

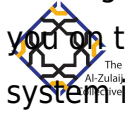
The BJP candidate for South Goa, Pallavi Dempo, has declared a combined worth, with her husband, of Rs 1400 crore. This amount reportedly includes, besides much property in Goa, a flat in London and another in Dubai, many luxury cars, and a huge amount of gold.

This declaration has surely made Dempo one of the richest candidates across India in this election. Now, there are many who, reading this, will say: So what? This is 'white' or legal wealth – i.e. openly declared assets on which taxes have presumably been paid. Plus, she may be among the richest, but wealthiness has become the norm among politicians and political contenders. According to media reports, 439 members of the current Lok Sabha were crorepatis when they were elected in 2019. According to one report of 2022, the average Member of today's Parliament (MP) is not just a crorepati but a substantial one: the average Lok Sabha MP is worth about Rs 20 crores, while the Rajya Sabha MPs are 4 times worse, at an average of Rs 79 crores. Not only this, but the wealth of politicians is found to grow exponentially, the longer and more successful they are at electoral politics.

All this has no connection to the wealth of their constituents, of course. The per capita annual Indian income has nearly doubled since 2014-15 (when Modi came to power), say most reports, but that average figure hides an ugly reality – that only a few Indians have grown rich under Modi — and not just rich, but phenomenally, obscenely, rich – while many others have seen their real incomes go down. From the pandemic till November 2022, the rich have seen their income surge by 121%, while the number of hungry people in India grew from 19 crores to 35 crores. According to the Oxfam India report of 2023 ('Survival of the Richest: The India Supplement'), and the World Inequality Lab report of March 2024, the top 1 percent in India now own more than 40% of India's wealth, while the bottom 50% (half the population) owns just 3-6%. Inequality in India is now among the highest in the world, and higher than it was under colonial rule – so vilified by 'liberation'-glorifying politicians like Pramod Sawant. Things are so bad that if you earn the 'average' income of India, you are earning more than 90% of the population – that's how skewed we are.

Comparing these politicians, flourishing as they are in luxury cars, foreign homes, and tons of gold, to the vast majority of their constituents, in Goa and India, who languish in the most wretched of employment, housing, healthcare, and environmental conditions, is it really possible that the former can ever 'represent' the latter?

But then, they are not even trying. It is well-known that people are not entering politics today to 'serve the people', as the cliché goes; they are entering only to make money. Indeed, electoral politics has become one of the most lucrative of careers – far better than becoming a doctor or an engineer, the top career options of yore. We are surrounded by career politicians, who may help a constituent here and there, who may spend a fraction of the



lavish government funds at their disposal on a few public works, and who will definitely slap you on the back and ask about your kids, but who would never dream of disturbing the system in even the smallest of ways. For them, the system is perfect. Unemployment is a problem in South Goa, admitted Pallavi Dempo (probably by mistake), but can you ever imagine her trying to make decent employment a right guaranteed by her government? Hardly. Electoral politics is a career, and these candidates are focused only on success in their career, which means winning elections, keeping their friends and funders happy, and making even more money for themselves.

But this success is not for everyone. For this career, to have 1400 crores - or 79 crores, or at least a measly 20 crores - at your disposal has become a basic requirement. The more money the candidate has, the more likely is she to win - this is a known fact. Hence the big funders of the past, the electoral bonds of today, but even more the growth of super-wealthy candidates contesting against super-wealthy candidates - all to become our so-called representatives. Elections have become the time to choose which billionaire you prefer - not to represent you, of course - but use you as the stepping-stone to even more billions.

Isn't this a bit too much? Even if we believe that things can't change, even if we think that today's sham democracy is all that's possible, and that politicians will always be like today's politicians - even by these very low standards - most of today's candidates should be completely unacceptable as contestants for power. Because, even if electoral politics in today's India is not a route to changing society for the better, but just a means to become rich for the individual politician, why should the super-rich like Dempo - who surely doesn't need any more wealth - be allowed to benefit? And similarly, why should certain individuals be allowed to hog political seats non-stop for decades just because their charisma and political backing ensures that they win?

If political power is a high-income job, then the holding of political power needs to be made accessible to all, just like other government jobs. And that can only happen by, first, banning the 'creamy layer' of society from electoral politics, and, second, banning anybody who has held political power once from holding it again. Every citizen should have the right - and duty, actually - to hold political power. Today that right exists only on paper. But banning the billionaires as well as the career politicians will allow more people to participate in the holding of power, and that wider participation will surely rock the rotten boat of the Indian establishment, something that we desperately need.



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## The Problem with Billionaire Politicians