

Naveen Patnaik

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 Juggernaut

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*To my late father, Tara Pada Banerjee
Baba, I know you would have been very proud*

Contents

Introduction: From Socialite to Satrap	1
1. <i>Mere Pitaji Ko . . . Bahut Pyara Tha</i>	23
2. The First Steps	55
3. The Uninterrupted Reign	87
4. The Secret of Naveen's Success	147
5. 2024: The Pandian Puzzle	195
6. What Next?	239
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	255
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	267

Introduction

From Socialite to Satrap

‘Oh! I have got a problem,’ Naveen Patnaik burst out spontaneously, before quickly falling quiet on a balmy evening in the spring of 2000.

The 53-year-old Naveen was on the cusp of taking over as the chief minister of Odisha (then spelt as ‘Orissa’). He was set to embark on an incredible journey that would see him becoming one of the country’s longest-serving chief ministers, second only to Sikkim’s Pawan Kumar Chamling.

Over the next quarter of a century, Naveen set new records, getting re-elected again and again – no less than five times in total.

Given his durability at the very top of his state despite the unpredictability that invariably comes along with any electoral democracy where elected leaders fall by the wayside routinely, the secret of

Naveen's spectacular success has long been the subject of a mystery as gripping as any Agatha Christie thriller. What allowed him to tick along for so long – some 24 years at Odisha's helm – has been the subject of never-ending debates amongst people interested in Indian politics.

His exclamation – 'Oh! I have got a problem' – while being driven around in a car from one television studio to another for in-person interviews in Bhubaneswar (the capital city of Odisha) – was out of character. Taciturn by nature, Naveen rarely spoke. When he did, he spoke softly and cautiously. His car pulled into a TV studio soon after he made that comment.

It was the day that the 2000-assembly election results were being announced and he was headed for a thumping victory. It was clear that he would be sworn in as the next chief minister, but Naveen surprisingly had no security accompanying him. I was with him in a rented car. He sat in front, beside the driver; I was in the back. Those were the pre-EVM days – the counting of ballots was still underway and the results of several seats were awaited. In some cases, trends were known, but official announcements of who had won and who had lost were yet to be made.

As results were confirmed and friends called on my mobile, I relayed them to Naveen. 'X has won from

Introduction

here, Y has lost from there' – I kept updating him. Naveen merely listened, poker-faced. He soaked in whatever information I offered him. But then came the result from Pallahara, an assembly constituency in the central Anugul district, and Naveen's ears pricked up. Naveen's new party, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), had contested the elections in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the winning candidate from Pallahara happened to be the BJP's Dharmendra Pradhan. The moment I broke the news that Pradhan had won, Naveen said, 'Oh! I have got a problem'.

Son of the then union minister of state for surface transport, Debendra Pradhan, Dharmendra was a little-known figure in 2000. An activist of the BJP's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and a former student union leader of Utkal University, Dharmendra was contesting elections for the first time. Nobody thought much of him and many in the state BJP felt he would, at best, be a temporary presence. Odisha, like every other state, was replete with instances of leaders fading into oblivion after winning one or two elections, and the consensus was that Dharmendra would be no different.

But clearly, Naveen thought differently and blurted out his concern over Dharmendra's victory in a rare moment of candour.

Why he felt that way is what makes Naveen truly intriguing. That a first-time MLA's election was clocked, with alarm, by Naveen way back in 2000 – when merely a few in the state took Dharmendra seriously – puts him in an entirely different league of politicians. It also possibly holds the key to understanding what made Naveen such a successful politician. He had this innate power to gauge any opponent's potential power well in advance, and Dharmendra – now an influential union minister – had set alarm bells ringing in him since the beginning.

A top IAS officer who had served Naveen for a long time insisted that Naveen possessed 'X-ray eyes'. He was suspicious by nature. The moment he saw a person, he sized them up, without letting the person know what he was thinking of them. 'Naveen's gut feelings were strong and he relied heavily on them,' another senior official explained. Those who have worked with him closely say that Naveen could hide his emotions well. He may have had a very poor opinion of someone, but the person would never get to know that. On the contrary, it was more likely that Naveen would floor them with his warmth and charm.

This happened with Dharmendra as well. A few days after his private remark, Naveen met Dharmendra in the assembly when the new house convened to welcome the newly elected legislators. Naveen, who

Introduction

was the chief minister by then, congratulated the first-time BJP MLA profusely and said how happy he was seeing Dharmendra win. Naveen, after all, could never be faulted for failing to show courtesy in public.

Precisely 24 years later, Naveen's premonition about his problem proved prophetic. Dharmendra – the 'problem' – settled down at his home in Bhubaneswar's Prachi Enclave to watch disaster unfold for Naveen on a giant television screen. It was the morning of 4 June 2024, when the votes for the 2024 general elections and the Odisha state assembly polls were being counted. In the intervening years, Naveen and his 'problem' had chartered different courses. Naveen kept winning election after election in the state and seemed virtually invincible. Dharmendra, too, had grown in heft, having graduated from a rookie legislator to the union minister of education.

Comforted by his visits to two places of worship – the Chausathi Yogini temple in Hirapur the previous night and the Maa Ugratara temple in Khordha in the morning – Dharmendra patiently awaited the results of the elections held simultaneously for the state's 21 Lok Sabha and 147 assembly seats. Besides being a frontline leader of the BJP who had contributed his might to queer the pitch for Naveen, Dharmendra himself was in the fray for a parliamentary seat from Sambalpur in western Odisha. As the results

trickled in, cagey nervousness gave way to cautious optimism, and eventually, to unbridled excitement. The unthinkable had happened: Naveen's BJD had been defeated and the BJP had been voted into power for the first time in the state. In the polls for the parliamentary seats, the BJD had drawn an embarrassing blank.

A few days later, it was the turn of Dharmendra to be at his courteous best as he and other BJP bigwigs – Prime Minister Narendra Modi included – went the extra mile to welcome the outgoing chief minister to the dais for the oath-taking ceremony of the new chief minister. It was a fine show of electoral democracy at its decent best.

Though reduced to being just a *former* chief minister, the aura around Naveen remains undiminished. He still invokes as much awe among people as he did during his heyday. Now 78-years-old, he also commands the grudging respect of opponents as a politically astute patriarch.

Reticent, reclusive and refined, Naveen has been a surprise package in the crass and chaotic world of politics. The youngest son of the legendary politician Biju Patnaik, he has blue-blooded pedigree and a powerful surname. Yet, initially, only a few thought much of him and almost certainly never imagined that he would reach the dizzying heights that he ultimately scaled.

Introduction

I, too, was one of them when I first ran into him in 1988 at Konark, the seaside resort with the famous Sun temple, not far from the more famous temple town of Puri. A British explorer and writer, Mark Shand – brother of Queen Camilla – was set to embark on a thousand-odd-kilometre journey from Konark to Sonapur (in the neighbouring Bihar) on an elephant, creating a buzz and drawing a motley crowd. Invited as a guest of the private secretary of Biju Patnaik – Naveen’s famous father and then the leader of the opposition in the Odisha legislature – I was loitering around in the lawns of the Konark inspection bungalow when Gour Mohan Sarangi, the private secretary, introduced me to a tall, lean, middle-aged man in jeans and T-shirt walking by.

‘Hi, I am Naveen,’ said the man, extending his hand for a warm handshake.

That was that, and we all moved towards Mark Shand as the adventurer arrived with his entourage a trifle late. I cannot be faulted for taking the fortuitous meeting lightly. Biju Babu’s family generally stayed in the background, away from the public gaze. Occasionally, his wife, Gyan Patnaik, would make an appearance beside the imposing, six feet-plus-tall politician, who left a deep imprint on the state, both during his life and after. But more often than not, Gyan Patnaik, when seen in public, would only be

a silent spectator, while Biju Babu held court. His children were rarely seen.

Biju Babu's children – eldest child Prem, daughter Gita, and Naveen – lived mostly outside Odisha. Naveen lived in his father's privately owned New Delhi residence on Aurangzeb Road, now known as the A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Marg. They visited their father in Bhubaneswar from time to time, but the family visits were invariably low-key.

Since Biju Babu's children only had a peripheral role, no one at Konark showed any interest in Naveen. No one crowded around him or sought to grab his attention. To his credit, Naveen kept to himself and threw none of the tantrums associated with children of the famous and the powerful. At that time, no one in Odisha or elsewhere could have dreamt that Biju Babu's younger son was destined to outshine his illustrious father.

But almost a decade after Shand undertook his epic elephant journey, those of us who had been somewhat dismissive of Naveen in Konark were forced to take note of him. I, for one, had the onerous task of chasing him for news reports. A political nonentity, Naveen was catapulted into the limelight following his father's death in 1997. Circumstances forced him to plunge into politics, and over time, he outshone his distinguished father. Consider this: for all his fame,

Introduction

Biju Babu had only short stints in power. His political career spanned some fifty years, but the legendary leader was in power for less than ten years in total. He was the chief minister of Odisha for about two years in the early 1960s. After spending a long spell in the wilderness thereafter, he next tasted power in the late 1970s, when a disparate opposition under Jayaprakash Narayan ousted Indira Gandhi from the Centre. Biju Babu was the union minister of steel and mines in the Janata government for a little over two years until the government fell. Biju Babu himself continued to be a powerful regional player, but held no executive post until 1990, when he again became chief minister. He remained in office until the completion of his term in 1995.

But unlike his father's roller-coaster ride, Naveen's political journey mostly had an upward trajectory till 2024. After his father's death, Naveen quickly became a member of Parliament (MP) after winning the Lok Sabha by-election to Aska constituency in 1997 – the seat his father had won in 1996 – and then got re-elected to Parliament twice in quick succession, first in March 1998 and then again in October 1999. When the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to power in 1998, Naveen became a union minister. He remained a union minister when Vajpayee took oath

as prime minister again the following year. He then set his sights on Odisha and when elections were held in the state in 2000, he swept the polls and became the chief minister.

He stayed on as the chief minister until he was ousted in 2024.

In the 24 years he held office, the world changed a lot. Naveen came to power in an era before the 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis. India, too, changed considerably. The NDA led by the BJP was voted out in 2004 and replaced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which had the grand old Congress party at its helm. It lorded over the country for ten years until a groundswell of popular disenchantment swept it aside and propelled Narendra Modi to the top job of prime minister in 2014.

On the economic front as well, there have been sea changes. To give just one example, the Sensex which hovered around 4,000 in the year 2000 – the year Naveen first assumed charge as Odisha’s chief minister – is now trading above 75,000 and shows an upward bias.

Odisha, however, showed little political upheaval until very recently, when the 2024 elections finally ended Naveen’s uninterrupted long run. Unlike many other chief ministers who were felled by anti-incumbency after winning landslide victories in their

Introduction

states, Naveen largely bucked the trend. Even in 2014, when the Modi phenomenon swept across the length and breadth of the country, it made no dent in Odisha. In fact, Naveen improved on the previous tally of the BJD in the assembly elections. In the Lok Sabha, the BJD won twenty of the twenty-one seats in the state.

All this and more made Naveen a remarkable phenomenon. Unlike other politicians with a penchant for being in the headlines, he was rarely seen on prime-time television, and heard even less. He could qualify as the quietest politician in present-day India. Back home in Odisha, there was an information deficit about Naveen. People knew the basic details of his social life before he entered politics in 1997, courtesy some of his journalist friends, but little else.

That Naveen, together with some of his friends, ran a boutique – *Psychedelhi* – in the capital's Oberoi hotel once was little-known. The boutique's clientele included famous persons such as The Beatles. The people of Odisha knew he was some sort of a writer before, but generally had no idea of how many and what kinds of books he had written. Few had seen or read the three coffee table books Biju Babu's son had authored – *A Second Paradise: Indian Courtly Life 1590-1947*, *A Desert Kingdom: The Rajputs of Bikaner* and *The Garden of Life: An Introduction to the Healing Plants of India*. Even fewer people knew that Naveen had acted in a

bit role in a 1988 Ivory Merchant film, *The Deceivers*, which had established actors such as Pierce Brosnan, Shashi Kapoor and Saeed Jaffrey in the cast.

Journalist Tavleen Singh's book *Durbar* is replete with references to a younger Naveen who went party-hopping with her and was a permanent feature of Delhi's cocktail circuit. Singh recounts an episode when a young Naveen asked Sonia Gandhi at a party if she was wearing clothes made by Valentino, the Italian couturier. Renowned editor-journalist Vir Sanghvi, in an article published several years ago, wrote on Naveen's lifestyle and the reputation he had as the perfect host. Naveen's Delhi home, Sanghvi wrote, was a cultural melting pot, where the high and mighty, the rich and famous – and the not-so-famous – gathered routinely. Among his guests were Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, actress Koo Stark, who once dated Prince Andrew of Britain, and Bruce Chatwin, the famous travel writer and novelist.

Though Naveen lived mostly away from the public gaze, his social contacts were legendary. One time, one of Naveen's foreign acquaintances apparently called up to ask if he could host a friend who would pass through India shortly. Naveen said yes and the person, who was identified only as Robert, came and stayed with him for a few days. It was none other than the Hollywood superstar Robert De Niro.

Introduction

Such stories, combined with Naveen's reticence, gave him an aura of mystery. People seemed to like him but knew precious little about him. There is practically no one who knows him intimately, at least not in Odisha, prompting some to compare him with Greta Garbo, the Swedish-born American actress whose mystique deepened after she became a recluse on retirement.

There is only one other politician in India who had been chief minister longer than Naveen. Pawan Kumar Chamling, who was chief minister of Sikkim between 1994 and 2019, and hence ruled for 24 years and 165 days. Naveen had occupied the chief minister's chair for 24 years and 99 days – nearly a year longer than the third-place record holder: West Bengal's Jyoti Basu, who had ruled for a little over 23 years.

But it isn't only his longevity that has leapfrogged Naveen to the status of a living legend. Politics, by and large, is a sordid, murky and fiercely competitive affair. It is a treacherous vocation where everyone is out to pull one and all down by any means, fair or foul. The world of politics in Odisha is no different: it was, in fact, the first state in the country where an elected people's representative switched political allegiances after winning at the polls. Bira Kishore Behera had changed sides and joined the Independent Party of

a local maharaja after being elected on a Congress ticket from Jajpur district in the provincial elections during British times, in 1937, thereby setting into motion a practice that came to later be decried as the politics of '*Aaya Ram, gaya Ram* (Ram has come, Ram has left)'.

Surviving such a cut-throat political set-up is no easy task. Naveen was a political novice in 1997, with little to no knowledge of the state. His pedigree and powerful surname did give him a head start, but to sustain the momentum for more than two decades, consolidating his hold on the state, going from strength to strength, was no mean achievement. From a greenhorn, Naveen smoothly transitioned into a regional satrap.

Remarkably, when he first took over as chief minister, he spoke no Odia. Rally after rally, ahead of the 2000 assembly elections, a somewhat sheepish Naveen went around telling the crowds that he would take time to pick up the local language – '*Mote bhala Odia kabiba paeen tike samay lagiba*' – before switching over to reading from a pre-written speech in Hindi. Imagine Mamata Banerjee seeking to become chief minister of Bengal without speaking Bengali, or Nitish Kumar becoming chief minister of Bihar without knowing a word of Bhojpuri. Or for that matter, Narendra Modi hoping to lead Gujarat, as

Introduction

he did for over twelve years before becoming prime minister, without knowing Gujarati.

Twenty-four years later, when he has finally stepped down, it cannot be said Naveen's Odia has vastly improved. He is more at ease speaking in English than the language of the state that he represented for so long. The jury is also out on whether Naveen delivered on the hope he gave people and lived up to their expectations. For all the publicity and propaganda that his successive governments undertook aggressively, Odisha still makes news for the wrong reasons. Children in the state's outlying areas are malnourished, poverty is rampant, and corruption, critics say, is endemic. Despite the long years of Naveen at the helm, Odisha's enduring image is that of a state neck-deep in despair and distress. Naveen gave the state stability, but his opponents say he failed miserably in bringing succour to the people.

But irrespective of his achievements or failings, it cannot be denied that Naveen scripted a spectacular success story for himself. Having had nothing to do with politics for approximately the first fifty years of his life, he transformed himself into a consummate politician once he decided to take the plunge. Some say Naveen had politics in his genes even though this instinct had lain dormant for decades. When the opportunity finally presented itself after his

father's demise, he simply outdid others with a mix of shrewdness and stealth – qualities that he inherently possessed. But he also owed a part of his political success to the state's disappointing political past. For decades before his arrival, the state seemed adrift on hopelessness. Politicians played their inane games ceaselessly and scandals erupted at regular intervals. When Naveen stepped forward to stake claim to his father's legacy, the Odias, wallowing in misery, responded wholeheartedly. It was as if the quest for collective redemption, an attempt to retrieve trust, integrity and morality that were in short supply in public life, had begun in right earnest with Naveen's arrival.



I had a taste of the muck that dominated Odisha's politics within hours of my arrival in the state for the first time, way back in 1987, when the paan-chewing man with stained teeth, sitting behind the small desk at the chief minister's official residence, said, '*Asila? Asa.*'

Less than ten-hours-old in Bhubaneswar, I was stumped by the words. I struggled to make sense of what the slightly balding man was saying. Or *why* he was saying it.

Introduction

The words in Odia seemed somewhat similar to my mother tongue, Bengali: ‘So have you have? Come.’ The man seemed to have been expecting me and was welcoming me inside. Obviously, he had mistaken me for someone else. But before I could fully comprehend what he had said, he spoke up again. ‘*Ratri egaratare asiba* (Come at eleven at night),’ he said, this time with a suggestive half-smile.

Since my arrival that morning as the state correspondent of *The Indian Express*, I had been caught up in a virtual whirlwind. Bhubaneswar those days was known for a cool breeze that invariably blew across the leafy, tree-lined city, but the political temperatures had been rising and the city was divided, with battle lines drawn between loyalists of the chief minister J.B. Patnaik (not related to Biju Babu or Naveen in any way) and his rivals.

J.B. Patnaik’s detractors within the ruling Congress were demanding his dismissal and I arrived just when yet another bout of dissidence was threatening to unseat the normally unflappable chief minister. Disgust at the political classes, including the chief minister, was at an all-time high in the aftermath of a damning cover story that the now-defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India* had run in May 1986 on the alleged sexual escapades of J.B. Patnaik.

The story portrayed J.B. Patnaik as a modern-day Caligula, the notorious Roman emperor known for

his mood swings and testosterone-driven orgies. The *Illustrated Weekly* quoted men and women giving details of Patnaik's sexual preferences and how they had been enticed to be at his service. The chief minister was shown to be a 'deviant'. The levelled allegations were serious, but far from conclusive. J.B. Patnaik doggedly denied the charges and took the magazine to court. Unable (or unwilling) to back up the allegations, the *Illustrated Weekly* was forced to apologize. But by then, the damage had been done and the chief minister's image and standing had been severely dented. Party rivals wanted him dismissed and senior Congress leader Uma Shankar Dixit was at Bhubaneswar to mediate between the warring pro- and anti-J.B. Patnaik factions.

Soon after he touched down, Dixit left for Raj Bhavan and the journalists assembled at the airport decided to head to J.B. Patnaik's official residence. I followed them and was puzzled by the light – almost absent – security at the chief minister's house. The journalists marched ahead, first past a portico and then through a small anteroom. By the time I got into the anteroom, the other journalists had moved into the next room – presumably where J.B. Patnaik was. So, there I was, standing alone in front of the desk and the paan-chewing man behind it. He did not know I was a journalist and said, *Asila? Asa. Ratri*

Introduction

egaratare asiba'. As I stood there, unsure, a journalist came back and pulled me inside, sparing me further embarrassment.

Nearly four decades later, I am yet to decode the real meaning of the words spoken by the man. Was it an innocuous welcome? Or was it an invitation of the kind that the *Illustrated Weekly* report had famously hinted were frequently given out?



Whatever it was, it got me hooked to Odisha from day one. My fascination grew overtime, with every twist and turn the state took in the following years, sprinkled liberally with murders, mayhem and mass misery. Events that unfolded in Odisha were mostly tragic, but at times, the changing situations also provided for some comic relief. In December 1989, when J.B. Patnaik finally made way for a change of guard in the state, his successor, Hemananda Biswal, was woken up from his sleep by a party emissary in the cold winter night, to be told that he would become chief minister the next day. Those were pre-cellphone times and Biswal's only landline at home, given to him as a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), had been disconnected by the service provider for non-payment of dues. Biswal was stunned by the

sudden good tidings. The emissary, the son of a former Congress chief minister, was stumped by Biswal's over-the-top reaction. '*Ha ha ha, mu mukhamantri bebi!* (Ha ha ha, I will become the chief minister!)', a surprised Biswal kept repeating aloud, as he paced up and down the lawns of his house, soaking in the news that night. First elected an MLA in 1974, Biswal, from the western district of Sundargarh, was a veteran politician, and commanded respect within the party. But the Congress, as always, was faction-ridden, and Biswal was not in the race to become chief minister until the party high command, prodded by the new state Congress chief, Nandini Satpathy, decided to crown him. By making him chief minister, Satpathy expected to be the real power behind the throne. Biswal, nonetheless, was overjoyed. He laughed more the next day, when the same service provider installed no less than seven landlines at his home after he had taken oath as the new chief minister.

Not short of either drama or melodrama, Odisha never ceased to surprise and shock. In December 1999, the Congress wanted to sack its chief minister, Giridhar Gamang, for his bumbling ways. A delegation of top leaders arrived to hand him his pink slip, but Gamang refused to go easily. He kept hopping from place to place across the city, with the leaders in hot pursuit. He escaped them and flew off

Introduction

to Delhi, where other senior Congress leaders finally cornered him and extracted his resignation.

Naveen, on the contrary, was his own master – he had no high command peering over his shoulder – and he brought stability to the topsy-turvy world of Odisha politics. But his reign did not rob the state of either the drama or the intrigue that was intrinsic to the way its politics was conducted. High-voltage action was never in short supply as the new chief minister stamped his authority by cutting down to size rivals he thought could sabotage him later. As Naveen grew in stature, most of his erstwhile comrades were made to bite the dust. Plots were hatched and daggers were drawn periodically, and Naveen gave repeated proof that he was no pushover.

The key to Naveen's success was that even though he indulged in political machinations and subterfuge, he largely came out without any blemishes, skillfully sidestepping scrutiny and deflecting criticism. He continued to be viewed by many as innocent and incapable of the maneuvering of an ordinary politician. And when something went horribly wrong somewhere in the state, there was always someone else to shoulder the blame, sparing Naveen any taint.

That he was single, soft-spoken and always deferential, helped in nurturing Naveen's image. It may have frayed at the edges after his very long

stint in power, but a sizeable section of the people still believes that he had no reason to be corrupt as he had no children to pass his wealth to. Many others refuse to associate anything nasty with the unfailingly pleasant and gentle Naveen. All this and more made his journey – from a socialite at ease in the rarefied cocktail circuit of Delhi to a regional czar astonishingly adept in the tumultuous world of politics – truly remarkable.