

India's Democracy in a Nutshell:

The election of a Pradhan in a small village in UP

-- *Manali Chakrabarti*

The following account is almost verbatim from what was related to us in a close-group discussion. [We met on 10th of July, 2021; the conversation happened in Hindi. I have translated it taking care to retain both the form and essence of what transpired.] Given the sensitivity of situation we will keep the protagonists and the various characters anonymous. Also, because there is nothing unique about this account; it is merely an example of what is probably happening on a larger scale in elections across the State and beyond.

The backdrop

We will call him **Our Friend** (OF). He is in his early thirties and is a contract worker in the Institute we reside in. We came to know him during a campaign to reinstate some workers who had lost their jobs because the contract was changed. The campaign was a partial success, and though the workers who were at the centre of the issue completely disappeared from the scene after getting re-employed, **OF** became a regular member of our weekly meetings for workers. Over the years he participated in all kinds of activities and discussions and became an indispensable member of our group. We appreciated his competence in grasping complex issues, his uprightness and sense of justice and his ability to reach out to fellow workers in fighting for their rights. **OF** has a very pleasant personality - ever smiling, firm and yet non-aggressive in his assertions, and he usually brings in cheer and goodwill in our meetings. He also was getting fairly political in his stance and analysis and could see the power angle in daily-life situations.

We also came to know of his personal details.

OF is from the Valmiki caste. Those familiar with caste relations in North India would know the implications of belonging to the lowest caste in the hierarchy; it is in fact outside the caste system, an outcaste so to say. But caste hierarchy follows the caste outside too, hence Valmikis are the lowest of the outcastes. Most other people even from the Scheduled Castes would not have any social relations with the Valmikis – no meals, no sharing of water, let alone a marital alliance. In the local area all sanitation work is *reserved* for this caste.

OF was not engaged in sanitation work, and in fact worked in a students' mess, which implied he worked and interacted with workers across caste lines. Further he belonged to a village close by where his family had a house, some agricultural land, and some cattle. He lived in a joint family of several uncles, aunts, cousins and their families, and since the death of his grandfather his grandmother had been holding the extended family together. **OF** was very close to his grandmother; and since she drew a government pension, she had significant say in the family matters, which in turn accorded **OF** a special position too. **OF**'s father worked as a supervisor in a soft drink bottling plant franchise unit in the city and earned Rs 12,000/- per month. When we came to know **OF**, he had recently got married and the couple had a baby soon after.

In December 2019 **OF**'s father lost his job because the company was bought by another party and the new owners did not wish to retain the employees. The workers went on an informal sit-in strike, but even after several weeks no one came to negotiate with them – neither the local government officials nor the owners. In January **OF**'s father was offered a job at a much lower pay in the new dispensation, with the understanding that he would break away with a few of the workers and join the factory so that production could start, effectively breaking the strike. **OF**'s father refused to do so. It was a difficult decision given that there was no alternative source of income in sight. And yet the strike fizzled out anyway – the extreme winter cold and overall gloom and despair were too much for these workers to continue in an uncertain fight.

Soon after, the pandemic struck, and the entire country was plunged into a complete lockdown. The Institute too, like most other establishments, effectively shut down, rendering thousands of workers jobless, including **OF**. The two main earning members of **OF**'s family were now jobless, and the situation was likely to continue for a while. **OF**'s wife was pregnant with their second child, which further added to the uncertainty. And then his grandmother fell ill. The family did try to get her as much medical attention as possible, but she passed away. Along with her went the only other steady source of income for the joint family – her pension. The family effectively fell apart after that – the kitchens separated and each unit (of **OF**'s father's brothers and their respective grown-up children and families) was left to fend for itself.

OF continued to be one of the most active workers politically in mobilising the workers' collective to demand financial support from their employers. They were successful to an extent, but as the months rolled on, we all realised that this was a long haul and things may never go back to 'normal'.

In February 2021 **OF** started missing meetings, and we came to know that he was actively involved in campaigning for the upcoming Panchayat elections. We were surprised, even shocked, given his political disposition towards authority and the system. By the third week of April the entire country was in the grip of the deadly second wave of the pandemic. There was death, distress and devastation all around in our state, although the official narrative underreported it by a massive margin. And yet the Panchayat elections happened with the usual fanfare right in the middle of the peak of the pandemic – between April 15th and 29th 2021. On the 2nd of May **OF** called us up excitedly to let us know that his father had won the elections – he was the new Pradhan, and **OF** the *Pradhan-putra*. His voice and our muffled congratulations got drowned in the celebrations going on behind him.

It has been two months since then. We met **OF** almost every week, but did not have a chance to talk about his new situation. This weekend he sought an intimate meeting with some of the closest associates and shared his experience of becoming a Pradhan-putra.

The village

OF's village has around 300 households, and there are 1100+ voters. There are a few households of upper castes, around 25 per cent are Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and the rest are *Harijans*. The village till recently was largely dependent on agriculture, and the

Lower Ganga Canal flowing adjacent to the village ensured that there was enough water for three crops annually. But over the last decade urban buyers and property dealers have shown an increasing interest in the land. These dealers usually buy large chunks of land from the owners, divide them into plots and sell them to various parties. Most of the lands are not bought by locals, and usually the land remains vacant, or even if some structure is built, it is not occupied for residential purposes by the buyers. Land prices have gone up exponentially, and there has been an influx of ready money into the village, which has led to some visible affluence in the form of two-wheelers and rebuilding of old houses with modern construction materials. And yet there is a high level of unemployment in the village; most of the lower caste youth work as daily wage labourers at various construction sites. They are rounded up by petty contractors by the day or week, depending upon the contractors' requirement.

For the last 15 years the Sarpanch (interchangeably called Pradhan) of the village has been a man of the *Baniya* caste. He has been elected unopposed for three terms. During his tenure his own prosperity increased exponentially: he has three brick kilns and two *desi*-liquor *thekas* in nearby villages, among other properties. This time the constituency was expected to be declared as reserved for an OBC candidate, so there was speculation as to whom the sitting Pradhan would nominate from the OBC caste, which would ensure perpetuation of his influence. However, barely two months before the elections, the village was declared a *Harijan* constituency. And this is when **OF** and his father were approached by some villagers to contest the Sarpanch elections.

The outgoing Pradhan had meanwhile selected a person from another Scheduled Caste community (other than Valmiki) to contest the elections. There are around a hundred households of the aforementioned SC caste in the village. The person he selected seems to be the village bum. He does not have a job, is not literate either, and spends his days drinking and getting into brawls. Obviously, if this guy were to get elected the earlier Sarpanch would be able to continue his stint without any interruptions. This was the person **OF**'s father was put up against.

The campaign

OF and his father decided to accept the proposition and put up his candidature. When we asked his reason to do so **OF** was quite candid:

This year and a half has been very tough on us, our family has barely been able to manage so far, but things look extremely bleak. Everyone told us that once one became a Pradhan, even if we chose to be **clean** in our dealings, we would make a lot of money. We knew we would never get another chance, and this would secure our children's future too. Also, my father really wished to get such a prestigious position - it was beyond his dreams that this could be.

And once decided, the father and son sat down to discuss how much money would be required in the process. **OF** was honest about this too:

We had chosen to do a *saaf suthra* (squeaky clean) elections, and for that one needed to at least distribute enough liquor and *murga* (chicken) to the people every day. We

know that even if the *mukhiya* (main male) of the household was a completely wasted person his decision was final for the family. So, it was imperative to keep him happy – more liquor and more *murga*. But then that would leave the other members of the household with nothing, so we decided to distribute cash to the families – Rs 5,000 to a few and Rs 1,000 to the rest.

All this would require money and **OF** and his family had none. **OF** and his father had had no earnings for over a year, and they had exhausted all their meagre savings, including **OF**'s EPF account, in fending for their daily sustenance. And then there was a new baby in the house. So they knew they had to borrow. One of their well-wishers (who pushed them to contest) assured them that he would arrange for a loan at a reasonable interest. **OF** and the well-wisher went to the city for the loan, the moneylender was amiable, and the deal was struck at an interest of 5 per cent per month. Further, the repayment would be due only when the 'Pradhani' was settled, and should **OF** lose the elections the interest would be waived. **OF** borrowed Rs 2.5 lacs over two instalments in this arrangement – the interest alone over these five months (March to July) was Rs 62,500, and it continues to pile up.

To appreciate how 'small scale' **OF**'s campaign budget was, he told us that the outgoing Pradhan's candidate (from the other Scheduled Caste) had spent Rs 8 lacs in the campaign. He doled out the same inducements – liquor, food and cash – albeit in larger quantities. With rival groups out-doing each other in trying to garner support, the village, like all other such villages, turned into a never-ending party of good food and drunken brawls. Men of all ages were indulging in the merriment and expecting more, knowing that these few weeks were the only ones where they mattered, and hence they made the most of it. The entire spectacle of democracy was reduced to these handouts.

OF had a rather interesting take on why the villagers supported his father's candidature over that of the more powerful (by association) opponent. He believes it is because his family was one of the few families which, in spite of belonging to the lowest caste, did not have any of the 'lower caste vices' – yes, he used this phrase. They did not drink or eat meat in excess, instead consuming milk and milk products. **OF** and his family were considered 'decent' and were respected because of their 'good' habits. He was convinced that this was the main reason that he was able to garner support from the villagers. **OF** elaborated that the young men of the other Scheduled Caste group are neither 'respectable' nor 'respectful' of the elders of the village. Having found some prosperity recently by selling off land, most young men of that caste group have been found to be showing off their powerful and fancy motorbikes by riding at high speed in the village paths. And of course, indulging in alcohol in excess. Such obscene display of affluence by them hurt the sensibilities of the village elders.

As we had mentioned earlier, **OF** is quite a politically conscious person, and is sensitive to the discrimination meted out to lower caste people like him by the society. In fact, he has often argued convincingly to fellow workers and associates that this leads to division in the working class, and hence that we should be mindful of it. And yet **OF** is unquestioningly convinced about the definition of respectable habits as defined by the dominant section of our feudal society. It did not even seem to occur to him that the so-called obscene display of wealth and disrespect by the youth of his village could be seen as a legitimate action of

defiance against the norm set by the upper caste/class. The quest to belong, to be accepted, seems to often cloud our political consciousness.

But in spite of all their respect for **OF** and his family, the voters were very clear that their allegiance lay with the side which would provide them free alcohol and food. In fact, a few got miffed with **OF**'s urging them to drink moderately and switched to the other side, even flaunting the cache of liquor which they secured from them. One needs to remember that the outgoing Pradhan has two *thekas* of *desi* liquor, so he could supply voters abundantly. **OF** put aside his principles and continued to supply liquor and *murga* to the precious voters. But he did not touch it, and neither did his father, he informed us earnestly.

OF's village was not an outlier in the extravagance of election campaigns. In the neighbouring village an uncle-nephew duo decided to contest elections against each other. Each earmarked Rs 15 lacs for the campaign, and each sold off substantial pieces of land to fund it. So, besides liquor and food, which as we realised was the very basic, one of them gave silver anklets to women voters and the other substantial cash. And that village has only 800 voters.

Besides this daily fare there were at least three occasions when **OF** had to dole out substantial cash. The first was the day of nomination, when a whole group of well-wishers and supporters had gone along with **OF** and his father. After the nomination was filed partying was in order.

Meanwhile six candidates of the other SC caste, including the one supported by the outgoing Pradhan, also filed their nominations. But in the next few weeks all of them withdrew after having been bribed Rs 90,000 each by the outgoing Pradhan. On the eve of the elections there were only two candidates – **OF**'s father and the SC candidate supported by the outgoing Sarpanch, whom everybody expected to win, given his patron.

The second big expense was the hosting of election officials. **OF** and his father knew they could not offer cash or kind, so they provided hospitality. Food, drinks, and the works. The other side apparently gave cash.

On election day, there was a large turnout in the village – over 800 voters of the eligible over-1100 voted. It was just the right number to be declared a valid election. Apparently if more than 90 per cent of the votes are registered, the constituency is considered 'suspect' and the process is withheld till investigations are done to validate it. No such mishap occurred in **OF**'s village.

And finally, on the day of the counting, **OF** and his father camped at the counting site with a large group of supporters to ensure 'fair play'. The other side too was there in even larger numbers. The counting got delayed and then continued till the early hours of the morning – and the supporters needed to be supplied with food and drinks to keep their spirits up.

Finally, the results were declared. **OF**'s father won by **14 votes**. He was the new Sarpanch – the first person of the Scheduled Caste to occupy this position in his village. **OF** called us up to inform of this happy outcome. And there were celebrations over several days.

Being a Pradhan Putra

According to **OF** there are three main actors in the village Panchayat system. They are the Sarpanch/Pradhan (an elected position for five years), then the Panchayat Secretary, Sachiv, a non-elected representative appointed by the government (permanent position but transferrable) and the Lekhpal, a clerical position appointed by the government to maintain village revenue accounts and land records. The Sarpanch is given a salary of Rs 3,500 per month, while the salaries for appointed positions are as per the government rules, ranging from Rs 22,000 per month to Rs 69,000 per month. And the entire system can work only if there is an understanding among these three actors. **OF** gave us to understand that the earlier Sarpanch had a 'setting' with these two functionaries, and hence was able to make a lot of money. The examples he gave casually were:

* Funds for the brick path which was to be laid in front of his house had been sanctioned twice and the money also spent, but the path never came up. It still remains a muddy mess.

* Sanction for a project worth Rs 90 lacs to build an artery canal from the main Lower Ganga Canal was made a few years earlier; but nothing happened, and the money of course disappeared.

* A plot of land belonging to the Gram Sabha (common land) was sold off to a private property dealer for Rs 66 lacs.

OF's father was happy to be the titular Pradhan, but he made it very clear that **OF** would have to handle all the affairs. And **OF** was keen to shoulder the responsibility, so things worked out fine between them.

As soon as **OF**'s father assumed the office, there was an order from the government to all village panchayats to run a '*safai abhiyaan*' (sanitation drive) for three days. **OF** promptly initiated the activity, recruited the requisite number of workers at a reasonable rate and actually got the entire village cleaned by continuing the activity for a fortnight. As he said '*teen din me kya hi saaf hota mera gaon, theek se saaf karne ke liye ek pakhwara to minimum tha*' (what could have been achieved in merely three days, the cleaning drive needed to be at least a fortnight to make any visible difference). After that he paid the workers on time from the money that he and his father had borrowed at such a hefty interest. We knew that **OF** was mindful of workers' rights, and as he himself said, '*unka paisa main rok ke kaise rakh sakta tha?*' (How could I withhold their wages?)' But then when he went to get the amount refunded from the Panchayat office he realised that it would not happen immediately, there was a lot of paperwork involved and even if the Sachiv and Lekhpal were willing to process them quickly it would still take weeks or months.

The second activity was MNREGA, which too comes under the Panchayat. He lined up 50 eligible people, who were ready to put in the labour should they be paid the requisite wages.

Usually, MNREGA is an exercise in farce: the Sarpanch rounds up his cohorts and submits their names as eligible for MNREGA work. No work is done, only the money is divided in half between the Panchayat members and the ‘workers’. And everyone comes out happier. On paper the work is recorded as ‘completed’. **OF** tried to amend the situation by personally identifying eligible households and workers. But his list was not accepted on various technical grounds, and an alternate list was finalised. The MNREGA wages is barely Rs 204/- per day, but since nothing gets done, no one grudges this ridiculous amount of support in the government’s grandest scheme for rural India.

And still no money came to **OF**, on the contrary money kept flowing out.

OF had not anticipated such a state of affairs. In fact, he was hoping that money would start gushing in as soon as his father occupied the position. Further he assumed that he would be able to meaningfully use his position of authority to direct funds and activities where it was required. He believed that, his father becoming Sarpanch would not only ensure that he and his family would make money, but the village also would benefit from it. He genuinely thought that all the promises of democracy, collective decision making and prosperity for the most vulnerable would happen, where everybody would come out the winner. But he soon realised that not only was there no ready flow of money to the Sarpanch, but people too were not interested in any form of participatory democracy. They were happy to grab whatever came their way as a largesse, and asked for more, but did not have the time or inclination to demand accountability. The reality was a shock for him.

He did disburse Rs 1,000 each in cheques to 30 unemployed people under the ‘*berozgari bhatta*’ scheme by the government during the pandemic. It felt good to write the cheques and his father was overjoyed to sign it; but people complained that it was too little to make any difference given the state of unemployment and despair because of the pandemic. **OF** found himself getting irritated by this *ingratitude*. He seemed to be blending into the system.

He decided to ask the Sachiv (Panchayat secretary) directly *how money was made in this set up*. The Sachiv told him that money could be made only by doing more work. **OF** learnt that the straightforward accounting for any monetary project of the Sarpanch was as follows:

For any sanctioned project the Contractor would deposit 30 per cent of the total value of the contract to the Sarpanch/Sachiv as soon as the contract was awarded. Of this amount a third (that is 10 per cent of the total value of the contract) is sent to the ‘higher ups (*ooparwaale*)’, and a third each is taken by the Sachiv and the Sarpanch as ‘commission’.

Well of course this is not official, but it is as overboard as possible. **OF** also learnt that the annual budget for the Panchayat was merely Rs 7 lakhs¹; for the entire term of 5 years this comes to all of Rs 35 lakhs. This means that, except for MNREGA, all other activities of the village would have to be done in Rs 5-5.5 lakhs per annum, after deducting the shares to the three parties mentioned above.

Of course, there are some villages which have fantastic sums allocated as budgets², but **OF**’s village is not one of them. And yet, coming back to **OF**’s primary concern as to how much

money can be made, it turns out that even with this commission, the maximum he could earn was Rs 70,000 per year – barely Rs 6,000 per month. While he already was in debt of Rs 2.5 lacs, and his interest itself was Rs 12,500 per month, including the month he borrowed. *Why would people spend tens of lacs of rupees to get elected as a Sarpanch – surely not to earn Rs 3,500 honorarium and some piddly sum as ‘bribe/commission’?* This definitely was not adding up.

As we tried to grapple with this puzzle, we also realised how the system is *designed* for corruption. The ridiculous sum as emolument to the Sarpanch (and the absence of a formal provision for other Panchayat members in the budget) forces them to continue with the practice of ‘commission’. Given this, the entire debate comes down to the scale of corruption – with the ‘smart’ ones being able to make tons of money while the others are left ruing their ineptness. But either way everyone is implicated and is forced to remain silent about the practice.

Other issues

OF also realised there were other complicated issues which he would have to grapple with because of his *de facto* position as Sarpanch. Several of them have come up in the first two months itself, two of which he elaborated for us as follows:

* **OF** got a call from the Sarpanch of the neighbouring village that a plot of land in his Gram Sabha was illegally sold to a private party during the tenure of the last Pradhan. The property developer had already made plots in the land and sold them off to buyers who had started construction on the land. **[Gram Sabha land cannot be sold off as it is the common land; it can be either leased by the Panchayat or converted to residential land/agricultural through the district authorities and paperwork. However, this not only takes time but also involves other dealings. Hence, given the demand for land, it is sometimes sold without paperwork.]** **OF** was warned that this could lead to an official enquiry if someone complained, and since **OF**’s father was the Pradhan he would be implicated. When **OF** asked the Sachiv and the Lekhpal about the deal, they brushed it off saying that the land did not fall under the purview of his village and in fact belonged to the village whose Pradhan had called **OF** in the first place. **OF** called back the friendly neighbouring village Pradhan to clarify and he was categorical that the land did not belong to his village. **OF** then asked the property developer to stall the construction till he verifies the requisite paperwork. The property dealer who seemed to be a powerful operator, basically asked **OF** to ‘buzz off’. **OF** went back to the Panchayat office and asked to see the papers of property transaction that had taken place in the tenure of the last Sarpanch. The Sachiv too told him that the earlier papers were none of **OF**’s concern and that they would be dealt appropriately ‘*kahe pareshan hote ho, sab theek ho jaayega*’ (*Why are you getting worked up, everything would sort out*). Meanwhile **OF**’s father got a phone call from the property dealer’s men asking him to warn **OF** to cool off and not meddle with matters that did not concern him ‘*samhal jaaye, nahi to achcha nahi hoga, jisse kaam na ho usme naak na ghusaaye*’.

This of course got **OF**’s father very uneasy, but **OF** was determined to pursue till he gets to the bottom of it. What he did not say, but was apparent from his narration, was that at this point he was more keen to be *included in the party* rather than break it up.

* The other case concerned an ongoing quarrel between two families of the village. One night things got intense. It started with a drunken brawl, and after they physically assaulted each other, one of the parties called the police and complained that a woman of his family was molested by a member of the rival family. This was late in the night. The police usually respond promptly to such calls, because usually, while there is no merit in the complaint, with the threat of harassment they are able to extract money from both parties. Of course, if things were to get uglier, one or both parties would get dragged to the police station, and things could get much more complicated. **OF** was summoned by the neighbours to handle the issue, and got it sorted out without one or the other party getting arrested. A deal of Rs 25,000 was struck to be given to the police for the complaint to be dropped. And since **OF** had mediated, the police started hounding him for the amount. **OF** had to run around for days to extract the money from those who were involved that night. Things are still simmering between the two families, and **OF** has managed to antagonise both of them too by his intervention.

What next?

OF is very clear he needs to make money, and very soon. With a loan, a mounting interest burden and a long list of aspirations he cannot afford for the present state of affairs to continue.

OF has been doing his own homework, talking to experienced and knowledgeable people who know the rules of the game. He has been told that the first step to be a successful Sarpanch would be to get one's own people into the team – a Sachiv who would be *helpful*. **OF** has been told that the current incumbent is too invested in the earlier Sarpanch to switch sides, and hence has not been of any help, in fact he may have been a hindrance. This Sachiv has to go, and then the Lekhpal would just fall in. He has also figured out the procedure for doing this. Apparently if more than one Sarpanch covered by the Sachiv (secretary) submits a complaint against the official to the SDM, he can be transferred. **OF**'s entire focus is on that move at present.

He knew we would not be of much help to him in this situation.

But we did learn a lot from this short account.

We also realised that we have probably lost **OF** as a political comrade – it is unlikely he would be able to straddle two such contradictory roles. And this made us sad. **OF** was political enough to understand this contradiction, too, and said as much. In his defence he said he had hoped it would be possible.

We were thankful to him for sharing his predicament with us with such honesty. It sure gave us an appreciation of this entire electoral process – the platitudes which we all learn from the books and the **REALITY**.

The character of our democracy

We are told that we can change the system by our *powerful ballot* – because we live in a Democracy. We are told that we can hold people in power accountable by voting them out should they not live up to the promise – because we live in a democracy. We are told it

merely requires an honest person to hold office for change to happen because again we live in a democracy. But the true character of *our* democracy is evident from the simple straightforward account narrated by our friend. This is our democracy in a microcosm. Where the process forces everyone to be 'corrupt', 'honesty' is a sign of ineptitude and is in fact meaningless. And the people, whom the government (of the people, by the people and for the people) claims to represent, are as cynical as the system.

Electoral democracy was thrust on the Indian people from above as a *form* devoid of content. It did not emerge out of the people's own struggles and hence the other social and economic arrangements do not correspond to democracy, so people never acquired any belief in it. The entire concept has been reduced to its periodical rituals and spectacle. The vast majority of our people in fact feel they have nothing to lose because they did not gain anything much from this hallowed democracy. They know that they are unable to afford a dignified existence in spite of toiling hard for their entire lives and through generations. Many of them do know that it is their sweat and tears which create the wealth of the society. And yet they do not question the extreme inequality in our society, since they see no tangible prospect of any change. In such circumstances, they satisfy themselves with the free handouts; that is what they fight for and use to judge the merit of any elected representative. If real democracy implies people's collective ability to get control over their own circumstances and their resources, then most people have no experience of that in the present set-up.

Democracy is premised on the principles of equality, liberty and a notion of collective, but most importantly a widespread public consciousness of these principles. The world over democratic consciousness has been achieved through long and protracted political struggle against all institutions of society, social, political and economic, which obstruct the functioning of democracy. There is no shortcut to it nor space for passive onlookers. If we do not like the present system, our time to act is NOW.

Maybe then upright individuals like **OF** would not have to make cynical choices merely to ensure dignified lives for himself and his children.

Manali Chakrabarti
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¹ <https://www.aajtak.in/india/uttar-pradesh/story/up-panchayat-chunav-2021-first-phase-voting-gram-pradhan-election-process-work-salary-1239209-2021-04-15>

² <https://zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/up-uttarakhand/up-panchayat-chunav-2021-gram-pradhan-budget-more-than-10-cr-know-full-news-here-rsup/880117>