Chapter **3**

How You Can Be the Catalyst for a New Evolution?

It had only been a few weeks since the Panchayat elections when journalist Jayasimha decided to visit the newly elected member, Janopakari Krishnappa.

"Come in, Jayasimha. It's unusual to see you around here," Krishnappa commented.

"Yes, Krishnappa, I heard about your victory in the Panchayat elections. I wanted to congratulate you and chat a bit," Jayasimha responded.

Krishnappa, visibly nervous, admitted, "Yes, Jayasimha, I was indeed elected as the Adhyaksha. Though I lack prior experience in Panchayat, I'm hoping to learn on the job."

Recognizing his nervousness, Jayasimha advised, "After being elected as a member, one must strive to benefit the citizens. For this, you need training to understand the workings of the Panchayat. When in doubt, seek advice from those with knowledge."

"But who are these people, and where can I find them? If there's someone, I'm ready to learn from them," Krishnappa conceded.

"Do you remember Shankranna from Bangalore? He's quite familiar with these matters. How about we visit him sometime?" Jayasimha proposed.

"Please reach out to him and ask when he's available. Then we can plan a meeting," Krishnappa agreed.

As an acquaintance of journalist Jayasimha for several years, I was soon informed of Krishnappa's eagerness to understand Panchayat workings.

"It would be beneficial if members, including the Adhyakshas of three to four villages, attended the meeting. That way, we can disseminate the information more effectively," I suggested.

Jayasimha and Krishnappa deliberated, subsequently inviting elected Adhyakshas and members from neighboring villages.

They managed to gather a significant number of elected representatives from four to five Gram Panchayats, including some members from Hebbet Nanjamma's Panchayath.

"Shankranna, we have been elected as Panchayat members, but we are unsure about where to begin. I'm also fairly uninformed about the operational mechanics of the Panchayat or the scope of my role," Krishnappa confessed.

"Don't worry, Krishnappa," I reassured him, "Everyone starts somewhere. Let's begin by discussing the evolution and functioning of Panchayats over the years."

"There's a saying that the past is the foundation upon which the present and future are constructed. Do you know it?" I asked. Additionally, there's another adage that proclaims, 'Those ignorant of history cannot create history.' Does that ring a bell?"

The meeting attendees admitted their unfamiliarity with these quotes.

"As newly elected Gram Panchayat members, Adhyakshas, and Upadhyakshas, your role is pivotal in igniting a new evolution within the Gram Panchayat. Whether you're an Adhyaksha or a member, it's crucial for you to comprehend the historical progression of Gram Panchayats in India, their evolution over the past 5000 years, and the key contributors to this evolutionary journey." I underscored the significance of understanding the history of Panchayats and the transformative influence of different leaders throughout distinct eras.

"Consider, for instance, how Rama established 'Ram Rajya,' a model of governance that is still admired today; or how Kautilya, during the Mauryan era, instituted the village structure documented in his Arthashastra; or even how Akbar the Great acknowledged the potential of the revenue system. You'll also learn about how Lord Primrose introduced the Royal Commission of Decentralization during British rule, enabling Indians to partake in the governing structure; or how Gandhi's vision of ideal Indian villages was manifested in his concept of Gram Swaraj in the 1920s; and finally, how Rajiv Gandhi's vision for local government decentralization was realized through the 73rd and 74th amendments, establishing local self-governments in India."

"But why do we need to immerse ourselves in these historical tales? Isn't it more pertinent to focus on our current responsibilities?" queried Kattige Katayya, a freshly elected member.

"Today, some of you hold the prestigious positions of Adhyakshas in your respective Panchayats, while others serve as members. The 21st century is a transformative era where technology is revolutionizing numerous development aspects such as agriculture, banking, healthcare, and education. For your Gram Panchayats to flourish, it's vital to recognize the potential of technology and comprehend its application for sustainable development within your GP. You must act as the catalyst for Digital Transformation in your GP. You are the

pioneers of the Digital Transformation of Gram Panchayats. You will be the creators of history," I reassured Katayya.

"To embody this catalyst role effectively, you must solidify your knowledge base. It begins with understanding the history of our Gram Panchayats in India. Who instigated what changes, and when? What were the contributions of Rama, Kautilya, Akbar, and others? This understanding will facilitate a deeper appreciation of your current roles and their importance in this present moment," I elucidated.

"So, let's embark on this journey with a brief overview of how Panchayats have evolved over the years, commencing with the Vedic era," I began, delving into the rich history of the Panchayat system.

Figure 3.1 A timeline showing the evolution of Panchayats in India.

3.1. The Vedic Period

"During the Vedic period, villages were autonomous and self-sufficient entities. It is often said that while kingdoms and empires rose and fell, villages endured. These villages were managed by a respected official, who was in turn governed by a council of elders known as Gram Vruddhas. The village chief, or Gramini, was a figure of high stature within the community. Importantly, these villages were free from centralized control, meaning they were responsible for their local affairs. The Gramini and the council of elders were selected by the community itself."

"A cluster of villages was termed a Vishaya, and the chief of these grouped villages was known as Vishayapati. A collection of Vishayas was identified as a Janapada. Typically, a king would preside over the Janapadas. During the early Vedic period, states were small, resulting in a negligible distinction between the central and state governments. However, as states expanded over time, a distinction between central and state governance became inevitable. The Gramini's primary responsibilities revolved around village administration and tax collection on behalf of the king."

Figure 3.2: Panchayats during the Vedic period.

"Throughout this era, two types of councils, or Mandalis, existed - the Sabha and the Samiti. The Sabha was designed to address local issues and was usually led by senior citizens or affluent individuals within the village. In contrast, the Samiti encompassed representatives from various groups of villages and aimed to facilitate larger community discussions."

"So, this Vedic period was well before the era of Ramayana?" Hebbet Nanjamma inquired.

"Yes, indeed. Let's delve into how village administration was handled during the period of Ramayana," I continued.

3.2. The Ramayana Period

"The Ramayana period is characterized by two kinds of villages. The smaller villages were called Ghosh and the larger ones were termed Grama. A collection of villages formed a Ganapada. In this era, Rama was the administrator of Ayodhya. Despite being a ruler, Rama is said to have served as a servant to his people. The system of 'Ram Rajya' was a governance model strongly based on principles of righteousness. Rulers governed democratically, prioritizing the happiness and prosperity of their citizens. Each village had administrators called Sarpanch, chosen in an open meeting attended by all villagers. The Sarpanch were regarded as Parameshwara during this period, which translates to the 'Supreme God'.

"History records that Rama formulated his governing principles based on the people's will. There were equal rights for everyone and justice was swiftly dispensed, accessible even to the poorest and most marginalized. The laws were founded on truth, non-violence, and other moral principles. In fact, during Rama's reign, there was no poverty, pain, grief, or discrimination. Ram Rajya remains a model of good governance even today."

"We can learn from the Ramayana period how to govern with the people's interests in mind, can't we?" Janopakari Krishnappa asked.

"Yes. I believe that Rama's model of serving his people as their servant despite being their ruler is an excellent example of good governance," Simple Sudarshan responded.

3.3. The Mahabharata Period

"In the Mahabharata period, the term Panchas can be found in 'Shanti Parva'. The term refers to a committee of five people. Veda Vyasa also used the word Samsad in Shanti Parva, a term we use today to denote Parliament. According to the Mahabharata, above the village were units of 10, 20, 100, and 1000 village groups. The chief official of the village was the Gramik, while the chief official of 10 villages was the Dashap. Vimshati Adhipati, Shat Gram Adhyaksha, and Shat Gram Pati were the chiefs of 20, 100, and 1,000 villages, respectively. These officials collected local taxes and were responsible for the defence of the villages."

According to the Mahabharata, law was considered an instrument of protection. The primary purpose of the state, as per the Mahabharata, was to create conditions for freedom from fear, including fear of violence. The king was to shield his subjects from fear of him, fear of others, fear of each other, and fear of non-human entities. The king was tasked with the protection of the poor, the exploited, the weak, the helpless, and the oppressed from the strong. They believed that this large class of the weak could only survive due to the power of the king, a crucial aspect of Raja dharma, which means "duty of the rulers".

"So, it's evident that the rulers of the Mahabharata period considered the protection of the poor, the exploited, the weak, and the oppressed from the powerful to be of paramount importance, isn't it?" Teacher Theresa asked.

The rest answered in the affirmative.

3.4. The Maurya Period

The Mauryan emperors followed a centralised form of administration, causing villages to lose much of their power and significance during this period. Nevertheless, some local affairs remained under the purview of the village assembly. This assembly consisted of village

elders known as Gram-Vruddhas, who were chosen based on their age, character, and the trust they had earned from the villagers. Their opinions embodied the collective wisdom of the village. Typically, decisions made by the assembly were unanimous.

During the Mauryan era, local administration was split into Purasabha and Gramin administration. As stated in Kautilya's Arthashastra, the Gramas were supervised by the Grama Vruddhas. The village, which was the smallest administrative unit, retained autonomy. The village chief was known as the Gramika, and he was assisted by Gram Vruddhas or Village elders. The Gramika, elected by the people, served without remuneration. The administrators above the Gramika were called the Gopa, Sthanik, Ratnin, and the highest administrator was the Raja. These five administrative layers are described in detail in Kautilya's Arthashastra. A grouping of 10 villages was known as a Samgrahana, 200 villages a Karvatika, 400 a Dronamukha, and 800 a Mahagrama or Sthatnuja. The largest administrative entity, the Sthatnuja, managed trade among the villages.

"So, as far back as the Mauryas, village councils had decision-making power," said Hebbet Nanjamma.

"Yes, you're correct. Additionally, it's worth noting that a structure like the Sthatnuja existed to manage villagers' affairs," I responded.

3.5. The Mughal Period

The Muslim rulers arrived in India around 1000 A.D., their reign lasting until 1700 A.D. This period witnessed multiple foreign invasions into India. The Mughals governed based on a highly centralised bureaucracy and military force. Administration was centrally managed from Delhi, with little to no attention given to village governance from the rulers. The panchayat was led by a headman, known as a Muqaddam, chosen by consensus of the elders and the Zamindar. This

headman served as long as he enjoyed the villagers' confidence. His responsibilities included supervising the preparation of village accounts, with the assistance of an accountant or Patwari. The panchayats also had the authority to levy fines and impose punishments like community expulsion for crimes. Villages independently collected their taxes and managed their own administrative affairs. During the Mughal era, the system of administration lost its originality, adopting more Arabic-influenced governance.

However, the concept of village local government persisted, preserving the tradition of village self-governance until the advent of British Raj. The Mughals minimally interfered with village government customs. The village administration mainly served as a unit for revenue and policy purposes. Under the Mughals, the judicial power of the village council, the panchayat, was significantly diminished. Nonetheless, local affairs remained largely unregulated from above, with village officers and servants being accountable to the panchayat. Though interference was limited, the village assembly lost its power and influence, and the relationship between the village and the state dwindled. The exception was Akbar the Great, who reorganised the revenue system by establishing a direct connection between the state and the cultivators.

"Indeed," I replied, proceeding with my explanation. "One of the significant changes during the Mughal era was the approach to land rights and land tax collection. The Mughals saw taxation not just as a source of revenue, but as a sort of compensation for their governance and protection of their subjects. Land became the primary source of tax revenue, supplemented by other taxes like import and export duties.

As for the connection between the rulers and the villagers, there was indeed a considerable disconnect. The Mughals were more city-

centric, leading to the growth and development of numerous cities during their reign. They established effective city management systems, but this inadvertently led to the neglect of rural regions. Consequently, the power and influence of the Gram Sabha, or the village assembly, decreased significantly.

Following the Mughals, the British continued the practice of collecting taxes from the people. However, they took a more bureaucratic and systematic approach, which further widened the gap between the rulers and the villagers. They continued the focus on urban development, further reducing the management and autonomy of villages. As a result, the villagers became increasingly disconnected from the power structures, and the significance of the Gram Sabha diminished even further."

3.6. The British Period

"My father used to say that the British came to India merely to exploit it. Is that true, Shankranna?" asked Paropakari Padmini, Adhyaksha of a Grama Panchayat.

"Yes, Padmini, exploitation was indeed one of the objectives of British rule in India. This led to suppression and effectively dissolved the Panchayat system. Consequently, strong institutions between the government and the panchayats were absent. The British rulers were more interested in establishing controlled local bodies to aid in their trading interests and tax collection. The functions of the Panchayat included civil and criminal jurisdiction in minor cases. They also managed sanitation and some minor developmental works, like the development and maintenance of village schools. The Royal Commission, which arrived later, also investigated the income sources of the Panchayats. Ultimately, the Commission wished for the Panchayats to enjoy autonomy, but still be subject to control by district authorities," I explained.

"When the British realised that managing the entirety of India with a centralised approach was challenging, they introduced municipal corporations to address local issues. The first municipality was established in Madras (now Chennai) in 1687. This system was later implemented in Mumbai and Kolkata. However, due to the British focus on these major cities, interest in local bodies like Gram Panchayats diminished."

"So, the British ignored village panchayats and focused on the major cities?" Simple Sudarshan asked.

"Yes, the panchayat system was further dismantled by the East India Company when it was granted the office of Diwan in 1765 by the Mughal Emperor. The company abolished the land record keeper for several villages, creating the role of a company official called a Patwari. They also abolished the village police, introducing the office of the Magistrate, who took over police functions. It was during this time that the Zamindari system was introduced, where taxes were collected in the form of money, not agricultural goods."

"In 1870, Lord Mayo introduced the decentralisation resolution. This move can be traced back to the Sepoy Mutiny or First War of Independence in 1857, led by leaders like Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. This conflict between the Indians and the British caused the latter significant revenue loss. The substantial reduction in income prompted Lord Mayo to propose decentralisation as a means to increase the government's revenue. This resolution's feature was to include Indians in local governance administration, which had been solely managed by the British before the war," I elaborated.

"So, the British decided to include Indians in the administration due to the detrimental effects of the Sepoy Mutiny or First War of Independence, right?" Simple Sudarshan asked.

"Not just that, the British mercantile intellect also played a role. They understood that ruling without the cooperation of Indians would ultimately lead to more losses," Petrol Pump Papanna analysed.

"In 1882, Lord Rippon furthered decentralisation in Indian Governance. This move was opposed by the British administrators because they were losing control over the Indians due to decentralisation. Eventually, in 1907, Lord Minto introduced the Royal Commission on Decentralisation, a significant decision from the perspective of decentralisation. For the first time during the British rule, Panchayats received more visibility."

"So finally, after the formation of the Royal Commission, the British gave prominence to the Panchayats," Simple Sudarshan observed.

3.7. Gandhi's Gram Swaraj

"After Gandhi returned to India from Africa in 1913, he outlined a vision for the villages of India, termed 'Gram Swaraj'. According to this vision, each village would be responsible for its own affairs. Gandhi believed that real Swaraj would come not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of capacity by all to resist authority when it's abused. He proposed that each Panchayat should be elected by a public meeting. Every Panchayat would be expected to address education for all children in its village, sanitation, medical needs, cleanliness, and the upliftment of the vulnerable," I explained.

"So, the move by the British to bring reforms in local administration by forming the Royal Commission, and Gandhiji's vision of 'Grama Swaraj', coalesced to restore the prominence of Gram Panchayats?" Simple Sudarshan analyzed.

I nodded in agreement with Sudarshan's analysis.

3.8. Post-Independence Period

"Upon gaining independence, India's National Development Council established a committee led by Balwant Roy Mehta in 1957 to examine the workings of the Community Development Program (CDP)," I began, explaining the post-independence developments in local administration.

"The committee observed that the main reason for the CDP's failure was the lack of public participation. They suggested a three-tier Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), namely, Grama Panchayats (GPs) at the village level, Panchayat Samiti (PSs) at the block level, and Zilla Parishad (ZPs) at the district level."

"The appointment of the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977 brought about new thinking in the concepts and practices of the Panchayat Raj. The committee recommended a two-tier Panchayat Raj institutional structure comprising of Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat. The G.V.K. Rao Committee in 1985 proposed making the 'district' the basic unit of planning and also advocated for regular elections, while the L.M. Singhvi committee suggested providing more financial resources and constitutional status to the panchayats to strengthen them. In 1992, Rajiv Gandhi's vision of a decentralized system for local governments in India was finally realized through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments passed by Parliament in December. These amendments introduced local self-governance in both rural and urban India."

After explaining the extent to which Urban and Rural Self Rule in India have been enacted through the 73rd and 74th Amendments, I took a pause, and then posed a question:

"Do you know how many levels of Panchayat arrangements have to be made in rural areas as per these amendments of the constitution?"

"Yes, Shankranna, these amendments implemented a three-tier Panchayat System," replied Teacher Theresa, "These are the three levels: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Taluk Panchayat at the block level, and Zilla Panchayat at the district level."

"Yes, in this way, the Panchayat system post-independence regained its power and influence as a decentralized form of government. The Panchayat is headed by an Adhyaksha, along with other elected representatives. The Gram Sabha is the only permanent unit of this system, composed of all citizens aged 18 and above. The village citizens vote and elect representatives for the governance of their Gram Panchayat every five years," I concluded.
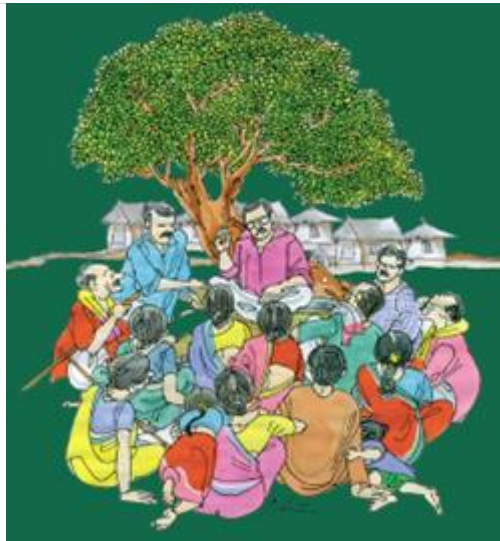

Figure 3.3 Gram Panchayats as Service Centers for Village Citizens

"Yes, indeed, we all elected the Panchayat by this system. Listening to this, it seems that a Gram Panchayat is the cradle of democracy in India, isn't it Shankranna?" asked Simple Sudarshan.

"Not only that, but India is also the Mother of Democracy. You'll understand more as we continue," I replied. "Now, I will explain the state of 21st-century Gram Panchayats. Bear with me," I continued.

3.9. 21st Century Gram Panchayat

"With the dawn of the 21st century, the integration of computers started slowly replacing books and registers with digital copies. Around the same period, mobile phones replaced landline telephones. The digital realm started taking shape not just in big enterprises but also for public use. The introduction of platforms like Facebook and Twitter in the mid-2000s accelerated access to smart devices, and most importantly, the internet. However, the internet service was relatively expensive, making it a luxury until it was mainstreamed, and prices dropped after the early 2010s," I explained.

"Now, we have high-speed internet access not just in cities but also in some rural areas. The internet is one of the greatest gifts of our time, bridging gaps and making the impossible possible. The so-called 'death of distance' is one of today's biggest technological advancements."

"What you're saying is indeed true, Shankranna. Twenty to twenty-five years ago, we'd have to wait for hours to talk to someone on the phone, and we were charged by the minute," reminisced Petrol Pump Papanna, recalling his struggles when his petrol pump was on the brink of running dry.

"Access to high-quality internet opens up myriad possibilities for us today. Recent years have seen a surge in technologies like Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, Virtual Reality, Blockchain, Natural Language Processing, Automation, Virtual Assistants, and Robotics. The transition from a paper-based economy to a technology hub has been nothing short of revolutionary," I elucidated.

"Yet, our villages lag behind in this race. I'm here to show you how you can bring about a much-needed transformation in your villages. A significant gap exists between urban and rural India regarding access to these services, with many villages still not internet-connected." As I said this, many in the meeting echoed, "Yes, Shankranna, yes."

"But with you as the Adhyaksha, you have the power to change this narrative. In the near future, our village citizens can have access to all these services. You must be the agent for digital transformation in your villages, leading to economic development, social equity, and environmental sustainability." I continued, providing a glimpse into the technologies that could be harnessed in Panchayats.

• Elected Representatives (ERs), students or citizens will be able to train/learn remotely using powerful tools like Navigated Learning Technology. ERs need special attention as they are the change drivers in rural India.

• Rural citizens will have access to all web content in their native language using Natural Language Processing technology or with the help of Virtual assistants using speech-to-speech technology. Opportunities and knowledge shouldn't be language-bound. NLP can enable social development through information.

• Manual data entry is tedious and error-prone, and records can be manipulated or destroyed over time. Your GP needs to automate tasks and maintain a central database. Automation increases productivity and saves time for GP Adhyakshas and ERs to focus on more productive activities.

• The Internet of Things, or IoT, is another technology poised to impact many aspects of technological development, as it allows you to use sensors to collect data over the internet. This

technology can gather a variety of data, such as health data, weather information, agricultural data, and more.

• Blockchain, one of the most trusted technologies today, will redefine the way we interact and transact. This technology fosters trust in the system by increasing accountability and transparency.

• The integration of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in planning and decision-making is another powerful addition. The precision of predictive analytics, especially when applied to a substantial amount of data, is remarkable. This tool can revolutionize the way you develop your villages by basing decisions on past data trends.

"Gram Panchayat institutions have been in existence for a long time, yet their growth has been relatively slow. With the introduction of the 73rd amendment, these institutions were given more responsibilities and decision-making power. Another emerging trend is the gradual integration of technology since the early 2000s. We need a digital transformation from manually operated systems to automated ones, making governance more efficient and effective."

"I envision 21st-century Gram Panchayats where Adhyakshas and Elected Representatives (ERs) will become agents of change. You and your team of ERs will play the most crucial roles in catalyzing change by harnessing the power of technology in rural India. Solutions in a 21st-century GP will be enabled by technology, complemented by capable human resources. As we strive to achieve the UNSDGs in less than 10 years, our solutions must be smarter than ever. This is the dawn of a limitless era for our rural citizens. You'll soon realize that your GPs will be nothing like what they used to be."

I wrapped up my talk by posing a series of questions:

"Will you step up to be the 21st-century Adhyaksha who brings digital transformation to your Panchayats? Will you lead your Panchayats to achieve the UNSDGs by 2030? Will you and your team of ERs bring Mahatma Gandhi's vision of 'Gram Swaraj' to fruition?"

By this point, the elected representatives began discussing the importance of being motivated to instigate change. They acknowledged that 21st-century developments are driven by modern technology and that they should act as catalysts for creating 21st-century Gram Panchayats.

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