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On My Terms From the Grassroots to the Corridors of Power - Sharad Pawar, New Delhi, Speaking Tiger, 2016, xii + 264 pp., ISBN 978-93-85755-39-2

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Sharad Pawar: A Krishna-ized Tactician

Immoral as acceptable

Sharad Pawar is not an ordinary name in the contemporary Indian political gambit. His benign charisma is somewhat difficult to grasp. When Pawar turned 75, a septuagenarian birthday party

was thrown. Major figures in the Indian political circle fared to the venue to register their appreciation.

Given the positions that he occupied, when one comes to visit Pawar's "as told to" (auto)-biography *On My Terms From the Grassroots to the Corridors of Power* assisted by journalist Anand Agashe, expectations entangle with excitement.

In this book, one might find various facets of Pawar's life. In one instance, he appears to be a firm leader and in the other, an efficient negotiator. His decisions to stay in politics and in the government and at times corroborating with his opponents is characteristic of his baffling nature.

Pawar flips loyalties and calls it politics. The ethics of politics remains anyone's guess. In this carefully written account, Pawar decries the family-run-Congress' beeswax as the main culprit behind plotting him out of the game from neither becoming the Prime Minister nor the Congress Parliamentary Party leader in Lok Sabha.

One might find it stimulating to record the lengthy time span, 48 years to be specific and reflecting it with the development of Pawar's aura as a national level leader. Pawar holds a unique record of being an elected representative in 14 continuous elections—as a chief minister of Maharashtra for four terms and in the Union cabinet for three terms.

In this book, Pawar is not offering free courses to political aspirants. Instead, he is retelling the political experiences which by and large are readily available in the public domain. If one is expecting to get hold of the Pawar-niti, then this is not the correct window. One would wonder if at all there exists one?

Or, maybe this is typical of Pawar to have it his way by declaring *On My Terms*. There is no political wisdom in the gauntlet of this juggernaut's life. Pawar is unwilling to share the tardy nature of his political ascendancy or the untimely decisions he made at the cost of Maharashtra politics—joined the Congress party (1967), left the Congress (1978), then rejoined and then left again (1999). Many well-known figures in the Maharashtra politics look up to Pawar as an

enthusiastically surprising personality. And in the electoral politics of coalition, surprises are not always pleasant.

One aspect that remains effervescent in Pawar's political career is the importance he gives to his family. He builds political allies and converts nemesis as friends because their family members connect with each other. His familial affection is credited to his parents who groomed their children in an intimate affection. As a result, the entire Pawar clan gathers for a four day Diwali retreat at their house in Baramati.

The preface by Supriya Sule, daughter of Pawar notes the distinction about the father as a politician and a family man. The extended family photograph in book gives evidence of the making of the Pawar dynasty.

In the chapter 'Battle with Cancer', the cancer survivor Pawar's fears and insecurities come to light. His fighting character and resolve to be active in deliverance of duties when he was granted a 6-month bail period to live marks the stern character of this leader. Suffering major heart attacks, regular chemotherapy sessions, pelvic fracture and navigating through other ailments, Pawar draws strength and inspiration from his mother, Shardabai, also referred to as bai, an important person in Pawar's life.

In spite of the candid insights, there are multiple issues that remain unengaged, though they find mention in the book. How does Pawar relate to the marginalized communities in India? He states that the question of Dalit assertion, especially the renaming of the Marathwada University to B R Ambedkar's name was the "most noteworthy decision of his government" as the Chief Minister of Maharashtra state (47).

Pawar spends plentiful ink explaining the causes and circumstances of the Namantar movement. This movement is crucial for understanding Dalit politics of the 1970s and onwards. Marathwada region was the epicenter of the newly emerging radical Dalit Panther movement. It is here where the sacrificial notes of Dalit leaders inflamed a strong Dalit character. Dalit Panthers were an alternative to the depressing Dalit condition. It was a morally sophisticated outfit that was armed

with literary and cultural criticism. To counter the growing assertion of the Dalit Panthers, Pawar surrogated the extremist movement of the non-Dalits by witnessing the formation of Shiv Sena in 1966.

The eventual agreement to changing the name of the university cost 13 precious Dalit lives, 7 police personnel, and 137 injuries spanning over three decades. The Marathwada university was rechristened to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University as the first half, the other half was made a separate university altogether and named as, Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University established in the Dalit movement's sensitive space, Nanded. The resurgent radical Naamantar (change in name) movement was deferred to as ardha-naamvistar (half-extension of the name) movement.

Pawar details the chronicles of Dalit involvement in violent protests and furthermore accounts for the sacrificed lives and properties of Dalits. But he dutifully avoids naming "these" criminal "communities" by vaguely referring to them as the "upper crust of the society." Pawar is committed to calling out the actions of Dalits but devoirs a discussion on the reasons for opposition to renaming the Marathwada University.

Pawar's socially conscious family was firmly rooted in the Satya Shodhak Samaj movement fighting caste and class exploitation. One might wonder what happened to the Satya Shodhak upbringing of Pawar that he so brazenly betrayed. The Satya Shodhak movement launched by Jotirao Phule in 1873 was one of the most important interventions of the non-Brahmin castes into the British-Brahmin system of control. The locus of the Phule movement gained wider reception amongst the non-Brahmin and a few Brahmin west Maharashtrian families. This movement articulated fierce critiques of Brahmin exploitation. It took on the issues of social inequality, religious bigotry and political inadequacy of the Brahminical society. The effect of the Satya Shodhak Movement gained wider reception among the peasants and workers. Phule's treatise Cultivators Whiplash remained a testament that detailed the exploitation of the hardworking Shudra farmers at the hands of unruly Brahmin (Phule 2002).

Instead of continuing the inherited sanskars of the Satya Shodhak movement, Pawar divulged

into tokenizing the movement. He detracted from his mother's early political impressions. His familial loyalties to the Phule inspired social reformative movement was culminated into the left leaning Marxist-Leninist, Peasants and Workers Party of India (PWP). His family members were active members of the party and even contested the election against the Congress party. Pawar contested against his brother Vasant for the Baramati Lok Sabha constituency in the 1960 elections.

The PWP was formed in 1947 by a collective of former Congress cadres Keshavrao Jedhe, Tulshidas Jadhav, Shankarrao More, Kakasaheb Wagh, Dajiba Desai, Madhavrao Bagal, P K Bhapkar, Datta Deshmukh among others. These were a group of charismatic leaders that brought the Maratha community into the fold of mainstream politics. This generation inspired many Maratha youths to join politics, Yashwantrao Chavan was one of them who stayed with the Congress. However, Pawar's family, Bai in particular remained committed to the left movement. She updated her understanding with the literature she acquired from the People's Publishing House.

Pawar confesses being seduced by the communist ideology, however, preferred the democratic ethos of the national politics that he found in the Congress party. Bai was firmly grounded in the theory of the dialectical materialism, who saw the political system as a making of elite class who enjoyed wealth on account of the poor.

Similar to Lenin's (1920) ideals of the capitalist class rule over the working people under the framework of the "democratic bourgeois republic"—a democracy for the minority, the rich, the propertied class akin to Brahmin-Baniya control of Indian democracy. Pawar vastly differed and thus disowned the radical roots of social justice. Bai confided to Sharad, "You think differently. Study ideological issues in greater depth and then form your opinion" (5). Clearly, Pawar missed the calling.

Pawar started off as a free market proponent and continues to operate in the liberal model of governance. His biographer Ravindranath notes that Pawar's call to review the entire economic structure was hailed by the ruling elite. Manmohan Singh, who took up the cudgels of finance

ministry in 1991 held Pawar's speech delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce and Industry on November 26, 1990 as his "Bible" (Ravindranath 1992: 97).

It is not surprising that Pawar's political innings in the national and state politics endeared the traditional capitalist-feudal class. Pawar understood in the early stages that disowning the socialist principles that his mother and father lived through their lives was the best political choice he could ever make. Living by this principle, Pawar went on to embrace bourgeois-infused democratic electoral policy. By patronizing workers' and farmer's movements, Pawar effectively silenced its radical uprisings. Pawar, who identifies himself as a messiah of farmers believes that farmers should give up farming and look for jobs elsewhere so they could sell their land to corporate houses. Pawar was also once keen on grabbing the African people's land. It was Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister, who had to discipline the agriculture minister Pawar about the ill-effects of colonizing other people's land in Africa and elsewhere (213).

As a handler of liberalism, Pawar is undeterred by the criticisms levelled against neoliberal capitalist forces. He is an advocate of private capital's involvement in state business. As an established policy maker he ensured that his friends in business were taken good care of. He boasts about how he helped to create a chain of crony capitalists from the feudal families of traditionally strong, land-owning castes.

A few examples being inviting the Patankar of Maharashtra, the Tanti of Gujarat, Enron into electricity, pharmaceutical liberalization or agricultural semi-capitalist GMO infusion. He loathes the pro-environment groups and NGOs as "aggressive" agents who meddled into his administrative acumen (190).

Pawar is a groomed politician whose socialist upbringing locates him in the precincts of hampered society. His deployment of political tools like public outreach, grassroots connect, cordiality with the intellectual groups, the farmers and the aspiring wannabe politicians is a suitable quality to govern in a messed up India polity. Pawar is well known for addressing the common public with their first names by deploying his humility into action.

Immoral as acceptable

Pawar is heavily influenced by his mentor Yashwantrao Chavan (1913-1984), a Shudra freedom fighter and pre-independence congressman who organized campaigns against the British government. Chavan was Maharashtra's first elected leader with nation-wide appeal. Chavan's contribution to Maharashtra is written in the Congress styled soliloquy.

Chavan, like the rest of the Congress party sabotaged the dissenting movements led by the non-Congress and marginalized communities. The Dalit movement's strong hold in Maharashtra was brought to ruins and centered around selfish and greedy Dalit leadership. Chavan orchestrated malignant plots to dismantle the radical Dalit and left-wing parties' consciousness by reducing it to electoral politics.

The fate of the Dalit movement and the left-parties in Maharashtra was put to pieces and eventually demolishing by coopting the non-Brahmin radicals from CPI, RPI, PWP into the Congress.

Pawar perfectly modeled his political stature in lines with Chavan as his ideal protégé. During his tenure in the government, Pawar ascended the land owning and rich peasant Shudra Maratha community into the neo-baniya fold by incorporating them into the modern economies of production—industrializ(ed)ation of agriculture, private contracting of roads, bridges, transportation and telecommunication, educational institutes, (sugar) cooperative sector, and heavy industries.

He ascended the traditionally land owning feudal community into the modern market as a petty bourgeois aspirant. Simultaneously, Pawar ensured the caste matrix was kept intact. He ardently promoted the caste supremacy by upholding the Brahminic virtues of choreographing caste based political and social tensions imposed upon the casteized bodies.

The right wing and as well as the liberal and left Brahminical forces were protected under the

commandership of Pawar. Many social fringe groups like Chhaavaa, a right wing Maratha organization alongside radical groups like Sambhaji Brigade took manuals from Pawar.

Conveniently, Pawar also muzzled up caste tensions instead of advocating for its abolition. Putting the Dalit gentry into the fold of co-opted political machine, Pawar de-sensitized the issues of Dalit emancipation and instead put it under the cauldrons of issue-based Dalit politics. The outcome of such a political cleavage resulted in the birth of noncommittal cadres who sold their integrity at the political doorsteps of their caste masters. Current, national Dalit political stream is indicative of such Congress styled manipulation.

On the other, Pawar brought forth a development led vision to the future of the elite Shudra community who remained unorganized under any particular banner. In Maharashtra, ascending from the village level feudal dominance to the control of state resources, Pawar promoted the power structure of the land-owning powerful Maratha vatandars (holder of gift lands).

As a result, the prominent Maratha titles in the feudal relationship like the Deshmukhs, Patils, Jadhavs, Raje, Nimbalkar, More, Shirke were made omnipresent in the state politics. In the past four decades in Maharashtra, the feudal Shudra was graduated to a neo-kshatriya and neo-baniya status under the leadership of representatives like Pawar.

By granting state owned land, approving central and state government's loans for setting up educational institutes, factories, cooperatives and other development led projects to his henchmen, Pawar sheltered the corrupt monies by backing it with political support. This is how we saw the emergence of goon tendencies imparted in the right wing elements of the NCP cadre. Pawar will be accounted for the decadence of morally committed political ethos.

Pawar brought forth the audacious pride of Maratha-ness from village to the district, state and national level by arming the local Maratha muscle man with state and political power. Gao tey Delhi became fashioned in the minds of the local feudal neo-baniyas who manipulated the political discourse of the diverse caste constituency. He politicized agriculture by promoting Marathas into the governing boards of sugar factories. The chairmanship of the sugar

cooperatives continues to be gloated by the land-owning minority of the Maratha castes.

Democratizing of institutions for the benefit of dominant group is what the neoliberal economy wrought upon the state. Pawar executed this project by retaining the caste and class status of the ruling communities in India. During his third term as a Chief Minister of Maharashtra in 1991 Pawar concentrated into privatization of state responsibilities like education, health, industry, land, construction and agriculture.

The social climate of shared responsibility towards the vulnerable was immediately politicized. Thus, the affiliations of one's caste and political affectation was valued over anything else. Creation of education mafias who manipulate the vulnerability of the public to amass massive wealth is worrisome for someone who also has influence in the political life of the public. The private as public is best represented in the ascent of feudal lords into elected lords.

Whenever the stories of Indian political scenes are mythologized into a quasi-religious admonition like those of Ramayana and Mahabharata, Pawar will be remembered as a Krishna-ized tactician who defined new methods to meander into political dubiousness only to come out later as a celebrated figure who experimented with multiple strides of statecraft and delivered suffocating surprises to his constituency—followers and endearing rivals. Withholding senior portfolios in the government and running the Maharashtra state for three times as its premier, Pawar has indefatigably entered his name in the Indian political encyclopedia.

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