

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY: Experiences of a Sarpanch.

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The title '*Sarpanch*' in the state of Uttarakhand means the Head of a Village Forest Council or *Van Panchayat*. This is distinct from the *Gram Pradhan* who is Head of the Village Administrative Council or *Gram Panchayat*. While both are elected posts, the position of Sarpanch is not often intensely contested or vied for, since the flow of funds from the state (and the power of dispensation of favour and patronage thereof) for creating village amenities and infrastructure are channelised through the the Gram Panchayat, and not the Van Panchayat. Not surprisingly, the election of the Gram Pradhan also involves political party affiliations. The work of the Van Panchayat, on the other hand, has little glamour, and involves an everyday slog of protecting a resource for ecosystem flows, while also ensuring equitable and sustainable use through inclusive and democratic processes.

When I bought some farm land and settled down in Sarmoli village, in a remote part of the Kumaon Himalaya in 1993 with my family, we sought membership of the Van Panchayat as part of the larger process of integrating with the village community. A refusal of such membership to us only served to make us aware of how the Van Panchayat, a village commons institution, had been appropriated by the better-off families from among the earlier settlers, but also that we were one among many families who had settled down in Sarmoli Village over the past few decades, and were perceived as competitors is the use of an already degraded and over used resource base. It has been a long journey from the 'outside', to being elected the Sarpanch of the Van Panchayat.

Families who live in the village but are not admitted as formal members of the Van Panchayat, may, at the will and pleasure of the members, be granted the 'concession' of being allowed to use the Van Panchayat, for fuelwood, leaf-litter or fodder, but may be refused such patronage at any time. The larger quid-pro-quo come in play here. All non-members are entirely excluded from any decision making within the Van Panchayat. However, such exclusion from decision making is rather pervasive and extends to members of various strata of the community even if they are members of the Van Panchayat. Most often, once representatives are elected onto the Forest Council or Van Panchayat, they begin to take all policy decisions rather than implement policy decisions that are made by the General Body. This is not an isolated phenomenon, but is a reflection of the affliction within the entire spectrum of our polity, from the Gram Panchayat and up the various federal levels.

My 'foot in the doorway' began with attending General Body Meetings of the Van Panchayat uninvited, and contributing with representing the concerns of women and those of poorer families in the village. Later, on the urging of some existing women members, I was admitted as a general member of the Van Panchayat. In the year 2002, the then Sarpanch resigned prematurely from his post citing rampant free-riding and degradation of the Village Forest and lack of cooperation from the community, as reasons for withdrawal. A professional Contractor, who had been Sarpanch earlier, was re-elected in his place, and a position vacant for another Panch (Village Forest Council member) was required to be filled in, and by a woman, since four out of nine Council seats are reserved for women members. I was proposed and elected as a Panch of the Van Panchayat. In 2004 the contactor Sarpanch of our Van Panchayat stood for and got elected at the Gram Pradhan of one of the constituent villages. Since one person cannot hold two elected posts simultaneously, fresh elections were held, and I was re-elected as Panch, and subsequently as the Sarpanch among them.

I inherited, in a manner of speaking, a hot potato. Our Village Forest was just too small to meet the subsistence needs of our community. Our Van Panchayat consisted of only 10 hectares of land for over 300 families in two villages. Compare this with the governments own estimated requirement of two hectares of forest land per household. Added to this, poor regulation and protection had led to

over-use and serious physical degradation of the Village Forest. The institutional structure lacked body, and most of the community were bordering on cynicism. There was also a substantial deficit in the Van Panchayat's accounts, due to unresolved dues.

To top it all, there was fresh legislation put in place by the government that pulled the carpet out from under the communities' feet, and centralized control of Village Forests, hitherto a village commons, in the hands of the Forest bureaucracy- the Uttarakhand Forest Department. In the name of 'democratic decentralisation', what is being put in place is administrative 'decongestion' of protection duties and the daily nitty-gritty, while all decision making powers and control have been vested in the bureaucracy. The question of 'who controls', is critically linked to the question of 'control what?' In our analysis, the recent legislation is part of the larger sequence of events unfolding over many years, culminating the turf battles between the Forest Department and the Revenue Departments, with the Forest Department finally prevailing. Most critically, we are witnessing the instrumentation of an altered political ecology that is guided by multilateral funding agencies, and where the global market instead of local subsistence takes precedence.

As is quite evident, the simpler local picture of competing local interests is riven with the complexity and the larger overlays; those of competing national, indeed global interests. In a setting of extremely high biodiversity values, where there is an increasing flow of very high value wild-plants and animal parts to global markets (illegally from Van Panchayats as well as from Reserve Forests), even the prospects of non-extractive use of the landscape for nature-based and adventure tourism is being set up to integrate with the large national and international players. Clearly working with just one village community is going to lead nowhere on these fronts, and so comings-together and agglomerations are being worked at, both at village cluster levels as well as at the state level to counter this downhill slide. I am only one among a few others in the state of Uttarakhand, who are nuclei, so to speak, around which local precipitations of collective thought and action can occur, and we are working together to build larger precipitations at a regional level.

At the community level this is my fourth year in a five year term. The process of building a democratically robust institution with equitable and broad-based flows of benefits on the one hand, and a conservation constituency on the other, is a long-term, indeed an ongoing process. We have but made a beginning in the following aspects:

- Putting in place resolutions and procedures for broad-based decision-making and everyday involvement in activities. Where the availing of any benefit is directly related to contributions in the protection and management of the Panchayati forest
- Extending Membership to every adult resident of the community, particularly of single women or resident daughters so far denied membership.
- Ensuring effective protection and regulated use.
- Complete and resolved records and accounts, open and accessible at all times to the General Body.
- Increasing the productivity of the Village Forest through strategic protection and enabling natural regeneration, as well as extensive plantation and seeding efforts.
- Seeking an extension of the Village Forest Area. As described earlier, the Village Forest area is far too small to meet our community's subsistence needs, and yet leave enough to regenerate and produce on a sustainable basis. While not falling into the Malthusian trap, there is no way to meet the communities needs from the Village Forest unless the area is increased to be in reasonable proportion with local needs. Presently, these needs are being met from the unregulated use of a neighbouring Reserve Forest, in an unsustainable environment of illegality.
- Resolving an old but festering boundary dispute with the neighboring village.
- Building cluster unions of Van Panchayats and participating in the federal Sarpanch Sangathan. The need for a larger collective voice against the forked tongue of the

government on decentralization in the face of unprecedented centralization, and their aligning Van Panchayats to distant markets are the current rallying points.

- Running a Galliformes Conservation Project in collaboration with the World Pheasant Association and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.
- Running a Community-based Nature Tourism programme through the Van Panchayat that brings income to the community through home-stay arrangements as well as through the services of trained nature and mountain guides, porters and kitchen staff. This is in order to enhance incomes from indirect and non-extractive use of the Van Panchayat and other forest landscapes in the river-basin.
- The Mesar Van Kautik (Fair). Our Van Panchayat has initiated an annual cultural forest festival that seeks to bring together people from villages across the river basin for a festival in the forest whose presiding deity is Mesar (local for the deity Maheshwar). Apart from sharing local folk music such as a drummers competition, there are group sports events, educational exhibits and talks regards important conservation issues for the river basin and beyond. This is being developed essentially as a platform for dialogue, in the tradition of other annual fairs and festivals that were precipitating points for mass mobilization against colonial expropriation of forest lands in the past in Kumaon.

None of this work however is smooth sailing. The two constituent villages are large and highly stratified within themselves. Longstanding discrimination and elements of divisiveness surface repeatedly and require to be worked out and resolved democratically. The larger and more comprehensive governance set-up of the Gram Panchayat under the 73rd Amendment of our Constitution, has by-and-large been reduced to a mere channel for the flow of welfare money for labour employment from the government. Governance aspects are practically non-existent. The role of the local dispensation of government money attracts a certain kind of politician to the posts of the Gram Panchayat, and administrative rent-seeking in these channels are rife. The working of Van Panchayats such as ours and a few others, provide a stark contrast and a foil to the prevailing set-up. This is resented, and it is often that our work is deliberately impeded by those who stand out in contrast to us. But we see that there is no short-cut past these processes. They are the everyday grind of everyday democracy.

At another level, with mounting assertion over ownership of land and natural resources as a country wide phenomenon, the Uttarakhand Forest Department, with large multilateral funding is steadily increasing its control and the infusion of its agendas into the Van Panchayats. This sometimes comes couched in benign-looking strategies like livelihoods development projects, using the Van Panchayat Forests as a resource base. By tapping into a genuine need for gainful employment, projects such as these while using the 'poor' local as a front, is really dismantling a long standing commons arrangement. In its place is being constructed the ground for private enterprise and personal profit, at the cost of providing for the survival needs and ecological security of the region. Recent legislative changes now allow for a sub-set of the village community, say a clique that calls itself a self-help group, to enter into a business transaction with a commercial entity, using Van Panchayat land as its base. One can see the way this is pointed and need hardly guess where it is headed.

Today, these concerns are being articulated and addressed within our Van Panchayat. From a state of alienation, we have moved some distance into to an relative environment of hope, even in the face of challenges seemingly too large for small communities to tackle. It has been a process of unlearning passivity, especially amongst the women and the marginalized who are the main interface with the forests, and to initiate action, moving beyond seeking individual solutions and the insular experience. Getting from here to there has been more than a leap of faith. It has demanded of each of us a day to day long range commitment to possibility and direct action. Through the Van Panchayat we seek to strengthen this model of small scale participatory democracy in conjunction

with large scale cooperation and coordination. There is now a platform and processes underway for addressing not just immediate needs of survival, but also for concerted engagement with the politics of an increasingly globalized economy. The struggle is a long and protracted one. It is history repeating itself. A hundred years ago, the communities of Kumaon had risen up against the British colonizers who by executive fiat had rendered them thieves in their own forests. Decades of often violent struggle which included the burning of huge swathes of forest of the Himalaya as a desperate measure by the people, finally resulted in the ceding and formation of the Van Panchayats. Today, a new colonizer, an Indian face but an old agenda confronts us.

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