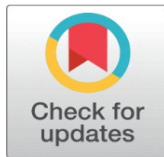


FRAMES OF DEMOCRACY: A SYNTAGMATIC DISSECTION OF PANCHAYAT SEASON 4 AND ITS REFLECTION ON RURAL INDIAN POLITICS AND ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Set in the fictional village of Phulera, Panchayat Season 4 marks a significant shift in tone, moving from gentle humour and pastoral stillness to the noise and drama of grassroots politics. This article presents a comprehensive, narrative-driven review of the season, employing a syntagmatic analysis to examine how sequences of visual motifs and recurring campaign rituals—such as loudspeaker rallies, symbolic vegetables, and samosa-fueled gatherings—construct a cinematic grammar of rural democracy. The show captures political spectacle with charm, humour, and emotion, but in doing so, glosses over crucial socio-political realities like caste hierarchies, bureaucratic partisanship, and the gendered nature of power in Indian villages. While the characters remain lovable and their stakes relatable, the broader system they navigate appears curiously flattened and sanitised. Drawing upon critical reviews from Outlook India, The Indian Express, The Quint, and others—as well as research in rural political sociology—this article argues that Panchayat Season 4 presents democracy not as a contested process rooted in identity and struggle, but as a series of well-choreographed performances. The piece raises urgent questions: Can popular media portray the soul of rural India without muting its fractures? And can storytelling preserve its emotional warmth while offering structural insight? This review aims to explore that delicate balance.

Keywords: Syntagmatic Analysis, Rural Democracy, Indian Web Series, Media Representation, Caste and Gender Politic

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since its debut, Panchayat has been praised for its subtle, grounded portrayal of rural India, where the pace of life is slow, the problems are local but heartfelt, and humour often emerges from the mundane. With its carefully etched characters and minimalistic storytelling, the series gave viewers a refreshing alternative to the often, over-dramatised rural depictions in mainstream Indian media. It felt real, warm, and quietly philosophical.

But Season 4 takes a noticeable turn. The quiet rhythm of Phulera is replaced by the noise of elections. The narrative is now framed by a series of familiar yet amplified political rituals—public cleaning drives, overnight poster-wars, samosa-and-loudspeaker-fueled campaigns, generator-powered rallies, and loud symbolic gestures (including a now-iconic lauki vs. pressure cooker face-off). These elements don't just serve as background—they become the very

scaffolding of the narrative. Repeated with variation across episodes, they form syntagmatic chains—sequences that stitch together the structure and tone of the season, signalling a shift from subtle storytelling to theatrical political commentary.

While the emotional arcs still hold weight—Abhishek's quiet moral dilemmas, his success in the CAT exam, his evolving affection for Rinki, and Pradhan Ji's growing anxiety about losing relevance—the show now frames these personal journeys within a performative political space. And here's where the gap begins to widen. As many critics and scholars have noted, the season largely skirts around the deeper structural forces that shape local democracy in India: caste equations, religious identities, patronage politics, bureaucratic bias, and gendered power dynamics. Instead, what we see is a filtered version of democracy—cleaner, quirkier, and more digestible, but also more detached from reality.

This article aims to explore this tension. By combining syntagmatic narrative analysis—looking at how meaning is built through sequences and repetition—with insights from rural political sociology and media representation ethics, it raises some critical questions: What kind of rural democracy is Panchayat Season 4 portraying? What gets repeated, and what gets left out? And does this shift enrich the series, or dilute the powerful social mirror it once held up?

2. METHODOLOGY: SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL REPRESENTATION

From semiotics and film theory, syntagmatic analysis attends to chains of signs—scenes, motifs, dialogues repeated across a narrative that cumulatively build thematic coherence (Metz, Barthes). In this series:

- Campaign units (cleaning, samosa stalls, poster fights)
- Symbol-based props (lauki, pressure cooker, laddoos)
- Public speech scenes (loudspeakers, megaphones)
- Electricity control scenes (generator use)

These recurring units, with slight variation across episodes, constitute syntagmatic sequences—narrative beads strung into a meaning necklace: politics is performance.

To assess representational impact, I draw on rural political sociology, where caste, patronage, landholding, and bureaucracy shape governance. Without depiction of these, a portrayal risks structural flattening. I also incorporate media ethics literature, which highlights the significance of what is omitted in representations—silences can be as meaningful as depictions.

Primary data: reviews from Indian media on Season 4's tone, pacing, themes; sociological commentary on Panchayat and caste dynamics; audience feedback on social platforms. The synthesis of syntagmatic form, structural content, and audience discourse forms this analysis.

3. MAPPING THE RHYTHM OF REPETITION: SYNTAGMATIC SEQUENCES IN FOCUS

One of the most striking elements of Panchayat Season 4 is its use of repetition—not just in plot points, but in how entire scenes and gestures reappear, slightly altered, from episode to episode. These aren't accidental echoes; they are purposeful, forming what media theorists call syntagmatic chains—units of meaning created through sequence and variation. In Phulera, politics is no longer just part of village life—it is village life. The following recurring patterns become the building blocks of that performance:

3.1. SWEEPING FOR VOTES: GROUND-CLEANING DRIVES

In nearly every campaign moment, candidates are shown orchestrating cleanliness drives. Villagers—often unwilling or indifferent—are coaxed into sweeping streets and dusting corners, all under the gaze of potential voters. On the surface, these acts seem noble. But when repeated, they reveal something deeper: cleanliness here isn't about hygiene—it's about image. Every broomstroke is for the camera, not for the community. In one scene, the rival group sabotages the cleanup by littering again, highlighting how this civic ritual has turned into political theatre.

3.2. POSTER WARS: SLOGANS OVER SUBSTANCE

Another familiar visual across episodes is the never-ending cycle of posters being plastered, ripped, replaced, and misprinted. Campaign slogans change overnight, and symbols swap hands. One particularly humorous scene shows a slogan pasted upside down—a comic but telling mistake. The frequency of these visuals suggests a battle of visibility rather than ideology. Who shouts louder? Whose posters survive till morning? It's not about vision for the village—it's about who owns the wall.

3.3. VOTES SERVED HOT: THE SAMOSA AND LADDOO CHRONICLES

No Indian election feels complete without food, and Phulera is no exception. Samosas and laddoos are offered as tokens of goodwill (or bribes, depending on your perspective). Whether it's during a public meeting or as part of a door-to-door campaign, food is deployed as political currency. These scenes often draw laughter, but they're also discomfiting—what should be a discussion about governance is reduced to a snack and a smile. Over time, it becomes clear that quantity, not quality, defines electoral generosity.

3.4. LET THERE BE LIGHT (AND ONLY FOR OUR SIDE)

One of the season's more telling patterns involves electricity—switched on selectively for campaign events, and turned off as a sabotage tactic. Generators hum in the background of late-night rallies, while rival supporters stumble in the darkness. Electricity, a basic necessity in rural India, is transformed into a campaign weapon. It's a reminder of how easily infrastructure can be politicised—not to serve the people, but to score points.

3.5. NOISE FOR DEMOCRACY: LOUDSPEAKERS AND RHETORIC

Throughout the season, public assemblies feature loudspeakers blaring slogans, promises shouted into microphones, and supporters repeating chants on cue. These rallies often follow the same template: sound over substance. The characters speak, but they rarely say anything. What matters is the performance—the energy, the enthusiasm, the decibel level—not the vision. Ideology takes a backseat to theatrical presence.

3.6. SYMBOLS THAT SPEAK: THE BATTLE OF THE LAUKI AND PRESSURE COOKER

Every candidate needs an identity, and in Phulera, that identity is often reduced to a vegetable or a household appliance. The humble lauki (bottle gourd) and the trusty pressure cooker become emblems of rival camps. These props are splashed across posters and turned into slogans, even memes. On one level, this is clever branding. But it also flattens the conversation: when leadership becomes synonymous with cookware, is there room left for real policy?

Together, these scenes form a repetitive choreography—rituals that audiences quickly recognise and anticipate. As they stack up across episodes, they begin to define the very grammar of the show's narrative: politics as performance, not governance. Campaigning becomes a loop, not a ladder; it circles gestures, rather than climbing toward solutions.

Reviewers have been quick to notice this fatigue. Outlook India likened the season to "reheated old slop", suggesting that while the visuals may still entice, the content has gone stale. The Hans India mourned the dilution of Phulera's warmth, now buried under campaign clutter.

More tellingly, what's missing from this rhythm is equally important. Those quieter moments that once gave Panchayat its soul—village gossip over chai, gentle debates on farms, unhurried conversations under trees—now appear only in passing. They serve as transitional breathers between campaign scenes rather than anchoring the story. As a result, the human texture of village life feels thinner, replaced by a checklist of electoral clichés.

The syntagmatic structure, then, does two things at once: it amplifies the spectacle of rural democracy while quietly muting its everyday realities. And that trade-off is worth pausing over.

4. CHARACTERS AT THE CROSSROADS: ETHICS, EMOTION, AND EROSION OF AGENCY

One of Panchayat's greatest strengths has always been its characters—people who feel lived-in, flawed, occasionally funny, and deeply rooted in their environments. In earlier seasons, they weren't just actors in a plot; they were carriers of texture, context, and quiet complexity. But Season 4 alters that landscape. As the narrative becomes increasingly driven by electoral theatrics, many characters find their ethical positions muddled and their emotional arcs either fast-tracked or flattened. Let's take a closer look at how this shift affects their journeys.

4.1. ABHISHEK TRIPATHI (SACHIV JI): FROM CIVIL SERVANT TO POLITICAL PARTICIPANT

When Panchayat first began, Abhishek Tripathi (Jitendra Kumar) was an outsider, not just to Phulera but to the world of rural bureaucracy. His reluctance, his need to escape, and his gradual acceptance of village life formed the emotional backbone of the series. In Season 4, however, we see a version of Abhishek that's more emotionally grounded but ethically compromised.

No longer just an observer or facilitator, Sachiv Ji starts making political choices. He grants access to government infrastructure for campaign activities, leans—if not overtly, then unmistakably—toward the incumbent camp, and uses his office as a strategic space. These are not minor oversights. In India's Panchayati Raj system, neutrality from civil servants is not just expected—it's essential. Yet, the show doesn't challenge this shift. Instead, it blends his political leanings with his milestones: clearing the CAT exam, evolving affection for Rinki, and navigating moral dilemmas.

This blend gives viewers emotional satisfaction—he's growing, succeeding, and finding love. But what's the cost? When emotional growth comes hand in hand with the erosion of professional ethics, the narrative begins to walk a morally grey line. In online discussions—Reddit threads, social media breakdowns—many fans noted that Abhishek is no longer the reluctant, principled hero. He's "complicit," "pragmatic," even "ambiguous." It's a bold move by the writers, but one that deserves a more conscious interrogation than the season provides.

4.2. MANJU DEVI AND KRANTI DEVI: WOMEN IN THE FRAME BUT NOT AT THE HELM

If Abhishek's journey shows ethical greying, the arcs of Manju Devi and Kranti Devi reveal something more frustrating: the persistence of gendered stagnation.

Manju Devi, still technically the elected head of Phulera, is once again pushed to the background. Her husband, Pradhan Ji, remains the face and voice of decision-making, reducing her role to one of ceremonial presence. Occasionally, she steps up—offering a slogan, delivering a line—but these are moments rather than movements. This mirrors a very real phenomenon in rural India: the "Pradhan-Pati" culture, where women are elected but men wield the power. It's a reality worth critiquing—but here, the show risks reinforcing it by normalising her passive arc without challenge or consequence.

On the other side is Kranti Devi, played with commendable vigour by Sunita Rajwar. She storms into the season as the rival candidate, full of energy, confidence, and biting one-liners. She's disruptive, yes—but also undefined. What does she stand for? What changes does she promise? Beyond the theatrics, we learn little. As a result, her candidacy feels more like a counter-performance to Manju Devi than a meaningful alternative.

Critics have noticed this gap. While Rajwar's screen presence was widely applauded, many felt her role was underwritten. There was potential for the Panchayat to explore what female leadership in rural India could look like. Instead, it settles for caricature—a missed opportunity in an otherwise ambitious season.

4.3. THE FAMILIAR FACES: FROM TEXTURE TO TOOLS

Characters like Vikas, Prahlad, Bhushan, Binod, and Banrakas have long been part of Panchayat's emotional core. They added depth, humour, and, more importantly, a sense of community. In Season 4, however, their roles are increasingly functional. They carry posters, shout slogans, cook food, and switch on generators. Their interactions are reduced to campaign logistics and comic timing, with little space for personal moments.

Gone are the subtle exchanges between Prahlad and Abhishek that once dealt with grief and friendship. Gone are the farm-side banter or the quiet scenes that revealed dreams, frustrations, or philosophical musings. Now, these characters serve primarily as extensions of the campaign machine.

The New Indian Express described Season 4 as "an overstay," and much of that critique stems from this shift. When familiar characters lose their emotional arcs and become props in political sequences, the show begins to lose the very heart that made it stand out.

4.4. ETHICS VS EMOTION: WHAT ARE WE BEING ASKED TO ROOT FOR?

Across the board, there's a clear trade-off in character design this season. The personal stakes—especially for Abhishek—are heightened, giving viewers emotional payoff. But the ethical consequences of these character choices are quietly swept aside. Women are placed in power, but not given power. The community becomes background noise rather than a narrative engine.

This shift reflects a deeper question the series seems hesitant to ask: In showing us a performance of rural democracy, who gets a real voice, and who gets scripted into silence?

Panchayat once thrived on its balance: tender without being sentimental, critical without being cynical. But in Season 4, the balance tips. The characters remain familiar, but the ethical clarity that once defined them is blurred. And in that blur, the show trades complexity for comfort—a move that deserves both admiration and scrutiny.

5. STRUCTURAL SILENCES: THE UNSPOKEN FRAMEWORKS OF RURAL POWER

Despite Panchayat's growing popularity and critical recognition, one of its most persistent blind spots continues to be its portrayal of structural realities, particularly those that define how democracy plays out in rural India. Season 4, though brimming with performances of politics, remains conspicuously silent on the deeper currents of caste, class, religion, gender, and bureaucratic accountability that govern the Gram Sabha.

Caste, for instance, is not just absent—it is erased. Not a single campaign dialogue mentions caste groups, vote banks, land ownership hierarchies, or the local socio-religious dynamics that are so integral to Indian village politics. The tension between OBCs, Dalits, dominant castes, and local elites—which often decides elections—is nowhere to be found. What remains is a "flattened village," aesthetically pleasing but dangerously simplified. As *The Quint* noted in its review, this omission is not just artistic restraint—it borders on sanitisation. The absence of caste renders invisible the fundamental mechanisms through which rural power operates.

Previous criticisms from Round Table India about earlier seasons resurfaced in the context of Season 4. These critiques pointed to a "saviour narrative", where upper-caste bureaucrats appear as rational redeemers while marginalised figures are written as comedic or dependent. The current season continues this pattern. Kranti Devi, despite being positioned as a challenger, lacks any socio-political depth. Her platform remains symbolic, and Manju Devi's agency continues to be overshadowed by her husband's omnipresent role, typifying the Pradhan-Pati syndrome. There is no exploration of how reservation policies, women's leadership quotas, or patriarchal resistance shape the electoral field.

Similarly, bureaucracy is shown as convenient rather than principled. Abhishek Tripathi's partisan behaviour—subtly favouring the incumbent group, enabling their access to state infrastructure, and participating in strategy—is treated as plot development, not an ethical dilemma. There is no narrative mechanism that holds him accountable. In real-world panchayat systems, such behaviour could lead to disqualification or public protest. But in Phulera, the line between governance and favouritism is blurred and unchallenged.

The silences around gender politics are also telling. While Panchayat gives us strong female performers—Neena Gupta and Sunita Rajwar among them—their characters are performative rather than transformative. They speak, but rarely decide. They appear in rallies, but not in planning meetings. There's little interrogation of how public decisions are made in their name but without their involvement. In a time when rural women are increasingly taking on leadership roles—often with resistance and resilience—this portrayal feels outdated and incomplete.

Together, these omissions point to a version of democracy that is more theatrical than functional, where rituals are present, but power is abstracted. And in doing so, Panchayat risks offering a comforting illusion of democracy, devoid of its actual fault lines.

6. CRITICAL RECEPTION AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE: LOVE, LAUGHTER, AND DISCONTENT

The fourth season of Panchayat received a mixed bag of reactions. On the one hand, performances were widely praised. Jitendra Kumar's restrained emotiveness, Neena Gupta's quiet strength, Raghubir Yadav's charm, and Sunita Rajwar's fiery portrayal of Kranti Devi all drew applause. Mid-Day called the acting "vivid and heartfelt," capturing the series' emotional pulse even as the political setting grew louder.

But critical patience with the narrative arc began to wear thin. India Today pointed to the season's "scattered plotting" and lack of tonal balance. Outlook India and IndiaTimes remarked on the fading humour—once the heartbeat of the show—now buried under electoral repetition. The Hans India lamented the loss of warmth, saying the Phulera they once loved now felt like a backdrop for campaign sloganeering.

The structural critique came from sharper corners. The Quint and Round Table India reiterated concerns about "caste-blindness" and flattened rural complexity. They noted how the show, in its bid to universalise village experience, ends up presenting a version that's stripped of its friction, politics, and plurality.

Among audiences, particularly on platforms like Reddit and X (formerly Twitter), responses ranged from nostalgia to discomfort. Many long-time viewers expressed affection for the characters and appreciated the emotional progression, especially Abhishek's academic success and subtle romance with Rinki. But others felt alienated. The campaign clichés, the absence of hard questions, and the predictable rhythms drew fatigue. As one Reddit user wrote: "It still feels like Phulera, but only in makeup, not in soul."

This divide reflects a broader tension in Indian media: between emotional continuity and sociopolitical realism. Panchayat Season 4 tries to maintain both, but doesn't always succeed.

7. DISCUSSION: DEMOCRACY IN FORM, NOT IN DEPTH

If one had to capture Panchayat Season 4's ethos in a single phrase, it would be: "Democracy as visual performance." The syntagmatic sequencing of political rituals—sweeping drives, samosa distribution, poster changes, loudspeaker wars—creates a rhythm, a pulse, a dramatic momentum. But what remains unclear is what these gestures ultimately mean, both within the story and beyond it.

In the absence of caste narratives, land disputes, bureaucratic corruption, or women's resistance, these campaign sequences become hollow. They offer continuity without conflict, aesthetics without structure. And that's where the danger lies.

For scholars and storytellers alike, this raises an essential dilemma: Can emotional storytelling coexist with critical engagement? Can we enjoy Abhishek's longing glances and Rinki's quiet smiles while also expecting the show to address the real fissures of rural India? Or are we being asked to choose between empathy and accuracy?

This question is particularly vital in the Asian media landscape, where rural stories are often mediated through urban lenses—romanticised, softened, or abstracted. Panchayat, for all its charm, is no exception. It paints Phulera in soft light, filtering out the barbed wires of social inequity.

And yet, this isn't a dismissal of the series—it's a call for narrative courage. The show has the tools, the characters, and the goodwill to go deeper. What's needed is the will to ask harder questions, even if they disrupt the aesthetic.

8. CONCLUSION

In its fourth season, Panchayat continues to offer rich performances and emotional storylines, drawing viewers back into the idiosyncratic lanes of Phulera. The characters remain endearing, the humour restrained yet effective, and the pacing familiar. But alongside these strengths, a quiet erosion takes place.

The season's syntagmatic structure—its repeated campaign motifs and performative gestures—creates a compelling aesthetic of rural democracy. Yet this democracy is largely symbolic. It lacks the structural depth that defines real political life in India's villages. Caste hierarchies are erased, gender roles go unchallenged, and bureaucratic neutrality is traded for character development.

For media scholars, journalists, and creators navigating the intersection of ethics and entertainment, Panchayat Season 4 serves as a case study in both possibility and limitation. It reminds us that emotional storytelling can humanise rural life—but it must not sterilise it. The challenge ahead is not to abandon sentiment, but to infuse it with structure, history, and truth.

In the evolving landscape of Indian streaming content, the next step is clear: move beyond the aesthetics of democracy to its everyday realities. Only then can shows like Panchayat do what they promise—to reflect rural India, not just stage it.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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