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Making the State Accountable

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A compelling story about citizen-led movements, government accountability, village politics, and decentralisation in Bihar.

In all the sound and fury of national politics and federal contestation, it is easy to forget that much of the frontline state that rural India interacts with regularly is at the third tier of government: the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). PRIs may not necessarily have the budgetary heft or powers of higher levels of government, state or centre. But the last 30 years of gradual devolution to local bodies have added another axis to rural politics and public service delivery which has been difficult to analyse quantitatively.

Part of the analytical conundrum here is that local government is not always quantitatively legible. There is rich historical literature across social sciences on panchayats, starting from colonial-era district collectors through MN Srinivas. But it is an arduous task to marry such work with decentralised village-level data to reach larger systemic conclusions about politics and service delivery. In the last few decades, various state-level surveys, censuses and other forms of administrative data have emerged, allowing PRIs to be included in the quantitative turn.

One of the consequences of the last half-century of quantitative turn in social sciences has been the increasing inaccessibility of academic work to the public at large. Social scientists, particularly those with strong public-policy leanings, have to make themselves intelligible not just to those in their own disciplines, but also to a much wider range of actors whose thinking and policy agendas they are interested in influencing. Hence we have an entire cottage industry of op-eds, policy briefs, social media posts, podcasts, panel discussions and public talks, which play the role of translation, boiling down dense papers into accessible narratives and core ideas.

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In Economics we have seen some of the biggest names in the fields engage in such exercises: *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *The Third Pillar* by Raghuram Rajan, *Poor Economics* by Esther Duflo and Abhijeet Banerjee, and *Sense and Solidarity* by Jean Dreze are but a few memorable recent examples. M.R. Sharan's new book, *Last Among Equals*, falls in the same category. It distils a decade of his work on the political economy of public services and economic development in Bihar. Sharan weaves together the common threads of many of his papers and experiences in the field to tell a compelling story about citizen-led movements, government accountability, village politics, and decentralisation.

One of the distinctive features about Sharan's book is that the researcher is not removed as a distant observer of the events and stories he is retelling. Sharan has worked closely with the Bihar government in various forms over the last decade. He has spent a considerable amount of time in Ratnauli, Muzaffarpur district, where many of his protagonists reside. He has supported the grassroots movements that he writes about. His is not a 30,000 foot narrative from a researcher running a survey halfway across the world. It is a heartfelt story about the possibilities (and failures) of rural development and bottom-up democracy from someone who believes in the project. This book effortlessly mixes the arms-length objectivity one expects from academic reasoning and the personal narratives that inspired the author to work on these topics in the first place.

One of the protagonists of this book is Sanjay Sahni, an electrician turned organiser, accountability activist, and aspirational local politician. State-level politicians, high-level bureaucrats, famous activists all make cameos in this story, but the reason *Last Among Equals* is compelling is that through Sahni's life, one sees the triumphs and travails of an average Indian citizen trying to hold the state accountable.

Sahni, one among the legions of Bihari migrants working outside of Bihar, starts out as an electrician in Delhi. Sometime in the early 2010s, sitting in a Delhi cyber cafe, he is acquainted with the website of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). As part of the scheme's mandate, the website publicly displays all public works built under the project and every single wage paid as part of these projects. As Sahni looks up his home panchayat in Ratnauli, he is positive that many of the names listed have either never worked or not got paid for their work.

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This leads to a cascade of events, where Sahni ends up spending more and more time back in Ratnauli. He tries to hold local *mukhiyas*, the PRI leaders, responsible for their complicity in falsifying payments data and slowly organises local working women to demand their right to employment and payment (under the Bihar Manrega Watch). There is a frustrating set of interactions with the frontline state of *rozgar sahayaks* and other panchayat officials, who often work with local elites to undermine the transparency and accountability mechanisms built into NREGS. Such work takes a toll on Sahni and his family. He often has to juggle being a responsible head of household and a citizen demanding state accountability, while also dodging threats from local elites and their *goondas*, weathering bureaucratic apathy, and more.

Sharan's narrative of Sahni's story is the beating heart of this book. This is not a story of some external entity with a saviour complex coming and saving a Bihari village. It is about how making a state legible to citizens (in terms of both data and processes) helps close the loop of accountability, rather than leaving it flailing in the wind, as is often the case.

The book zooms out from Sahni's case to look at broader systemic changes in Bihar towards political and administrative decentralisation. Sharan tracks the evolution of how the 73rd amendment to the Constitution in 1992 created space for PRIs, and how this law slowly trickled into Bihari political life. He narrates how difficult it was to implement the spirit of the law (especially the parts related to social representation and reservations) given multiple legal challenges in the Patna High Court and the Supreme Court.

Despite the Constitutional amendment and the implementation of panchayat elections, the social representation of mukhiyas in Bihar has lagged well behind population characteristics. This is particularly egregious in the case of Dalits, who make up roughly 16% of Bihar's population, but in the early 2000s made up just 1.06% of the state's mukhiyas in over 7,120 panchayats. The introduction of the Bihar Panchayat Act in 2006 attempted to address this inequity by legislating reservations for various communities (Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Extremely Backward Classes, women) in panchayats.

Drawing on his detailed work of tracking village-level outcomes (public goods, private assets, inequality), Sharan gives a detailed analysis of on what axes reservations did or did not benefit minorities and Dalits. As usual, a mixed picture emerges. Villages that elected Dalit mukhiyas in 2006 tended to have less inequality within the village (measured in 2011) and wealthier Dalit families (measured in 2019), but often at the cost of other dominant elite sub-castes. The pie had not necessarily grown in rural Bihar, but there had certainly been some redistribution of both wealth and power as a result of these reservations.

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Drawing inspiration from some of the best social science observers of Bihari village politics (Shaibal Gupta, Jeffrey Witsoe, Awanish Kumar, Girish Kumar), Sharan is able to impart a sense of "feeling" into his narratives of village life, a quality rare among development economists. (Perhaps not surprisingly, he draws inspiration from Albert Hirschman in the introduction to his book.)

The social and political life of the average Indian residing in a Bihari village is a far cry from what we usually experience in urban India. Identity and caste are more strongly felt and are frequently a consideration during day-to-day activities and interactions. Time passes more slowly, but people also have to work much longer (particularly in agriculture) just to make ends meet. Pushing against established social hierarchies is unwelcome and often resisted with great prejudice and occasional violence. And the local frontline state is often complicit by acts of commission or omission, which is why it takes incredible courage and mobilisation for any kind of organised demonstration against the status quo.

Finally, one of the big legislative moves that Sharan covers is the Bihar Right to Public Grievance Redressal Act, 2015 (BPGRA). In his words, "an apathetic state wanted citizens to tell it stories of its own apathy, promising not to mock, but to listen and make amends" (137). With unparalleled access to Bihar's call centres that mediated the first level of redress, Sharan gives some fascinating stories and empirics regarding the ability of these BPGRA call centres to deliver occasional spurts of direct accountability of the state to citizens.

As he ultimately observes, "The BPGRA, flaws and all, has the potential to keep tabs on many of these facets of the state. Yet, for the most part, the Act is a patch, a temporary fix on individual, infinitesimal and immediate problems. The state is a giant, complex

machine, and the BPGRA is the mechanic. A mechanic can keep things going, but she cannot redesign the machine, or finance new parts, or design incentives to make employees work efficiently.”

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It is rare to read a book about the ground realities of something as messy as village politics in Bihar and leaves one with that elusive emotion: hope. And yet hope is inevitably what one is left with after reading this book. Hope that bottom-up citizens’ movements can make a difference in people’s lived reality. Hope that laws and accountability mechanisms are not just ideas on paper passed by a legislature or bureaucracy, but can take institutional forms which have some power and ability to close the accountability loop between public servants and the people they serve. Hope that empirical development economics is not solely the pursuit of datasets and conducting surveys, but can actually be driven by big ideas. Hope that social science researchers are not just distant, objective observers of social systems, but can actually participate in the systems they study to try to improve them (however infinitesimal the contribution).

Last Among Equals is not a book about endless triumphs and successes. More often than not, many of the policies and protagonists do not deliver on their considerable promise. There are limits to what incremental bureaucratic and technocratic fixes (like BPGRA) can do to fix problems that are fundamentally rooted in identity conflicts. Who becomes a leader, how easy it is for them to aspire to leadership, whether they have the means, and whether the state supports a level playing field (through instruments like reservations) seem to have more persistent welfare effects for marginalised communities.

While Sahni may not have won his first election, his story will inevitably inspire others to aspire to political life. Ultimately this book is optimistic. It leaves readers with the idea that one man or woman can change the system. That is an idea worth holding on to.