From collections made from fines over the last fifteen months, all the Panch of the Mahto toli purchased a panchlight at this year’s Ramanavami fair. The village has eight Panchayats in all, each caste has its own assembly and each Panchayat owns a common rug, a sheet, a carpet and a Petromax, which is also known as panchlait in the rural idiom.

Immediately after buying the panchlight, the headmen decided, while still at the fair, that the surplus ten rupees should be invested in articles for devotional offerings, as it was inauspicious to inaugurate a mechanical object without religious rituals. Even in the times of the Angrez Bahadur (the mighty British) they always made sacrificial offerings before initiating the construction of a bridge.

The headmen returned to the village while it was still broad daylight; the Panchayat Chhadidar walking upfront with the panchlight box on his head, followed by the chief, the deewan, and the other headmen. While they were still at the outskirts of the village, Futangi Jha of the Brahmin toli made an undesired enquiry – “How much did you pay for this lantern, Mahto?”

“...Can’t you see, it is panchlight! The people of Brahmin toli have an exaggerated sense of self-importance. They would call a wick an electric bulb, if it happens to be their own, and will call others’ panchlait a lantern!”

The whole toli – young and old, women and men, quit work and came rushing, “Come on, let us go, our panchlait has come, it has!”

Aganu Mahato, the Chhadidar, would caution people every now and then, “All right, stay away, don’t try touching it! Watch out, you may just kick it!”

The Sardar told his wife, “We will have puja this evening – hurry up, take a bath and arrange the seat”.

The lead singer of the musical group in the toli gave clear instructions to his fellow singers, “Listen, we will sing in the light of the panchlait today. Let me warn the discordant elements right away. If you mess up today with tunes or words then tomorrow you are boycotted”.

In the women’s group Gulari aunt began humming gosain geet. Small children began making a lot of useless noise out of sheer excitement.
The people thronged to the Sardar’s gate an hour before sunset - panchlait, panchlait!

All talk was panchlait - there was no other talk, no other topic. The Sardar took a puff on the hookah and said, "The shopkeeper first loftily announced, 'no less than five (times) twenty and five rupees'. I told him, 'Look shopkeeper sahib, don't you take us for complete rustics. We have seen many a panchlait, ok!' The shopkeeper gave me a careful look. He said, 'It seems you are the sardar of the caste! Alright, if you have taken the trouble of coming here to buy panchlait yourself, I will offer it to you for five kaudis only'".

The Deewanji said, "What a perceptive salesman he was. His servant wasn't prepared to part with the panchlait's pack box. I said, 'Sahib, how can we carry the panchlait without the box!' The shopkeeper immediately shouted at the servant, 'Are you trying to trick the Deewanji, shame on you! Give him the box!'".

The people of the toli looked at their Sardar and Deewan with renewed respect. Chhadidar informed the women’s group, "It made a constant swishing sound all the way from the market this, panchlait!". Then, at the very last moment, a big 'how' cropped up. Three bottles of kerosene had been acquired from Rudal Sah baniya’s shop, and a tricky question now stared everyone in the face: who will light the panchlait?

Nobody had visualised this problem - neither before buying the panchlait, nor after. Now that the materials for puja were neatly kept on the chowk, the singers with their drums and cymbals raring to go, the damn panchlait was sitting dead. The villagers had never bought a thing that involved such complicated procedures of lighting and extinguishing. Should I buy a cow, but who will milk her, isn't this how the adage goes?... Now, have fun! Where does one get a person to light this contraption?!

It's not as if there was no skillful hand in the entire village. Every Panchayat had a panchlait and people who lit them regularly. But the inaugural is a moment of religion and ritual, a ceremonious occasion. So how could this toli borrow a man from outside to light it for the first time? Better to let the panchlait lie useless! For this involved inviting a lifetime of jibe from others. They would make it a point to remind us of this dishonour at every possible occasion... that we got somebody else to do it for the first time...! No, never! The honour of the Panchayat is at stake here. Don't ask an outsider!

A thick layer of melancholia hung over the toli as darkness started spreading its wings. Nobody had even cared to light a wick in their houses today... Why should they think of doing that when there was the panchlait!

The show, put up after so much hard work, was turning into a flop. The Sardar, Deewan and Chhadidar lost their voice. The shoulders of all the Panch drooped. Somebody tried to make a point in whispers, "These mechanical contraptions throw huge tantrums, really".

A young man came to break this piece of news, "The people in Rajput toli are going wild with laughter. They say, if you hold your ears and do five sit-ups in front of the panchlait, it will light up immediately".

All the Panch thought, "Why won’t they laugh? God has given them reason and occasion to". An old man came to announce, "This Rudal Sah baniya has suddenly got loquacious. He is saying, be careful while pumping [air into] the panchlait".
Gulari, Munari aunt’s daughter, has a secret brewing up inside her. But how does she let it out? She knows that Godhan does know how to light a panchlait. But, he faces expulsion from the caste Panchayat. Munri’s mother had appealed to the Panchayat, accusing him of singing the lewd Hindi film song “O my love, when I fell for you” to her daughter. And Godhan was already an entity resented by the Panch. He had come from outside to settle down in the village and he had not made the customary offerings to them. He simply did not care. So the Panch got their chance when Munari’s mother appealed. They slapped a fine of ten rupees, failing which he was to be expelled from the Panchayat. Godhan is still facing boycott. How does one tell him! And the caste is facing utter humiliation.

Munari made a smart move. She told her friend Kaneli in their shared code, “Kaneli! chigo, chidha, chin...!” Kaneli smiled and kept quiet. Then, “But the Panchayat doors are shut on him!” Munari replied, “Take a chance, just tell the Sardar!” “Godhan knows how to light panchlait!” Kaneli blurted out. “Who, Godhan? Does he really? But...”

The Sardar looked at the Deewan and the Deewan turned to the Panch. All the Panch had expelled him unanimously. The whole village was angry with Godhan for his act of winking as he sang the film song. The Sardar said, “Why bother about the caste injunctions when the honour of caste itself is being washed away? What do you say, Deewan?”

Deewan, “I agree.”

All the Panch also agreed, “Let Godhan be freed!”

The Sardar sent the Chhadidar to fetch Godhan. Chhadidar came back to report, “Godhan does not want to come. He says how does one trust the Panch? If I break a part or a tool I will have to cough up a fine, and get punishment”.

Chhadidar seemed as if he were on the verge of crying. “Please do something, anything, to persuade Godhan, otherwise it will be difficult to walk around in this village”.

Gulari aunt said, “OK, let me try!”

Gulri aunt went towards Godhan’s hut and persuaded him to come along. The faces of all the assembled lit up with new hope. Godhan quietly got down to filling kerosene in the panchlait. The wife of the Sardar shooed away the cat taking rounds around the holy material for puja. The lead singer in the group began twirling his moustache. Godhan asked, “Where is the spirit? How can one ignite it without the spirit?”

Have more fun! Here comes another trouble! Everybody started cursing the wisdom of the Sardar, Deewan and the Panch - these people do things in bouts of absent-mindedness. The assembly went into a collective depression yet again. But Godhan is a truly clever fellow. He will light it without the spirit. “Get me a little coconut oil”. Munari ran out and came back with a small bowl of coconut oil. Godhan started pumping the panchlait. The light slowly started filling into the silken filament of the lamp. Godhan would alternate between blowing into the top and turning the knob. Very soon the panchlait began whizzing and then it turned brighter; the ill will they had in their hearts suddenly vanished. Godhan is quite a worthy boy!

And in the end when the whole toli dazzled in the light from the panchlait, the song party broke into singing with the collective shout of “Jai Mahaveer”. Every face smiled as their faces lit up, making contours obvious. Godhan had conquered all hearts. Munari looked at him wistfully (with desire?). Their eyes met and exchanged notes, “Let’s forgive
and forget. It wasn’t really my fault!”

Sardar called Godhan next to himself and spoke affectionately, “You have saved the honour of the caste. All your sins are written off. Didn’t you always want to sing film songs? Go, sing now to your heart’s content”.

Gulari aunt said, “Godhan, why don’t you come home for dinner tonight?”

Godhan looked at Munri one more time. Munri lowered her eyes.

The song party broke into another slogan at the end of a prayer, “Jai ho, Jai ho!” Every leaf in the surrounding trees thrilled under the illumination of the panchlait.

Translated by Ravikant.

GLOSSARY

1. **Panchayat**: The self-governing body of a village.
2. **Panch**: The five elected members of the Panchayat, with some judicial and executive powers.
3. **Toli**: Sub, caste-based group in a village.
4. **Chhadidar**: The Panchayat messenger.
5. **Sardar**: The chief.
6. **Puja**: Prayers.
7. **Gosain geet**: Religious songs sung in certain regions.
8. **Sahib**: Sir.
9. **Kaudis**: A count of twenty
10. **Deewan**: The treasurer.
11. **Ji**: An honorific.
12. **Baniya**: A trading caste.
13. **Chowk**: Here, a votive platform.