

Call for Papers for a Conference on:

Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality: Fifty Years of *Raag Darbari*

Two day Conference 29-30 January, 2018

Convenor: Satyajit Singh, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Raag Darbari, a work of Hindi fiction based in an imaginary village of Shivpalganj in Uttar Pradesh, is an important story of rural India, local politics and administration. The author Shrilal Shukla, who won the Sahitya Academy Award for this novel, insisted that this was a work of fiction. That his fiction mimics a village in rural India; its local institutions: the college, the panchayat and the cooperative; and the politics of the local elite that manages to not only subvert the developmental state and administration but make it a hub of clientalism, parochialism and corruption, is to say a truism.

Most discussions on *Raag Darbari* have been from a literary perspective. However, the novel has multiple insights for a student of public administration, development and politics. Penned in 1968, a mere two decades after independence, it was perhaps the first critique on the developmental state, its bureaucracy, and the democratic institutions of the country, served with black humour and irony. It questioned the values on which the new nation was built, and provided a mirror to the reality of everyday *rangdari*. A cast of dominant male characters, Vaidyaji, Rupan *babu* and Badri *pahelwan* ensured that Langad (a representative of the common man) was always at the receiving end of the state. Only characters like Shanichar, who was willing to be a *chamcha* of Vaidyaji, could prosper and be elected as a sarpanch due to the machinations and blessings of his mentor. The idealist Ranganath, the nephew of Vaidyaji, was left bewildered about the state of the nascent nation and its institutions, already mired in corruption. Shivpalganj was not just a village in Uttar Pradesh, but a reality of the rest of India - *Shivpalganj me jo hota hai, sare Bharat me hota hai!*

At the time of independence, the Indian state mindful of its colonial predecessor, adopted a Weberian bureaucracy. This was meant to be a state based on rationality, centralization and rule-based authority; a model of government that institutionalised a separation of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary; and a Wilsonian concept of public administration that underlined a separation of policy from administration. The polity was meant

to be a replica of the centralized Westminster model with federal state legislatures; and the local institution of panchayats being introduced. Much of the political engagement was to be at the centre where laws were framed and policies drawn. A centralized and professional administration was to implement these through a deconcentrated state. The ideals and rights espoused in the written Constitution and the political economy of state power determined institutions and outcomes at the local level. State and political action was to be in the Rajdhani of the country or the state, and politics ultimately a play in the hands of the MLAs and the MPs.

The political and administrative narrative of Shivpalganj mocked these apparently sound theories. It showed that it was the local politics and its interplay with local institutions that was at the centre of the local state craft, disbursing *vikas* and *nyaya* to the people. It was not just the formal administrative and political structure devised by the state, but also informal institutions designed by Vaidyaji, which determined the nature of state directed development. *Raag Darbari* presciently pitted the idealism of the educated against the opportunism of the local elite. The varied narratives of local power struggle in Shivpalganj questioned the notion of an independent ideal type bureaucracy and administration. It tested the false dichotomy of the separation of politics and administration. It underlined with effective resonance that state institutions were little more than a source of rents for its local elite. In two short decades after independence, the unfolding politics of Shivpalganj underlined that even though governance was imagined as centralized, the specifics of the local shaped everyday administrative reality.

Where are we today in our understanding of administration and politics, five decades after *Raag Darbari*? Have we managed to get local institutions to deliver welfare? Do we have a handle on dealing with corruption? Is the institutional architecture of local administration better? Have we done away with the *darbar* and the *pahelwan*, or are there new *darbars* and *pahelwans* that continue to mock the might of the state? Which new characters now appear in the village? Are villages still under the control of upper castes or have the Langads (the common man and woman) found a voice and can exercise their choice? Have we made any progress on education, the cooperatives and the panchayats? Importantly, how does administration relate to the fluid nature of politics? How is the constitution and state institutions regarded and their promise upheld? Does idealism have any place in making political choices? What tools can we deploy to analyse the new forms of local politics? These and many such questions will be taken up. The present imagination of the variegated Indian village and its

local politics, administration and welfare is the drama whose multiple performances – past, putative and in the future – will be under scrutiny and discussion at the proposed conference.

A one page abstract of papers along with one page CV is invited from political scientists, sociologists, economists, historians, bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, non-governmental organisations, civil society groups or any individual to give us a perspective on the village today, fifty years after the publication of *Raag Darbari*.

