

By Sidharth Mishra



Two chief ministers from the Bharatiya Janata Party recently completed their first year in office – Manohar Lal Khattar in Haryana and Devendra Fadnavis in Maharashtra. It's customary for chief ministers to address the media on achieving such a milestone. Khattar courted controversy in the interview he gave to the Indian Express, where he did not make politically palatable remarks on the issue of eating beef. This remark even got him an invite from party chief Amit Shah for an in-person dressing down. Fadnavis conducted himself better, channel hopping and giving interviews to newspapers but at the same time effectively either skirting tricky issues bothering his government or answering them with ample caution. Your reporter was there at one such television show with Maharashtra's young chief minister where he gave a very queer answer to a question regarding his stature.

He was asked whether he would ever come out of the shadow of towering Maharashtra leaders from his party like Nitin Gadkari, who was like a banyan tree. Given that the party

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leadership had initially overlooked the demand of many party legislators to make Gadkari chief minister, Fadnavis said that there was just one banyan tree in his party, and everyone lived peacefully under his shadow.

No prizes for guessing that he was referring to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Both Fadnavis and Khattar owe their office and status to the Prime Minister; similar to a Narayan Dutt Tiwari or for that matter a Giani Zail Singh, who had no qualms about wearing their loyalty to their leader on their sleeves. Tiwari, as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh during the Emergency days, did not hesitate for a minute to pick Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's sleepers. A few years later on being nominated President of the nation, Giani Zail Singh had said that Gandhi would continue to be his leader and he could even pick a broom on her calling.

Before I am railed for being anti-Modi, let me illustrate a trend from the political campaign in the ongoing Bihar elections. The newspapers in the state are full of stories about who could be Bihar's Khattar. In other words, if the BJP does come to power, which unknown entity would the party leadership foist as the chief minister. There are talks of one Rajendra Singh contesting from Dinara seat in Rohtas district becoming the chief minister. He is only the third serving "Pracharak" (full-time volunteer) of the RSS to have been allowed to contest polls—the other two being Narendra Modi and Manohar Lal Khattar.

He is not the only "Khattar" in the poll, the other being Rameshwar Chaurasia. Not a "Prachark" but like Modi and Khattar he too is a bachelor. He belongs to the extremely backward castes community and has been appearing on television channels on behalf of the party. But that by no means makes him a political heavyweight in the state.

Such stories are finding space because the BJP campaign in Bihar has totally been Modi-Amit Shah centric with no Bihari leader making an appearance on any of the huge hoardings. To those who have followed the rise of BJP in the state, the complete short shrift given to the local leaders especially former Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi is somewhat indigestible.

Sushil Kumar Modi for seven years regularly featured alongside chief minister Nitish Kumar when the BJP and the Janata Dal (United) ran the coalition government. More than that Sushil Kumar Modi has been BJP's and Sangh Parivar's most recognisable face since the time Jayaprakash Narayan launched a movement against the Emergency in 1975. There are other leaders too in the state, who are capable of providing able leadership in case the BJP coming to power and the party doesn't need to look for a Khattar.

But then the search for "Khattars" is fuelled by the need to have subservient leadership in the states; what else explains the destruction of local party structure in Delhi. A similar phenomenon is being witnessed in Uttarakhand where all the Lok Sabha MPs, which includes three former

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chief ministers – Major General BC Khanduri, Bhagat Singh Koshiyari and Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, have been consigned to the cold-storage. The Himalayan state goes for Vidhan Sabha polls in January-February 2017.

In Punjab, another state going to the polls in 2017, there is no recognisable face of the party who can provide leadership. With both Navjot Singh Sidhu and Vinod Khanna out of favour, the party is not in a position to utilise its most charismatic Sikh and Hindu faces. Probably, it's the party strategy to not allow any other leader's charisma share space with that of the Prime Minister's. But will the name and appeal of the Prime Minister alone provide sufficient arsenal to party in its electoral battles?

The state assembly polls in Bihar would provide a definite answer to the above query. The BJP leadership, especially the Prime Minister and party president, managed to overcome the adverse results in Delhi assembly polls. However, if the party suffers reverses in Bihar too, the leadership would have to do away with the policy of going to the battlefield with leaders looking to prosper in the shade of a banyan tree. Nitish Kumar still has enough friends in the BJP. If he does come back to power, Kumar is capable of doing more damage to present BJP leadership from inside than outside. Who are Nitish Kumar's friends are anybody's guess?

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