and fertilisers for farmers. It promotes cottage industries and arranges for training for self-employment.

Zila Parishad

The people of a district elect the members of the Zila Parishad. The Zila Parishad also has some ex officio members. It has a president and vice-president, who are elected by the members from among themselves.

The Zila Parishad supervises the work of the Block Samitis and Gram Panchayats under it. It examines the budgets of the Block Samitis and distributes government funds among them. It advises the government on the development of the district and prepares plans for it.

Municipalities

Urban local self-government bodies are called municipalities. In India, there are three main types of municipalities. Semi-urban areas, that is, areas that are gradually changing from rural to urban, have *Nagar Panchayats*. Cities with a population of less than 10 lakh have *Municipal Councils*. And cities with a larger population have *Municipal Corporations*. In this chapter you will study about Municipal Corporations.

Municipal Corporation

Composition The Municipal Corporation consists of members elected by the registered voters of the city. Those who are 21 years of age or above may stand for election. For municipal elections, the city is divided into small areas called wards. Each ward elects one representative, usually called the *councillor*. Some seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, other backward classes and women. Apart from this, the MPs and MLAs from the city become members. Some distinguished residents of the city are appointed as members. They are called *aldermen*.

The members of the corporation elect a presiding officer called the *mayor*. Municipal Corporations are formed for a term of five years.

The functions of the Municipal Corporation are carried out through various committees which look after different areas like health, education, water supply, etc. The state government appoints an officer called the *municipal commissioner* to look after the functioning of the corporation. The officers in charge of various departments like education, health, engineering, sanitation, etc., assist him.

Functions

- The Municipal Corporation arranges for the clearing away of garbage and maintenance of the drainage system. Usually, every neighbourhood has a collection point, where the residents dump their garbage. The Municipal Corporation may employ workers to collect garbage from households at fixed times and carry it to the collection points. A collection point may have separate dustbins for biodegradable garbage, which can be disposed of without harming the environment, and recyclable garbage, which can be reused to save resources. The garbage collected at the collection points is carried away by municipal trucks at regular intervals. The Municipal Corporation should

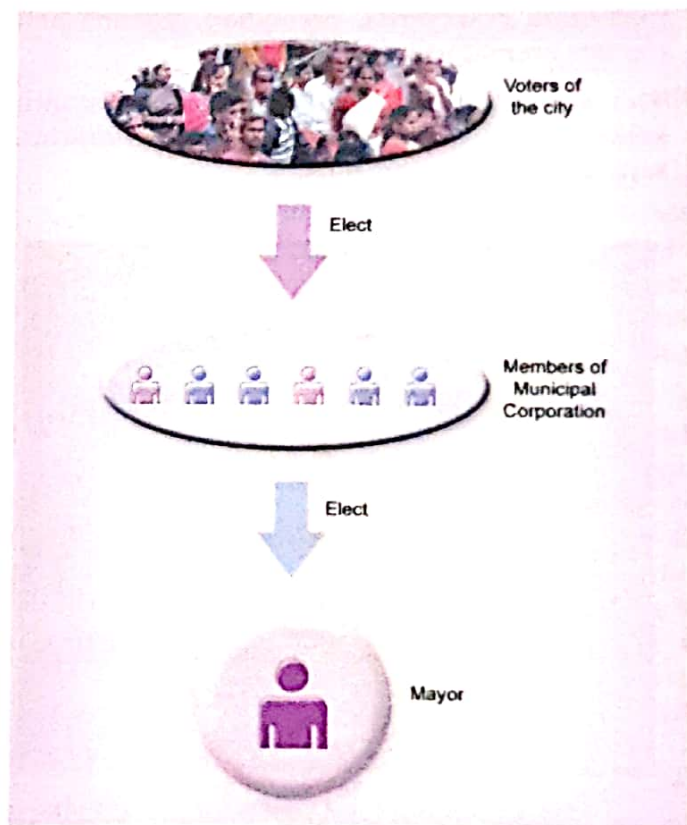


Fig. 5.3 How the Municipal Corporation is formed



Fig. 5.4 Municipal trucks collect garbage from collection points at regular intervals.

ensure that the collected garbage is disposed of in a suitable manner.

- The Municipal Corporation looks after public health by running dispensaries and hospitals. It also checks adulteration of food.
- It arranges for drinking-water supplies and street lighting. It may also make arrangements for firefighting.
- The Municipal Corporation records births and deaths, and issues birth and death certificates. It maintains graveyards, cremation grounds and electric crematoriums.
- The Municipal Corporation may run its own schools and help maintain public libraries, museums, parks and zoos.

- The Municipal Corporation provides and maintains public utilities such as markets, roads, bridges and public toilets.

Sources of income The Municipal Corporation gets money from taxes, fees and government grants. It collects property tax from house owners, municipal tax from business establishments like shops and markets, and water tax from users of municipal water supply. It also collects tax on nonmotorised vehicles like cycles and rickshaws. In some cities, it collects toll on certain roads and bridges, and a tax called octroi on goods entering the city. Apart from these, it charges fees for issuing birth and death certificates.

The civic amenities provided by local self-government bodies are mostly maintained out



Fig. 5.5 The Municipal Corporation may provide separate dustbins for the sorting of garbage for disposal or reuse.

of the taxes paid by us. Hence, we should try to prevent the misuse of such amenities. Also, we should elect efficient representatives to enable the local bodies to serve us better.

District Administration

The administration of a district is placed in the charge of an officer known by different names such as *district collector*, *deputy commissioner* and *district magistrate*.

A district is divided into subdivisions. The officer in charge of a subdivision is called the *subdivisional officer* (SDO) or *subdivisional magistrate* (SDM) or *deputy collector*. He works under the district collector.

Functions of the District Administration

The district administration under the district collector performs a variety of functions. Some of these are discussed below.

Maintaining law and order The district collector is responsible for maintaining law and order. He does this with the help of the police.

The police department in a district is headed by an officer called the *superintendent of police* (SP). The district is divided into five or six police circles, each headed by a *deputy superintendent of police* (DSP). There are about 10 *thanas* (police stations) in each circle.

In each police station there is a *station house officer* (SHO) of the rank of an *inspector* or *subinspector*. He registers complaints and reports relating to crimes and accidents that take place within the area of the police station. He organises investigations into such incidents. Under the SHO there are *assistant subinspectors*, *head constables* and *constables*.

A *chowkidar* is posted in each village. He reports all criminal activities to the nearest police station and helps arrest criminals.

Collecting land revenue and keeping land records

Agriculture is the chief occupation in India. Thus, land is of great importance to us. Land has to be classified as fertile or barren. It is also necessary to know who owns how much land, who grows which crop in a particular season, who gets irrigation facilities, and so on. All this information can be obtained from land records. Revenue is collected on the basis of these records. Steps are now

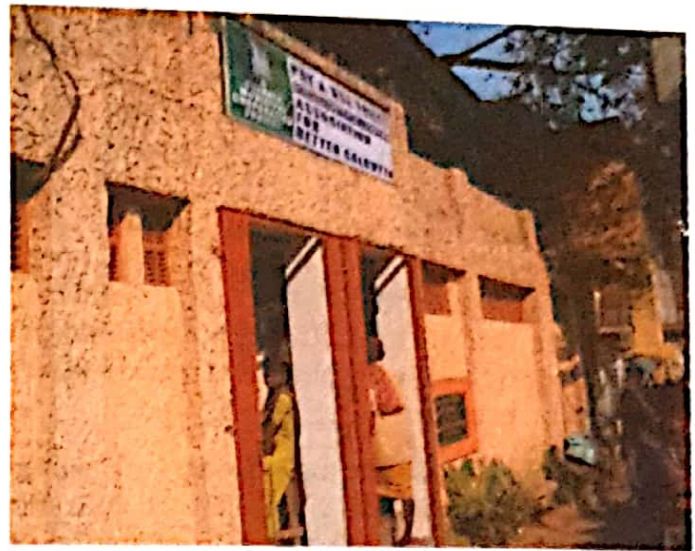


Fig. 5.6 The Municipal Corporation may provide public toilets.

being taken to computerise land records for maximum efficiency.

Land records are essential for settling disputes about the ownership of land. The records have to be changed whenever any land changes hands. All changes in the ownership of land have to be strictly in accordance with the latest laws passed by the government. The government has recently changed the law relating to the inheritance of land. According to the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, a landowner's daughters, just like his sons, will become joint owners of his land upon his death. This law has been passed to reduce discrimination against women.

For the purpose of revenue collection and maintenance of land records, districts are divided into subdivisions which are again divided into *tehsils* or *taluks*. Each tehsil is divided into *parganas* consisting of a number of villages. (The method of division of a district may vary from state to state.)

The work of collecting land revenue and maintaining land records is done by the *patwari* or *lekhpal* in a village, by the *kanungo* in a pargana, and by the *tehsildar* in a tehsil. Tehsildars also hear land disputes. Farmers can get copies of their land records from the tehsildar's office if required. Tehsildars are assisted by *naib tehsildars*. The SDO is in charge of collection of land revenue and maintenance of land records at the subdivision level. The district collector is ultimately responsible for these functions throughout the district.

Supervising the work of administrative bodies The district collector supervises the working of urban and rural local government bodies within the district.

Providing civic amenities and coordinating development

The district administration takes care of civic amenities in the district. It provides health services and education facilities, and undertakes public works like the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and buildings. For each of these there is a separate department under a responsible officer. The district collector coordinates the work of all these departments. He also supervises the development work done by different departments.

Carrying out relief work During floods, droughts, earthquakes, storms, etc., the district collector organises relief work with the help of the other officers of the district.

Judicial Administration in Districts

A district has two types of courts for administering justice. There are *civil courts* for hearing civil cases such as disputes over money, property, land, etc. And, there are *criminal courts* for hearing criminal cases, which involve theft, murder, kidnapping, etc.

The highest civil court in a district is the court of the *district judge*. The court of the sessions judge is the highest criminal court in a district. The district judge usually presides over both these courts and is, therefore, called the *district and sessions judge*. The court of the sessions judge can award a sentence of life imprisonment or even death. A death sentence, however, has to be confirmed by the high court of the state.

Things to Remember

- The system in which people themselves govern their community through their representatives is called local self-government. Panchayats in the rural areas and municipalities in the urban areas are local self-government bodies.
- Local self-government is effective because the problems of any area can best be solved by local people. It makes people self-reliant and responsible, and reduces the work of the central and state governments.
- In the Panchayati Raj system, there are panchayats at three levels—village, block and district. People elect the members of these panchayats for a term of five years. The panchayats also have some ex officio members.
- The panchayats mainly work in the areas of education, agriculture, animal welfare, water supply, roads, cottage industries, etc. They get money from the government, and from taxes and fees.
- The panchayat in a village consists of the Gram Sabha, the Gram Panchayat and the Nyaya Panchayat.
- The Gram Sabha, consisting of all adult villagers, elects the Gram Panchayat and the mukhiya. The Gram Panchayat mainly looks after civic amenities and agriculture. It also records births and deaths. The Nyaya Panchayat is a village court. It is headed by a sarpanch.
- The Block Samiti supervises the work of the Gram Panchayats under it. The Zila Parishad supervises the work of the Block Samitis and Gram Panchayats under it.
- Elected members, distinguished residents of the city and the MPs and MLAs of the city make up the Municipal Corporation of a city.
- The mayor presides over the Municipal Corporation, which functions through committees. The municipal commissioner, appointed by the state government, supervises the functioning of the corporation.
- The Municipal Corporation takes care of public utilities and records births and deaths. It holds office for five years. It gets money from taxes, fees and government grants.
- District administration is headed by the district collector. He is ultimately responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting land revenue, keeping land records, supervising local government bodies, providing civic amenities, coordinating development work and organising relief work within the district.
- Law and order is maintained with the help of the police department. Each police station has a station house officer, who registers complaints and reports, and organises investigations. The work of collecting land revenue and maintaining land records is done by the patwari or lekhpal in a village, by the kanungo in a pargana, and by the tehsildar in a tehsil.
- The highest civil court in a district is the court of the district judge. The highest criminal court in a district is the court of the sessions judge. Usually, the district judge presides over both these courts.