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GOOD PRACTICES IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Children in Local Governance

By Alka D | Dec 2024

From campaigning for sanitary pad vending machines to playgrounds and cleaner villages, children are making their voice count in Maharashtra's Gram Panchayats.



KAGAL, Maharashtra: In 2022, the then 14-year-old Anushka Sutar could barely make eye contact with a male student in her village, let alone have a conversation with them. In the next two years, not only did she break this taboo but also organised several meetings with her peers of both genders, an exercise that boosted her confidence tremendously.

“Confidence is so underrated in villages,” she said. “I never thought I had leadership qualities or that I could actually do something like advocating for a sanitary pad dispenser in our school.”

Anushka’s self-assurance, like that of many other children, springs from an entity called the Bal Panchayat or Children’s Council. Parallel to the Gram Panchayat, a local government institution in rural India, the Bal Panchayat initiative aims to nurture children’s active participation in local governance processes to foster a sense of responsibility and enable them to develop leadership qualities.

The Bal Panchayats in Anushka’s village, Arjuni, and Vhannur and Kapashi villages, were part of a pilot project launched in 83 villages in Kagal taluka by the Maharashtra government and the social policy division of UNICEF on September 30, 2020.

*We felt heard, respected and accepted
when we witnessed the construction of this
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surprised the Sarpanch and other members of the Gram Panchayat.

- SAKSHI JADHAV, SARPANCH, VHANNUR BAL PANCHAYAT

Arjuni was the first village to get a Bal Panchayat in April 2021 while Vhannur and Kapashi got theirs exactly a year later. Delighted in their newfound voice, the children of these villages plunged headlong into ideation and community activism.

Sakshi Jadhav (16), the sarpanch of the Vhannur Bal Panchayat, recalled how excited she was when she first saw the construction of a road in Sankpal Wadi that they



“We felt heard, respected and accepted when we witnessed the construction of this road,” she said. “Some of our suggestions truly surprised the Sarpanch and other members of the Gram Panchayat; they realised that we could actually engage in serious brainstorming and come up with solutions for some of the long-pending issues in our village.”

Kapashi, on its part, first took up the issue of clean drinking water. “Previously, students were reluctant to drink the water in the taluka schools due to its poor quality,” said Samruddhi Parit, the 17-year-old deputy sarpanch of the Bal Panchayat. “However, even after it was improved with filtration, some kids would still forget

to drink regularly. I requested schools to incorporate two daily bells as a reminder, and the students now drink water regularly and enthusiastically.”

Samruddhi also held discussions about the Bal Panchayat in every taluka school, emphasising the importance of adults supporting regular meetings for children and creating a space where they could freely express their ideas. Selected ideas could then be incorporated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan.

Origins of Maharashtra’s Bal Panchayats

In 2016, UNICEF launched the Child-Friendly and Gender-Friendly Governance project , piloting it in over 100 villages across Nandurbar, Chandrapur and Latur districts.

This project introduced a child-centric approach to planning, budgeting, and monitoring, led by sensitised elected representatives, functionaries, and volunteers, with active community involvement, including that of children. It encouraged child participation through Bal Sabhas, promoting their engagement in planning, monitoring and ensuring safe public spaces.

स्थापना : २४/०४/२०२१

बालरुनेही पंचायत, अर्जुनी



सदस्यांचे नाव	पद
कु.अनुष्का उमेश सुतार	बालसरपंच
कु.समृद्धी दत्तात्रय देसाई	उपसरपंच
कु.संग्राम महादेव देसाई	सदस्य
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श्री.अनिल जोतिबा उन्हाळे	प्रेरक
सौ.पुनम दिपक पेडणेकर	प्रेरिका

राष्ट्रीय मूल्ये

प्रतिष्ठा

सौजन्यशीलता

साम

Names of members of the Arjuni and Vhannur village Bal Panchayats are displayed on the board in the respective Gram Panchayat offices, recognising the children's role in local governance.

The success of the intervention led to the inclusion of children's participation in the Gram Panchayat Development Planning guidelines issued by Maharashtra's rural development department in 2018. In 2020, the state government became directly involved and took lead in this initiative with UNICEF providing technical support.

In Arjuni, the Gram Panchayat convened a joint meeting of two schools at a village temple where, along with health tips and a lecture on the detrimental effects of excessive mobile phone usage, the Bal Panchayat concept was introduced to the students.

Stories and games during training

The process began with sensitisation workshops with various governmental and non-governmental organisations, which helped identify potential field facilitators called Preraks and Prerikas, names that signify their role in the process – to inspire the children.

“We were not used to listening to children’s opinions, which most of us adults tend to dismiss as childish. So, this was the first change within us: learning to listen when a child speaks.”

- RAVINA MANE, FACILITATOR FROM VHANNUR VILLAGE

The facilitators underwent a rigorous training programme, which included how to converse with children on rights and duties, introduce them to child rights laws and educate them on local governance. The programme also equipped them with the vital skills of building a personal rapport with the children.

“We were trained to engage with the children and encourage them to share their ideas and stories,” said Ravina Mane, a Prerika from Vhannur village. “We were not used to listening to children’s opinions, which most of us adults tend to dismiss as childish. So, this was the first

change within us: learning to listen when a child speaks. We were also taught how to keep a safe distance while guiding the children: to not bombard them with too much information but rather to lead them via storytelling, games and group activities. Besides this, we learned not to make personal remarks and how to handle emotional outbursts from participants during experience sharing sessions.”

The training provided an overview of different children — from the specially abled, rehabilitated, substance-addicted, transgenders and beggars to the HIV-positive, victims of sex work and sexual crimes and those displaced by conflict.

There were lessons on sexual relations and human reproduction — pointing out what to explain and what to avoid. Additionally, the possible shyness of the facilitator, which could hinder effective communication, was tackled with games, conversational role play dialogues and storytelling exercises.

India has eight different laws addressing the protection of child rights, each with a different age limit. While all were explained during the training, the facilitators were told to provide a simple definition to the children to avoid confusing them: viz that in India, a person under the age of 18 is considered a child and is protected as such under the 1989

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the country is a signatory.

Namdev Chougule, a teacher at Lal Bahadur Shastri Vidyalaya in Arjuni, was a member of the first cohort to

undergo the facilitator training. Like many other participants, he initially expressed skepticism about children assuming responsibility for such tasks and questioned the rationale of a democratically elected body like the Gram Panchayat considering their opinions at all. However, after the training sessions, which conveyed the importance of acknowledging and valuing the expectations and expressions of every child, he was more than convinced.

“Recognising that traditional lecturing might not be the most effective approach for young minds, we adopted a more interactive style,” said Chougule of his subsequent interaction with the children.

“We encouraged students to formulate at least 25 questions on a given topic before delivering a lecture or imparting information . This strategy helped us in direct engagement and ensured that students were attentive and invested in the subject.”

Spotting problems, offering solutions

Once the Bal Panchayats were instituted, the discussions in them threw up several hitherto untacked problems of villages. One of the major concerns was safety.

Samruddhi Desai, deputy Bal Sarpanch of Arjuni, recounted how students routinely raised this issue, particularly adolescent girls who had to cycle through deserted routes at odd times and faced stalking and inappropriate remarks from the men and boys.

Like her, Yash Bharmal, a member of the Kapashi Bal Panchayat, shared his fear of harm befalling vulnerable children.

“My primary concern is safety,” he said. “We frequently see or read news about children being kidnapped. Our village is in a large market area which is accessed by people from neighboring villages, so there are many unknown people around. In such a situation, it is crucial to educate every girl and boy on how to conduct themselves and what to avoid.”

At the meetings, Yash asks important questions like “Should children engage in conversation with unknown people or not? If something goes wrong, how does one reach out for help? Is it a child’s responsibility to collect evidence if a crime takes place?”

The need for such surveillance was the common demand in all three villages.

“In areas with inadequate street lighting, we girls were afraid to walk home from school in the dark,” said Suhani Khede, a Vhannur Bal Panchayat member. “Some of us also experienced harassment in the form of explicit comments and suggestive remarks. We shared these experiences with members of the Bal Panchayat during our meetings at school and at other events.”

*Bal Sarpanch Anushka Sutar in conversation with staff at the
Mhalsakant High School in Arjuni village*

In response to these persistent issues, the students decided to engage in brainstorming sessions to identify potential solutions, and ultimately asked for CCTV cameras to be installed at strategic locations within the village. While this initiative has not yet been fully accomplished, cameras have been set up in certain areas.

The Bal Panchayat has also requested that a child helpline be set up and its numbers prominently displayed to provide discreet assistance to those in need.

Another conspicuous issue was that of children being increasingly drawn to the digital world and spending excessive time with their mobile devices.

Arjuni Bal Panchayat members held extensive discussions on the declining interest in socialising and physical activities, and in February 2023, proposed a solution to address this issue: the establishment of a recreational area with playground equipment for children of all ages.

“Our training emphasises the importance of peer engagement, problem identification and solution development,” explained Saniya Sutar, an Arjuni Bal Panchayat member. “We believe that by providing modern play stations and exercise equipment such as an open-air gym, we can encourage our friends to return to outdoor activities and reduce screen time. We have formally submitted this request.”

In response to the demand, the Gram Panchayat developed plans and initiated work on the recreational area, but additional funding will be required to complete

it. A proposal has been submitted to the Panchayat Samiti (Block Panchayat, the local government institution at the block level) to secure the necessary resources.

Another demand of the Bal Panchayats was advocated largely by female members. In Kapashi, under Samruddhi Parit's leadership, members asked for the installation of sanitary pad vending machines and incinerators like the one Arujni village had installed.

In Arjuni itself, Bal Panchayat members expressed their discomfort with discussing menstruation-related issues with male doctors and asked for regular visits by a female healthcare professional with whom they could have uninhibited discussions. Their concerns were seconded by their parents but unfortunately this demand remains unfulfilled.

Bal Panchayats have also asked for dustbins throughout the village, the formation of Self-Help Groups to initiate self-defense training for children, and public talks by dignitaries to benefit adolescents and youngsters. In keeping with the challenges of the contemporary world, one of these subjects is financial literacy.

“Most adolescents watch YouTube and Instagram reels, from which they draw inspiration to earn quick money from mutual funds or the stock market,” said Samruddhi Parit. “They know nothing about the risk factors; just watching others' experiences makes them feel this is the right way. To channel their financial ambitions and understanding properly, the deputy Bal Sarpanch has requested the Kapashi Gram Panchayat for training.”

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Bal Panchayats maintain records of their meetings and written requests to the Gram Panchayat for amenities

In contrast to contemporary challenges, Bal Panchayat members are also pursuing a resolution of age-old social problems. Following the example of many villages in Maharashtra which have passed resolutions to end the practice of discriminating against widows, the Kapashi Bal Panchayat has advocated a similar resolution in its village.

“Some of my friends have lost their fathers,” said Samruddhi. “I can see that their mothers get discriminatory treatment, and I want to stop such regressive social behavior from going forward.”

Environmental pollution is also a big concern for children. Yash Bharmal from Kapashi, an outdoors type, has been noticing how the village has not been protective of its natural resources. “We have beautiful water streams and a river, but we have been polluting them and have not had any clean-up drives,” he said. “I am eager to explore the ways in which we children can contribute to preventing the pollution of these water bodies.”

Blossoming kids, wiser teachers

Whilst taking up these vital issues, the children themselves have blossomed perceptibly. Tushar Ingle from the Kapashi Bal Panchayat said that his consistent participation in the organisational meetings had improved his socialising skills.

Reflecting on his initial fear of social situations, he emphasised the importance of persevering. “Had I given up halfway, I would have never fully understood the impact of this experience,” he said.

Vhannur Bal Panchayat member Atharv Mane too shared his empowering experience. “When I was selected, everyone at home was delighted but I was unsure about what to do next,” he said. He then began making a list of the problems he was facing, for instance the perennial foul odour from leaking sewage lines in Malewadi where he lives.

Initially, he was hesitant about voicing this, but after bringing the issue to the attention of the Bal Panchayat, it was resolved within a few months by the Gram Panchayat.

“The villagers in senior positions listened to our inputs, which boosted my confidence,” he said.

Within a few months of the training, many students began to exhibit a notable improvement — they shared more openly with teachers and parents, and engaged in meaningful conversations, clearly indicating the programme’s positive impact.

The Vhannur Gram Panchayat was awarded for their work in successfully running a Bal Panchayat under a pilot project undertaken by the Maharashtra government

Anil Unhale, the Prerak for the Arjuni Bal Panchayat, pointed out that adults had benefited too. “From missing streetlights to domestic issues, from school problems to

village-wide concerns, we gained various perspectives that we had previously overlooked despite their obvious presence,” he said. “The children helped us see these issues in a new light.”

Elections and Gram Panchayat support

Initially, electing the Bal Panchayats was a challenging task. A typical Gram Panchayat has wards from which representatives are elected, providing for caste, tribal and gender reservations. After discussions with schoolteachers, Anganwadi workers and facilitators, it was decided to maintain the existing village wards for the Bal Panchayat and implement caste and gender reservations.

Rather than conducting a ballot-box election, students were informed about potential candidates aged between 11 and 18 years, and their consent for an unopposed election of each candidate was recorded.

To ensure that the members of the Bal Panchayat reflected the diversity of the village population, candidates were selected from both Zilla Parishad schools and government-aided schools managed by private organisations.

A direct correlation exists between an active, vibrant Bal Panchayat and a sensitive Gram Panchayat.

“The Gram Panchayat members realised how they lacked a child-friendly attitude, and how listening to children and empowering them could help to formulate better policies for our villages.”

- POOJA RANJIT MORE, SARPANCH, VHANNUR GRAM PANCHAYAT

In Vhannur, for instance, Pooja Ranjit More, the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat and M D Jangam, a Gram Sevak, have both taken a keen interest in ensuring smooth functioning between all the stakeholders — teachers, villagers, facilitators and children.

“It was a learning experience for all of us,” they said. “The Gram Panchayat members realised how they lacked a child-friendly attitude, and how listening to children and empowering them could help to formulate better policies for our villages.”

More and Jangam said that meetings between the Sarpanch and the Bal Panchayat representatives happened every month. A few Bal Panchayat members were sent for block-level training to Kagal taluka, where the facilitators had also been taught. After their training, the facilitators and Bal Panchayat representatives regularly interacted for several months with all the Bal Panchayat members in informal sessions called Bal Samwads.

One of the issues the students took up with the assistance of the facilitators was of anganwadis , visiting these in groups to interact with the children and staff and conducting surveys. The Bal Panchayat then developed a charter of demands for anganwadis, including appropriate floor seating for younger children, water filters, a toilet facility, doors, windows and a proper roof for the anganwadi building, drawings on the walls to engage the kids, and a storage area for grains. Most of the demands were met by the Gram Panchayat.

More shared her experience of how Vhannur Bal Panchayat members had alerted her to a proposed child marriage in a nomadic tribe community in the village. The authorities intervened and stopped the wedding. “Although the girl was eventually married to the chosen man after turning 18, the Bal Panchayat’s intervention prevented her from being married at the young age of 16 and a half, demonstrating the positive impact of their involvement,” she said.

Another initiative involved a survey of elderly single women in the village. The Gram Panchayat and Bal Panchayat had a joint meeting, and the work was entrusted to members of the Bal Panchayat. Children visited the homes of the women, communicated with them and tried to understand the challenges they faced — for instance, some of the women were not equipped to apply for the state pension scheme. The Bal Panchayat compiled a list of such women and their problems and submitted it to the village for further action.

Facilitator Ravina Mane updating Gram Panchayat members on the functioning of the Vhannur Bal Panchayat

Independence Day 2022 was witness to the changed relation and power dynamics in Vhannur village after the formation of the Bal Panchayat. At the flag-hoisting ceremony on the Gram Panchayat campus, Bal Panchayat members sat alongside the Sarpanch, Deputy Sarpanch, Gram Panchayat members and schoolteachers on the dais.

Nothing could convey better the fact that the Bal Panchayat had been recognised as a legitimate and respected initiative by adult citizens of the village. It sent out a powerful message to the public and instilled a deep sense of pride in Bal Panchayat members.

Limitations and challenges

The Gram Panchayats, however, have their limitations. Many demands raised by the Bal Panchayats need approval and funding, which is often delayed. Some demands can be handled only by the Panchayat Samiti/ block administration, which either ignores them or delays their execution.

Jalendra Buwa, the Development Officer of Kapashi village, pointed out that since he was responsible for overseeing 16 villages and his busy schedule limited his ability to fully address the children's demands.

“We have established a sanitary pad facility for girls, and it is being utilised as expected,” he said. “But this was within the Gram Panchayat's budget — most other proposals are sent to the block level and are pending for further action.”

This bureaucratic delay, said Arjuni Bal Panchayat facilitator Unhale, was difficult to explain to the children, who often felt disappointed.

Amol Patil, the Child Development Officer of Kagal taluka, said that all 83 villages within it had been sensitised to the Bal Panchayat programme. Safety audits, a compilation of safety demands by children, emerged as the top demand from the Bal Panchayats. “The children propose interesting, innovative demands that cannot be ignored,” explained Patil. “However, due to limited funding, we are unable to fulfill every demand.”

Bal Panchayat members meeting students at the Lal Bahadur Shastri School in Arjuni village to create awareness about child rights.

A major issue in the Bal Panchayat initiative is the response of different Gram Panchayats to it. The pilot project in Kagal taluka did not lead to similar outcomes in every village. The Arjuni and Vhannur Gram Panchayats' results were inspiring because the leadership took interest in the programme whereas other Gram Panchayats saw this as additional work.

Another issue is how to ensure a continued commitment beyond Gram Panchayat elections. Many interventions at the Gram Panchayat level, often by civil society organisations, governments and even by an elected body of the Gram Panchayat, do not continue when new representatives are elected after five years.

A more general challenge is the lack of a core engine to drive the initiative. Former Kagal Block Development

Officer (BDO) Sushil Sansare took the initiative and mobilised schools and Gram Panchayats to carry out the programme, using different modes of interactive sessions and film screenings for capacity-building.

“I liked the idea because it was inclusive and novel,” he said. “But the new BDO treated the initiative as just one more among his many responsibilities, which I heard has dampened the mood in the Gram Panchayats.”

A third challenge arises out of the limitations and red tape at the Gram Panchayats and block administrations. For example, the Gram Sevak and teachers of Arjuni village closely interacted with the Bal Panchayat and prepared a plan for execution of their ideas. However, while some suggestions got executed, others did not.

Finally, the Bal Panchayats are yet to become self-propelled institutions which can continue their work without external support. After the UNICEF pilot project ended in 2023, it showed in the slackening of institutional processes.

The children in the Bal Panchayat also grew up and their priorities changed to exams and college admissions. The Bal Panchayats require new faces and constant nurturing until they are owned by the teachers and Gram Panchayat leadership. That is yet to happen.

About the author

Alka D is a Mumbai based journalist and writes on developmental issues

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