

What Urban Indian Dreams Are Made Of

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It'd be a cliché to recognise the recent phenomenon of filming "real" India for "real" Indians, if one were to go by that old adage that "India lives in its villages". Earlier this month, the third season of Amazon Prime's highly loved web series, *Panchayat*, premiered with great fanfare. Thus far, the series seems to have delivered on its promises, with its viewership only increasing. However, as some critics argue, the once-beloved "Phulera Gaon" of *Panchayat* has got embroiled in "a political maelstrom", challenging the show's earlier vibe, as journalist Vibha Maru puts it. She notes that the 'Phul' of Phulera has lost its lustre. Maru's observation of the fading Malgudi Days-like simplicity of Phulera and Phakoli Bazaar gains credence considering the growing reliance of OTT platforms on big data to cater to specific audience preferences and perpetuate certain aesthetics or predispositions.

A Layered Picture Of 21st-Century India

What initially appeared as a timeless Indian tale of Abhishek (played by Jitendra Kumar), an IIM aspirant-turned-village secretary, and his earnest companion Vikas (Chandan Roy), supported by Brij Bhushan Dubey (Raghubir Yadav), Manju Devi (Neena Gupta), Prahlad Pandey (Faisal Malik), Rinki (Sanvikaa), Bhushan (Durgesh Kumar), Binod (Ashok Pathak), and others, has now evolved into a narrative encompassing social,

political, and gender complexities unique to 21st-century suburban India. The question remains: how idyllic is the India that *Panchayat* portrays on screen, and how credible is the transformation of its fictional village to a potentially darker reality?

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Given the series' broad appeal, opinions naturally vary. Political scientist and Tata Institute of Social Sciences professor Ashwani Kumar suggests that *Panchayat* challenges "the enduring images of primordial rural reality in the classic *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), *Pather Panchali* (1955) or *Mother India* (1957)". Instead, it presents a "delightful and seductive celluloid ethnography of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Indian villages".

Steering clear of stereotypical, crude, or unrealistically utopian portrayals of rural life, Phulera in *Panchayat* offers a cinematic journey that Ashis Nandy describes as a "time travel to a potential self" within an Indian village, where genuine Indian experiences confront contrived, pseudo depictions of the village. Rural cultural entrepreneur and founder of *banglanatak.com*, Amitava Bhattacharjee, concurs on the theme of representative realism, noting that *Panchayat* authentically portrays rural life, striking a balance by showcasing both its charms and its challenges.

"Like Doordarshan From Many Moons Ago"

Until the release of Season 3, these viewpoints largely encapsulated critical perspectives on the series. According to Bhattacharjee, until the previous season, *Panchayat* explored the daily lives of simple villagers, focusing on their interactions and challenges through "situational comedy", highlighting rural bureaucracy's absurdities and inefficiencies. The narrative centred on a city graduate's journey of getting used to village life. Bhattacharjee emphasised that the series' triumph lay not merely in its depiction of rural India but in revitalising a rustic genre devoid of guns, crime, and bloodshed. It almost reminded one of "the Doordarshan serials from many moons ago", says Mumbai-and-Delhi-based author and entrepreneur, Shriti Tyagi.

Read | Panchayat Actor Durgesh Kumar AKA Bhushan On His Struggling Days: "Suffered Depression Twice In 11 Years"

This sentiment is echoed by filmmaker and *Al Jazeera* journalist Gautam Singh, who praises the series for its sharp portrayal of rural India's humour and authenticity, particularly in capturing the nuances of "purvanchali boli" or dialects from Eastern Uttar Pradesh, including the Ballia district.

Theatre vs OTT Audiences

However, Singh cautions that no single show can fully capture the diversity of rural setting. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the larger political contexts shaping OTT series like *Panchayat*. Harish Wankhede, Professor of Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru

University, observes that a stylised urban perspective shapes new representations of rural and suburban India. He further adds that "there is a clear bifurcation between theatre-going viewership sensibilities and OTT aesthetics".

In many of these ostensibly realistic portrayals of a newly mainstreamed rural India, caste complexities remain neglected, laments Wankhede. Rittvika Singh, Professor of English at IGNOU, further observes that OTT platforms cater to the interests of the social elite and have failed to address the issue of deeply entrenched caste dynamics. "The casual erasure of caste - given that all the main characters of the series hail from a particular caste - works as a tried and tested way of mainstream viewing to avoid dealing with difficult questions," she says.

Read | Faisal Malik On The Emotional Scene In *Panchayat*: "Didn't Think I Would Be Able To Pull It Off"

This observation resonates with Jitendra Kumar's acknowledgement that OTT platforms attract a significant following among urban young adults, who eagerly wait to return home to their favourite web series after corporate work hours, where 'authenticity' becomes both a buzzword and a contested concept.

Rittvika Singh observes that while Season 1 of *Panchayat* authentically portrayed rural life, its realism has waned since then. "What if," she questions, "the panchayat election is fought on caste lines (as it often is in reality)? Would the Pradhan have the same circle of associates if he weren't from a privileged caste? Would he accept a secretary from a different caste? Imagining a comedy on screen that is not only emotionally but also politically aware of village social dynamics would be more intriguing." Bhattacharjee concurs, suggesting that *Panchayat* could have delved into caste dynamics, gender inequality, and economic disparities.

Let *Panchayat* Not Be A Victim Of Its Success

Despite these evident shortcomings in its political narrative and the complex politics surrounding its consumption and incidental learning, the question, as Kumar advises, is this: should *Panchayat* become a victim of its success? The show deserves recognition for what it represents: an India that was not considered worthy of mainstream portrayal until a decade ago. Rather than solely interrogating *Panchayat*, one should consider what prompts the urban gaze to localise themes of frustration, aggression, and violence in smaller towns and the so-deemed "less civilised" parts of India, and why cities like Noida, Delhi, Bangalore or Mumbai are usually spared this treatment.

Read | Raghubir Yadav On The *Panchayat* Effect: "Everywhere I Go, People Call Me Pradhan Ji"

There is a noticeable rise in the number of screenwriters and filmmakers from cosmopolitan cities dedicated to crafting exotic narratives of rural India, especially following the success of Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) duology. One

might even link this new OTT trend to the political changes in India since 2014. However, correlation does not necessarily imply causation.

Thus, while the spotlight on Phulera may seem too rose-tinted to serious critics, what if the medium itself is the message? Perhaps India's socio-political destinies are indeed quietly brewing in its villages and small towns.

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