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Naveen Patnaik's Odisha (2000-2024)

By: Birendra Nayak

Naveen Patnaik served as Odisha's chief minister for 24 years before his party, the Biju Janata Dal, was defeated in the 2024 assembly election. How did he hold on to office for so long and other than in curbing communal tensions why is there so little to show for 20+ years of governance?

A severe cyclonic storm hit the coastal districts of Odisha on 29 and 30 October 1999, causing unprecedented devastation and untold misery to the people. Just three months later, in February 2000, the Congress party's decades-long supremacy in the state came to an end, with the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in alliance with the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) replacing it.

Chip off the Janata Dal

A political novice was chosen to contest the byelection from the Aska parliamentary constituency in Odisha that fell vacant when former chief minister Biju Patnaik died on 17 April 1997. He was Biju Patnaik's 54-year-old son Naveen Patnaik, who had till then been leading the life of a "glamorous socialite" in Lutyens Delhi, according to his friend, the journalist Tavleen Singh, in her book *Durbar*.

Naveen won the by-election in June 1997 as a Janata Dal candidate. Biju Patnaik had been the Janata Dal Chief Minister of Odisha from 1990 to 1995, with 123 members of the 147-seat strong 10th Odisha Assembly. But in the 11th Assembly election in 1995, the Janata Dal was reduced to 46 seats and the Congress came back to power.

On 15 December 1997, the Janata Dal in the Odisha Assembly [split](#) as the central leadership of the party disallowed a section of it from entering into a poll alliance with the BJP. This section declared itself the Biju Janata Dal on 26 December 1997 and formed a separate party group in the assembly. The desire of some Janata Dal members to align with the BJP was reportedly [kindled](#) by prominent BJP leaders such as Atal Behari Vajpayee and Promod Mahajan.

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It was ironic that a party bearing Biju Patnaik's name craved an alliance with the BJP because he had been unflinchingly committed to secularism. With the BJD being an alliance partner of the BJP, Naveen, its president, was made a union minister on 19 March 1998 in Prime Minister Vajpayee's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. But back home, [all was not well](#) in the BJD legislative party, with the issue of its leadership awaiting resolution.

Naveen therefore decided to be a part of the Odisha legislature, and contested in the assembly elections of February 2000. Being barely known in Odisha politics, and unable to speak fluent Odia, his mother Gyan Patnaik reportedly advised Naveen to seek the help of 'Pyari babu' to navigate the choppy waters of politics. Pyari babu, as Pyari Mohan Mahapatra used to be addressed, was a retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) official who had served Biju Patnaik as his principal secretary when he was the chief minister, during 1990-95, and had [enjoyed the trust](#) of the Patnaiks.

Naveen contested as a BJD candidate from the Hinjli assembly constituency, which was a part of the Aska Lok Sabha constituency, and won. The BJD (68 seats) and its ally, the BJP (38 seats) together bagged 106 of the 147 seats. The combine formed a government with Naveen, who quit the union ministry on 4 March 2000, as Chief Minister.

Sacking and expelling spree

In this election, Bijoy Mahapatra, who had been a confidant of Biju Patnaik and was the chairman of the BJD's political affairs committee, had been informed at the last moment that Naveen had withdrawn the ticket given to him to contest as a party candidate. It was said that Pyari babu was behind this. Naveen's journey in Odisha politics thus began by humiliating one of the founders of the

BJD who had been an MLA four times. But Bijoy Mahapatra’s perceived threat to Naveen’s leadership had now been nipped in the bud.

Just a year later, on 9 July 2001, senior BJD leader Nalini Mohanty was sacked from Naveen’s ministry along with two more ministers, ostensibly because of corruption charges. Nalini Mohanty was also [expelled](#) from the BJD.

In 2002, [Dilip Ray](#), who had been a minister in Vajpayee’s ministry, was also sacked from the BJD. Just two years into his rule, these incidents created the impression that Naveen was a mercurial politician.

But the general public, who suspected all professional politicians were corrupt, perceived Naveen, a new entrant to politics, as an honest person. His simple attire of a white pyjama and kurta, as well as his bachelorhood, appealed to the masses. And the sacking of his ministers buttressed his clean and incorruptible image. Till May 2012, when finally Pyari Mohan Mohapatra himself was dismissed from the party, [26 ministers had been sacked](#) and it was believed that most of the dismissals had been on Pyari babu’s advice.

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But even in the absence of Pyari babu, ministers continued to be dropped from Naveen’s ministry now and then, most often to [strengthen his position](#). This lent weight to the suspicion that Naveen himself found the sacking and expelling strategy useful, both to create an honest image for himself and to warn his BJD colleagues about the consequences of dissent.

Pyari babu’s removal in May 2012 had a chilling effect on party functionaries. In the initial years when Pyari babu was mentoring Naveen, every possible threat to the chief minister’s leadership was neutralised. The BJD as an organisation was also gradually strengthened with Pyari babu inducting new faces into it. His association with the BJD paid rich political dividends when it faced the 2009 assembly election without the BJP, winning 103 seats while its erstwhile ally ended up with only six seats.

When Naveen began going solo, Gyan Patnaik, who had advised him to seek Pyari babu’s cooperation, [was no more](#). She passed away in February 2009. A year before Pyari babu was shown the door, V.K. Pandian, an IAS bureaucrat, joined Naveen as his private secretary.

Naveen’s BJD fought the 2014 and 2019 assembly elections on its own and succeeded in winning 117 and 113 seats, respectively, with a 43.4% and 44.71% share of the vote. The BJD also had landslide victories in the panchayat and municipal elections of 2022, persuading the media to see Naveen as one who had [checked the BJP’s advance](#) in the state.

Seeking alliance with BJP

With such success in elections since 2009, why did the BJD want to again enter into an alliance with the BJP for the 2024 election? It did not happen, and the BJD under Naveen saw its tally reduced to 51 seats – the lowest in its electoral history that began in 2000.

Most surprisingly, Naveen lost to a BJP candidate in the Kanatbanji assembly constituency by a margin of 16,344 votes. Though he won from the Hinjali constituency, his victory margin was a slender 4,636 votes. Another surprise was that the BJD could not win any of the 21 parliamentary seats. The BJP won 20 of them. Why did the BJD suffer such a humiliating defeat?

Many [blame Pandian](#), who resigned from the IAS and joined the BJD on the eve of the 2024 election. He was the most visible campaigner for the BJD and was said to be representing Naveen. The actual candidates were reportedly almost invisible in the clamour of Pandian’s visits. The [thinking](#) seems to have been that all the candidates would win on the basis of Naveen’s popularity with the masses.

A decline in the BJD’s share of the vote by 4.49 percentage points from 44.71% in 2019 to 40.22% in 2024 spoke otherwise. Against this, the BJP’s share increased by 7.58 percentage points—from 32.49% in 2019 to 40.07% in 2024. Pandian being a Tamilian (with an Odia wife in the IAS) provided the BJD’s opponents with an opportunity to raise the issue of Odia *asmita* (self-respect, pride). Unlike Naveen, Pandian could speak Odia, but with a southern accent. The BJP’s attacks on Pandian became more vehement after the BJD-

BJP electoral tie-up failed to materialise.

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Before the 2024 election, there was plenty of mutual public admiration that suggested a BJD-BJP alliance was a strong possibility. The BJD had supported almost every bill moved in Parliament after the BJP's victory in the 2019 general election. It also did not support a no-confidence motion against the government on the issue of Manipur violence. It did oppose the contentious farm laws, but that [did not impress](#) Odisha's farmers because the party had already promulgated an ordinance very similar to the central farm laws in the state.

The BJD also ceded a [Rajya Sabha seat](#) to BJP candidate Ashwini Vaishnaw, and this happened, not once, but two times, reportedly at the behest of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. Vaishnaw was an IAS bureaucrat of the Odisha cadre, six years senior to Pandian.

The BJD's proclivity to support the ruling party's policies and its eagerness to be its electoral partner must have caused a section of the voters to see it as indistinguishable from the BJP, and to gravitate towards it. To say that the BJD raised the acceptability of the BJP among the voters of Odisha would not be an exaggeration. Naveen even gave Modi a [rating of eight](#) out of 10 for his foreign policy and measures to fight corruption in September 2023.

Scams and inaccessibility

Naveen's and the BJD's sheen of incorruptibility and honesty began fading with a chit fund scandal in 2013. The Supreme Court ordered a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into it in response to a petition, and, after considerable delay, it led to the arrest of [some BJD MLAs and MPs](#) as well as some chit fund company bigwigs.

A mining scam came to light when the [Justice M.B. Shah commission of enquiry report](#) into illegal iron and manganese ore mining in Odisha, which the Centre had kept under wraps, was released on 27 January 2014. Illegal mining worth Rs. 59,203 crore had taken place in the state and 22.80 crore tonnes of iron and manganese ore had been extracted illegally for almost a decade. The enquiry commission demanded a CBI investigation into the matter, hinting at the involvement of many powerful businessmen, bureaucrats, and politicians from in and out of the state.

Following the end of the BJD-BJP alliance of nine years in 2009, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power at the centre, and the BJD declared it was equidistant from both the national coalitions. But when the BJP-led NDA again came to power at the centre in 2019, the BJD substituted its equidistance with a "constructive support" policy. Ironically, senior BJD leader Bhartruhari Mahatab, who had declared, "We are now in the role of constructive support," joined the BJP before the 2024 election.

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Mahatab left the BJD complaining that hardly anyone in the party had [met Naveen](#) after 2019. In an interview, he said, "During the last six-seven years, all power was concentrated in only one or two people. The chief minister, who was adored by the people, went into a cocoon or was forced to. When there was no direct contact with the party leaders and workers, what to say of the people?" Pointing a finger at Pandian, Mahatab said, "A person who was once upon a time his private secretary is now controlling the party."

With the party's control in Pandian's hands, anybody who criticised him was given marching orders. This included senior BJD MLAs Baijayanta Panda and Soumya Ranjan Patnaik, who were dismissed in 2018 and 2023, respectively. Pandian allegedly did not like anybody to be close to Naveen. BJD politician Pradip Panigrahy, who was said to be enjoying "unfettered access to the chief minister", was [expelled from the party](#) in November 2020. In his words, "I raised the issues of mismanagement in Covid centres and the treatment procedures for Covid patients. This probably did not go down well with some bureaucrats."

While Pandian is blamed for blocking the access of party workers, MLAs, and MPs to Naveen, it should not be ignored that the BJD president himself preferred to remain aloof from the hurly-burly of political life. Even after he had been Chief Minister for 22 years, he was [described](#) by well-known journalist Priya Sahgal as "invisible, inaudible, inaccessible and incommunicado." In Pandian, Naveen

seemed to have found a competent aide to help him stay detached.

In the initial years, the political clamour used to stop at Pyari Mohan Mohapatra's doors because he could control the party workers with his seniority and experience, leaving Naveen undisturbed. Naveen began interacting with party workers and MLAs only at the end of May 2012 when he feared Pyari babu was planning a coup against him. Once Pyari was removed, Naveen returned to his old self. In Pandian, Naveen did not see any threat to his chief ministership. It is another matter that Pandian's management led to a fall in the party's fortunes. This appears to have now brought Naveen out of his cocoon.

Language, agreements, schemes

Though Naveen attracted criticism for being a Chief Minister of Odisha who could hardly speak Odia, his cabinet [approved](#) the Odisha Official Language Rules, 2016 for implementing the Odisha Official Language Act, 1954. It also approved setting up an Odia Language and Literature University.

To Naveen's good fortune, Odia was recognised on 20 February 2014 as the sixth classical Indian language, and the state government decided to observe [Shastriya Odia Bhasa Divas](#) every year on 11 March, the day the gazette notification was made. Just before the 2024 election, the Odisha government decided to hold first [World Odia Language convention](#) in Bhubaneswar, and it was held under Pandian's supervision from 3 to 5 February 2024 with a lot of fanfare.

As the website of the Odisha Department of Steel and Mines shows, 60 memorandums of understanding (MoUs) were signed by BJD governments with steel, cement, and alumina companies between 2002 and 2006. In June 2005, an MoU was signed with POSCO, a South Korean steel company, and this was followed by a decade-long protest against it by the local people. In 2020, the land allotted to POSCO was proposed to be handed over to another steel company, JSW, which was also not in the good books of the local population.

On the eve of the 2024 election, it was revealed that the ruling party of resource-rich Odisha, the BJD, had received most of its electoral bond donations from mining and steel companies.

Arcelor Mittal, which had signed an MoU with the state government in December 2006, withdrew in 2013, again due to protests by the locals. But this did not happen with Tata Steel Ltd, which signed an MoU on 17 November 2004 and is continuing to produce at the Kalinganagar Industrial Complex in Duburi, Jajpur. Protests against it were suppressed by police action, which led to the death of 12 adivasis on 2 January 2006.

Earlier, on 16 December 2000, three adivasis died in police firing in Maikanch village of Rayagada district, when they were protesting against Utkal Alumina International Ltd barely 10 months after Naveen had been the Chief Minister. Another industry that continues despite protests is Vedanta Ltd's alumina refinery in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi district.

An MoU signed with the Vedanta Foundation in July 2006 was followed by the assembly passing the Vedanta University Bill in July 2009. This too aroused large-scale protests and the high court finally ordered that the land acquired in Puri for the university be returned to those from whom it had been acquired. A September 2024 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report, examining a large number of cases from 2017-18 to 2021-22, said that "tribal land was acquired without gram sabha meetings" and that many affected families were denied rehabilitation and resettlement.

On the eve of the 2024 election, it was revealed that the ruling party of resource-rich Odisha, the BJD, had received most of its electoral bond donations from mining and steel companies. The BJD received Rs. 944.5 crore through electoral bonds from 2018-19 to 2023-24 (up to September). The largest amount of Rs 174.5 crore was donated by Aditya Birla Group's Essel Mining & Industries Ltd whereas Utkal Alumina donated Rs 70 crore, Vedanta Ltd. donated Rs. 40 crore, JSPL Rs. 100 crore, and Jindal Steel Rs. 30 crore. Aditya Birla Group's former chief executive officer Santrupt Mishra joined the BJD on 9 February 2024 and was appointed as its national spokesperson moments later. The BJD always knows who to be friends with.

No aspect of human life appeared to have escaped the attention of Naveen's governments, and schemes were formulated for all sorts of activities to cater for different sections of the population. This ranged from the Mamata Scheme launched on 5 September 2011 to provide monetary support to pregnant women and lactating mothers to the Mahaprayan Yojna launched on 31 May 2018 to provide financial assistance for cremation. There were also several schemes specifically for the youth, senior citizens, and adolescent girls, and

women, not to mention the popular Mo Bus, a public transport bus service that was launched on 6 November 2018.

In 2019, after assuming office as Chief Minister for the fifth time, Naveen articulated his five mantras to build a new Odisha—transparency, technology, teamwork, time, and transformation, or 5T—before his party members. He gave his private secretary Pandian additional charge as Secretary to the CM’s Transformation and Initiatives (5Ts).

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Soon, the government decided that the implementation of the 5T charter would be reflected in the annual performance appraisal reports of different categories of government employees. Niti Ayog even tweeted in favour of 5T—“Odisha has adopted a 5T agenda to transform education system, achieve the goal of all children at grade-appropriate learning level in a school environment that is conducive and engaging”

However, 5T created confusion. There were apprehensions it was undermining the authority of state departments and its implementation was “belittling” the chief secretary, development commissioners, and departmental heads by creating a separate “power centre”. IAS official turned-politician Aparajita Sarangi, a BJP MP, even went to the extent of alleging that pursuing the 5T initiatives amounted to running a parallel government.

Pandian on being appointed as 5T Secretary had begun touring different districts to supervise the activities of various departments, particularly medical institutions and subsidised food centres. However, his style of functioning, particularly his practice of taking on-the-spot decisions, did not go down well with the Opposition.

Pandian’s tour of all assembly constituencies was completed by the end of August 2023. On 23 October 2023, he resigned from the IAS. On 24 October 2023, he joined the BJD, and was appointed as Chairman, 5T Initiatives, with the rank of a Cabinet minister. The manner in which Pandian conducted his tours and inspections is thought to have negatively affected the morale of the state’s ministers and officers.

Socio-economic scenario

Unemployment amongst the youth is high in Odisha and the state’s workforce participation rate declined from 54.8% in 2005 to 46.23% in 2022. The state’s unemployment rate is 3.9%—3.6% in rural areas and 6.2% in urban areas—which is higher than the national average of 3.2%. A 2024 study by the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Sonipat, found Odisha, Bihar and Jharkhand to be the worst performing states in eastern India in ensuring equality of access to basic amenities such as healthcare, education, justice, and socio-economic security.

During Naveen’s time, according to Niti Ayog, multidimensional poverty in Odisha declined to 11.07% in 2022–23 from 63.84% in 2005–06, with 102.78 lakh people escaping poverty. This was said to be the result of various schemes implemented for the uplift of the poor (Odisha Millet Mission, Mission Shakti, Jaga Mission Mo School, Mo Ghara, Annapurna, and so on) by successive BJD governments.

There was also the mixed blessing of enrolment rising in government schools, while surveys pointed to a decline in basic reading ability among students.

More importantly, Odisha was the only state that decreased its liabilities to Rs 113,856 crore in 2022–23 from Rs 129,356 crore in 2021–22 . The low debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio in Odisha is attributed to its mineral resources and growing manufacturing sector.

In the field of education, there was a shortage of teachers in colleges, and many vacancies in teaching posts in schools. In 2023, Naveen’s government planned to hire 16,519 junior teachers for the state’s 41,407 primary and upper primary schools because more than 17,000 teaching posts were vacant. There was also the mixed blessing of enrolment rising in government schools, while surveys pointed to a decline in basic reading ability among students. Poor enrolment also made the government shut down some rural schools.

On the health front, there was an acute shortage of doctors in state government-run medical establishments, while in many tribal regions [the nearest health clinic](#) was often “jungles and rivers away”. Malnutrition among children increased and Odisha slipped to 14th on the Niti Aayog health index in 2021, which stated that “the state was the worst performer in governance, information, key inputs, processes, health systems and service delivery indicators”.

Among 25 major Indian states, Odisha’s rank in health was 22 in 2017 and 23 in 1990 . Despite this, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.1% on social expenditure, Odisha was the best performing state in eastern India in 2019.

All this shows that though the BJD did reasonably well on the economic front, it still could not ensure public amenities were accessible to all.

Crimes against vulnerable sections such as women, children, senior citizens, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes were a matter of concern during the years the BJD was in power. Though Transparency International India declared Odisha was amongst the least corrupt states in country in 2019, it topped the list of states that had registered the most cases against those with disproportionate assets in 2023. Vigilance sleuths found several Odisha bureaucrats in possession of [disproportionate wealth](#) in August 2024, and it is assumed they must have made most of it during the BJD years.

Conclusions

The Odisha of the last quarter century was Naveen’s Odisha. Naveen was its uninterrupted chief minister for 24 years while his father Biju Patnaik was in power for only seven and a half years, in 1961-63 and 1990-95. In six assembly elections, Naveen lost only once (in one of the two seats he contested in the 2024 election), but Biju Patnaik lost all the four assembly seats he contested in 1971. Yet, Biju still remains a legend in Odisha, while Naveen has become its longest serving chief minister.

Naveen has always kept his cards quite close to his chest, though his strategy of authorising Pandian to visibly represent him in the 2024 election campaign did not succeed. He kept people guessing if Pandian would be his successor till the last phase of the poll on 1 June 2024 when he [declared](#) that the people would choose his successor.

What will be remembered about Naveen’s time as Chief Minister is that Odisha’s common people did not have to live under the fear of a communal disturbance affecting their day-to-day life. The last major communal riot took place in 2008...

After the election, Pandian announced he was quitting active politics. This appears to have reanimated Naveen, and the media are taking notice. Naveen has been taking his role as the leader of the Opposition in the assembly seriously, leading his party colleagues out of the Assembly in the midst of Governor’s speech in protest against inaction in an alleged assault case. He has also been [spotted](#) addressing party workers, MLAs, and MPs, visiting Ganesh puja pandals, and mingling with common people.

This has stirred speculation that Naveen’s health is not really as bad as it was made out to be during the 2024 election campaign, which many thought was his reason for authorising Pandian to represent him. Some leaders of the BJD came out almost four months after the defeat to say that one of the causes of the party’s defeat was Naveen’s absence from the campaign.

What will be remembered about Naveen’s time as chief minister is that Odisha’s common people did not have to live under the fear of a communal disturbance affecting their day-to-day life. The last major communal riot took place in 2008, in Kandhamal, between Hindus and Christians, and it led to the BJD-BJP alliance breaking down. In 2017, there was another riot in Bhadrak between Hindus and Muslims, but it was contained and there was no casualty. Yet another disturbance on 12 April 2023 in Sambalpur could also be controlled without any loss of life.

That there is no second line of leaders in the BJD after 27 years is a sad commentary on the internal affairs of the party.

“My every bone is secular,” Naveen had said after the Kandhamal riot, and he never allowed communal skirmishes to assume the proportions of large-scale riots. This could be considered the biggest achievement of Naveen’s five terms as Chief Minister—he succeeded in preventing communal hatred and enmity from dominating the discourse in Odisha, particularly when it was doing so in other parts of India.

The question of who after Naveen lingers. The way Naveen put his trust in Pandian before the 2024 election, and now relies on Santrupt Mishra, a corporate leader with only six months in the BJD, is intriguing. It seems to show he prefers bureaucrats and corporate figures over career politicians. That there is no second line of leaders in the BJD after 27 years is a sad commentary on the internal affairs of the party.

Soon after the election defeat, Naveen, on 24 June 2024, exhorted his party's Rajya Sabha MPs (it now has no Lok Sabha MP) to emerge as a strong opposition and no longer support the BJP. Yet, a month later, on 31 July 2024, BJD MP Mamata Mohanta resigned from the Rajya Sabha, followed by MP Sujit Kumar on 6 September 2024. Both joined the BJP. This would have been unlikely if the BJD had nurtured leaders who could have been seen as successors to Naveen. That there are still no signs of it happening may well affect the BJD's longevity.

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