

# The Charisma of Autocracy

## Bal Thackeray's Dictatorship in Shiv Sena

○ Julia Eckert

*In issue No. 129 of MANUSHI, Julia Eckert's article "Shivshahi in the Mohalla" described how and why Shiv Sena has managed to entrench itself so deeply in the social, economic and political life of Mumbai. In this article, she explains the complexity of the autocratic command structure that allows party supremo Bal Thackeray to reign unchallenged over his party.*

The autocratic control of Bal Thackeray over the Shiv Sena is probably the party's most notorious feature. Bal Thackeray, *Balasaheb*, the movement's founder and undisputed leader, the *Sena Pramukh* (leader of the Sena) is said to rule the organisation with dictatorial powers. It is his charismatic appeal that is assumed to inspire his followers, and it is his "remote control" which is said to govern Mumbai. In the self-representation of the Shiv Sena, the supreme command and the supreme obedience based on conviction, dedication and love for the leader are central. "He is the only leader in the country who gets 100 percent loyalty"<sup>1</sup> declares the Shiv Sena website.

Unity and solidarity, love for the leader and unquestioning loyalty is regularly presented to the outsider at first. Thackeray employs the family simile when speaking about his relationship with his *sainiks* (literally, soldiers): "I look upon the *sainiks* as my children. A family can only run when one man makes the decisions."<sup>2</sup> He is said to "know every one of us. We are like his children and can have no secrets from him," as an aspiring lady *pramukh* (leader) rather fearfully



explained. In the self-description and interpretation by some observers (Heuzé 1995) the family-ness of the Sena is its vital characteristic and the base for its appeal. The belief in the utter accessibility of Bal Thackeray is upheld even when their conviction of having immediate access to the Supremo is not supported by experience. The importance of a personal rather than an institutional relationship with the leader is related to his legitimacy being founded in the supposed love - a personal kind of love - of his followers. And the *sainiks'*

**"I look upon the *sainiks* as my children. A family can only run when one man makes the decisions."**

belief in the factuality of this personal relationship does not seem to be defeated by contrary experience.

### **Loyalty, Real or Feigned?**

Expressions of utter loyalty form a narrative which *sainiks* believe in but which has a representational objective at the same time. It partly corresponds with their attitudes and feelings, and partly is the idiom of legitimacy and identity. Within the organisation there is no other legitimate way to speak about the relationship of a *sainik* to Bal Thackeray. The rule of the *Sena Pramukh* is justified by the "love" and the admiration of his followers - mainly their love. To question this love is to question the legitimacy of his rule and is thus done only in hushed tones. He holds the reigns of power not qua election but due to his "charisma" - that is qua the belief of *sainiks* in his superior qualities.

The regular and frequently standardised expressions of love and obedience sometimes take on a rather routine character. This routine extends even to the much mentioned hysterical shows of love, adoration and dependence. A rather amusing account of the preparation to such a show of desperation upon the announcement of one of the strategically sulking

retreats of Bal Thackeray was volunteered by an aspiring *Shakha Pramukh* (leader of the branch): “When *Balasaheb* announced his retreat we had just been called for a seminar. When we heard of his decision, we were told to go to his house and plead with him. But we hadn’t eaten yet and the food had been ordered. So we decided to eat first and then go to *Matoshri* (Bal Thackeray’s residence). So we had the food - or else it would have gone waste! Then some of us went to his house...” From this account the agitated pleadings and hysterical desperation of *sainiks* sways between a routine performance, a duty almost with a clear choreography and a felt need to beg him not to retreat from public life. Members of the party themselves interpret their motives to join in the “hysterical” pleadings according to the context of the recounting: when the story of “hysteria” is told in connection with the explanation of the various personal motives to be part of the *Sena*, then the desperation expressed in such acts is presented as “real emotion”. When, however, the story of “hysteria” is told in connection with the expression of personal discontent, “hysteria” is presented as routine endeavour.

Moreover, *sainiks* consider the legitimacy resting on such emotional bonds to be superior to that which rests on rational procedures, like elections. Thus, the unity of the organisation and loyalty of its members are assumed to be stronger and based on selfless conviction rather than instrumental interests.

### **Benevolent Dictatorship?**

The autocratic position of Bal Thackeray is referred to as the feature of the organisation which makes it particularly trustworthy.

“*Balasaheb*... being the sole head of the entire organisation, there is no chance of vetoing any of the policies

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decided by him. The policies framed by him are carried out faithfully to the end.”<sup>3</sup> Bal Thackeray has time and again advocated a “benevolent dictatorship”<sup>4</sup> as the most beneficial form of government for India. *Lokshahi*, parliamentary rule, having allegedly failed, because it did not provide the long promised development to the Indian nation, it is *Shivshahi*, the monarchic rule of the warrior king Shivaji, which serves as a model for the *Sena*. Accordingly, dictatorial rule and anti-democratic structures within the Shiv *Sena* are, in the eyes of the *sainiks*, part of the projected counter-politics of “getting things done” and justified by the failure of other forms of decision making, namely the parliamentary one. In this view, the supposedly dictatorial rule of Bal Thackeray firstly provides them with clear decisions on which to act. These univocal decisions are, in their eyes, solely aimed at obtaining “the best solution”. *Sainiks* repeatedly

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emphasise that Thackeray is disinterested in power altogether, that “he has shunned power [i.e. political office] all these years.”<sup>5</sup> In their representative declarations they propound that he offers his engagement as a service to the people<sup>6</sup> and therefore will seek only the people’s good and not his own.

Privately, *sainiks* express their knowledge about and criticism of the various scandals which the front ranks, and above all the Thackeray family, are involved in. The incompatibility of their knowledge about corruption and crimes in the front ranks and their belief in the incorruptible rule does not seem to be double speak. Rather, *sainiks* separate the realms of public office and private business and make a distinction between political and “purely economic” corruption. Personal enrichment is said to be a “human weakness” and is forgivable as long as politics stays “pure” and “for the people”. The purity of conviction is, in the *Sena*’s terms, identical with militancy, the unfaltering and uncompromising pursuit of “what needs to be done”. Radicalistic postures and militancy are therefore quasi per definition opposed to corruption - just as much as any form of debate, of compromise is regularly presented as political corruption.

Corruption is in this construction intrinsically linked to democratic procedure, and democratically legitimised power. “Every politician wants only power and they do everything to get it. See how they give out sarees to all the poor womenfolk. But the worst is what you do not see: see how Pawar sold his skin to the underworld. He does what they want. I mean, he is a strong politician. Also a leader, but he sells himself just for power,” said a young and wealthy resident of Pedder Road who is an admirer of Raj Thackeray. “The Indian

politician is corrupt. All politics is corrupt. And the masses don't care. They give their votes for a scrap of anything. Because they know that most leaders are corrupt. But they know that Bal Thackeray is not interested. They believe him. *Balasaheb* does not want power. He does not want wealth. He is happy. He has a good family ... He just says what he thinks is right," asserts a *sainik* from the first generation of Sena's cadres. He had been with the movement from the time of the "son-of-the-soil" politics.

The theme of "betrayal by democracy" as well as that of the dangers of party rivalry holds sway far beyond the Sena's constituency. The failures of governance are attributed to the modes of parliamentary decision making. Moreover, their case is strengthened by the fact that the high moral expectations from the Indian democracy established by the Independence struggle (and its leaders) have been led down by post-Independence politics, especially in recent decades. Opposition to what they see of politics is particularly virulent when party rivalries come to dominate Indian politics. When governments fall because of failed coalitions, for example, they are often attracted to the idea of a strong ruler, the philosopher king or the decisionistic autocrat. This despair about the failings of Indian democracy stands in strange contrast to the numerous examples of its evident success, to its liveliness and strength and its increasing expansion.

### **"Remote Control" Politics**

The representation of the absolute control of Bal Thackeray is frequently affirmed by the public demonstrations of obedience and obeisance of even senior members of government. Former Chief Minister Manohar Joshi declared himself to be a puppet in his hands.<sup>7</sup> Anand Dighe, probably one of the most independent leaders of the Sena, too

declared "I will take action with due consent of my Supremo, Bal Thackeray."<sup>8</sup> This relates not only to large scale concerted actions, like *bandhs* (the downing of the shutters, a general strike) and agitations but also to election strategies and government's development projects. The mode of operation of the Shiv Sena as a governing party is usually described with reference to Bal Thackeray's "remote control", that is his final say over any government decision. As founding member of the Shiv Sena and former Transport Minister Pramodh

Chhagan Bhujbal also once declared: "We all take *Balasaheb* as our supreme commander. Whatever he says is an order for us, and we don't go against it."<sup>10</sup> Bhujbal made it all too clear by his subsequent defection to the Congress Party that this is an organisational principle, functional for the Sena's specific mode of operation, rather than a personal one.

### **Autonomy of *Shakhas***

What matters is the appearance of final control. Because at the same time, the centralised structure of the Sena relies on a high degree of local



**Dictator alright, but hardly benevolent.**

Navalkar states: "It is not unusual for him to read an item and immediately call up the minister concerned. That's how the remote control-thing really works."<sup>9</sup> It is also expressed in the fact that state guests first pay their respects to Thackeray, as the visits of, for example, former Prime Minister of India, Deve Gowda, or Rebecca Marks and her successors of the American energy company Enron demonstrated. When government activities are visibly undertaken without his consent, as for example, the plans for a renovation of the Mumbai airport, those responsible will quickly be reprimanded publicly.

autonomy for various operations. This does not contradict the centralisation of leadership but complements it. Despite the relentless references to and demonstrations of the supreme command of Bal Thackeray, the *shakhas* have a degree of autonomy in the activities and services they offer. It is left to the *shakhas* to create their clientele through the services offered locally. Moreover, *shakhas* are responsible for the funding of their respective activities- the collection of donations and protection money. Indeed, it appears that underneath the autocratic leadership the Sena operates

as a network of multi-layered institutions that are dispersed and autonomous to differing degrees. Rather than interpreting this diffusion of command as a sign that “the party’s organisational coherence may be faltering” (Katzenstein, Mehta, Thakkar 1998, 234) the *sainiks* claim that this duality of autocracy and autonomy is a central feature of the Shiv Sena’s mode of operation and has been so from the beginning. The diffusion of command does not mean that the organisation cannot act as a close-knit network and as a tightly controlled “army” at times. Rather, the two modes of operation stand in complementary relation to each other: The *shakhas* function autonomously in their everyday activities, guided by a certain general directive concerning the types of activities, their overall intent and the line of justification and explanation given out through *Saamna* and through Thackeray’s speeches. They thus establish structures of power, control over revenue, and the command over a local clientele that can be mobilised when the party demands it. Since the overall unity is beneficial for the functioning of the individual *shakhas* and fiefdoms because it provides them with clout beyond their immediate size, both sides benefit from this combination of autonomy with elements of central control.

The autonomy of the individual *shakhas* and of *shakhas* towards the Sena government serves to affirm in practice the pre-eminence of the movement before the party. The autonomy of the *shakhas* counteracts the processes of formalisation that have occurred in the organisation, especially in connection with its governmental role. The organisational strength of the *sainiks*, usually confined within their respective *shakhas*, is frequently mobilised on a larger scale when internal discontent

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is mounting. Agitations, even against their own government, help keep the movement alive and prevent it from being subsumed under the party’s interests - which itself is in the interest of the party to a certain degree. Thackeray performs the balancing act between movement and party by switching between his role as the foremost *sainik* and that of the “remote control” political master.

#### **Shakha Norms**

The relative autonomy of the *shakhas* is thus a strategic command structure which affirms the pre-eminence of the movement before the party. It represents and realises the ideal of participation, involvement and self-help through this specific modes of autonomous operation. It affirms the accessibility of the Sena’s institutions; and it is this quasi-autonomy which also distinguishes the Sena from the structures of patronage of its competitors, as for example, those of the Congress. They might be equally

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or more efficient, and they are wider spread and more firmly entrenched. The operative autonomy of the *shakhas*, strengthened by the myth and principle of unity inherent in the charismatic organisation, creates the potential for their involvement in larger issues.

But autocratic rule, far beyond relying on an assumed charismatic appeal, and more than being an organisational device integrating solidarity and autonomy also has a motivational role in centralising the rules of ascension and the promises and prospects for “making it and being made”.

In accordance with the authoritarian ideal, the hierarchy of the Sena is gathered in Bal Thackeray’s hands. Rank is officially determined by success in the public arena, that is by being a leader who can rally crowds. “If you can’t bring a mob you are a flop,” stated a *shakha pramukh* aspiring to become a corporator. The chances of promotion within the Sena, for example of acquiring an election ticket, depend partly on the size of the patronage, that is the votes or support that the candidate can command. Thus rank is ideally a matter of personal ability although the size of the patronage depends not entirely on personal skills but also on the needs of a *shakha*’s clientele.

Where the word of the leader replaces formal procedures, aspirations take a different course. Thackeray’s control over promotion and ascension, strongly exercised in his re-shuffles and party “face-lifts”, make all positions shaky: who comes, who goes and who stays is Bal Thackeray’s decision. As it is not a regular procedure of promotion or election but the “discovery” by Bal Thackeray (or one of his twelve “national leaders”, the *Netas*) that can make one’s fate in the Shiv Sena, many *sainiks* put their hopes on him and aim at excelling in his eyes.

It is considered within his power to “make” somebody; it is by his will that simple *sainiks* rise to fame bypassing norms of hierarchy and rank through excellence (defined according to the Sena’s specific needs) or by proving themselves in the eyes of the Supremo. One *sainik* was promoted to be a *gata pramukh*, the lowest rank of the hierarchy, after 15 years of being a member of the organisation. But he still felt his hour had come, and he still believed in the endless possibilities for his own ascension. “From here I will become *shakha pramukh*. And then I can become corporator. As a corporator you can do everything. You do not have to worry anymore. I will give up my job. I can make my money as a *shakha pramukh*...And when I will be promoted I will start my own business...I am very happy today. My wife is very happy.” This is the vital myth motivating those with aspirations to engage themselves in party work.

Thackeray’s party’s internal power is affirmed precisely by this focus of all aspirations on gaining his attention, by trying to please him first and foremost, and be thus considered for any possible opening. Because his attention is so central to careers of those within the party, dissent is smothered, or at least dissuaded simply by the aspirational logic of autocratic control.

### Ascension Strategies

Thus competition, rather than solidarity is the rule of the internal working of the party. Stories of intrigue and backstabbing are rife in the accounts of the organisational life. People “steal” connections or the attention of senior members, they prevent others from doing their social work by, for example, not handing over funds or equipment. One *Shakha Pramukh* refused to hand over the ambulance, which had been donated to the *shakha* by the tempo union,



**Bal Thackeray with Manohar Joshi, Narayan Rane, Udhav Thackeray and Raj Thackeray**

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when he was replaced as *pramukh*. Others secured the “rights” to small business ventures like the *zhunkar bhakar* stalls on the “territory” of others. They were established as part of a government programme to supply cheap food for the poor and at the same time serve as channels of patronage and public appeal for the owner. The “take-over” of a stall, by acquiring the license for a certain area, thus prevented the “owners” of the territory from gathering the necessary number of clients to impress those at the higher levels. It was important for *pramukhs* that they be called upon for help. The more the clients put their hopes on them, the more they could demonstrate their influence and the more visible this influence would be. *Pramukhs* wanted to be seen as influential not only by their clients but even more by their

fellow *pramukhs*. “This morning I was very busy. I was very lucky because many people had come to see me and just then X came by and so she saw that many people come to me. They’ll know that I do a lot of work for them,” stressed one aspiring party worker. Having many clients means the command over “a mob” when one is needed for larger Sena activities. “I want to come up. But I have no chance to show my potential. In this ward I can’t get a mob. ... I want to make a breakthrough. I live in tension because I missed my only chance to become corporator. They (the previous *pramukhs*) prevented it. Everyone works only for himself... The upper layers know who is good and who is bad. But they want peace and quiet,” was the frantic outcry of an exasperated *Shakha Pramukh* of an affluent area shortly after the Municipal elections in 1997.

Hopes – and thus loyalty – are, however, also strongly connected to the perceived general fortunes of the movement. When prospects of expansion, and of individual access to the spoils of power seem to be severely threatened, individual hopes and aspirations among the lower ranks of

the Shiv Sena turn into despair. When several electoral debacles in the late 90's exposed the overall potential of expansion and thus of individual political careers as limited where they had previously appeared unlimited to many a *shakha pramukh*, aspirations of rising to political office suddenly seemed vain. The loss of seats and the concurrent loss of individual prospects, however far removed from the parliamentary scene, severely challenged the loyalty of even ordinary activists. "I will never make it now. My one chance is gone. We will not have another chance. The voters have left us," moaned one *Shakha Pramukh*. In despair, he drastically reduced his activities for the party as he did not see any possibility of benefiting from it in terms of a personal increase in access to positions of power and money. After the Sena lost the Assembly elections in 1999, he considered leaving the Sena for good.

What is projected publicly as unflinching loyalty to the leader, a loyalty which is based on a personal love and adoration, turned up its underbelly and revealed the aspirational motivation of Thackeray's following. The movement needs success for all its members in terms of victories and success in gaining spoils. In order to motivate *sainiks* to engage themselves they need the prospect of ascension. Expansion equalled or at least substituted for charisma. But this meant that party failures get to be seen as charismatic failures, threatening and questioning the very myth of unity and purpose.

The intricate connection of loyalty and aspiration thus develops a dynamic which, when aspirations within the folds of the party appear to be futile, has well-nigh a centrifugal force.

Re-shuffles can recreate the hope for ascension. When external expansion seems to be limited and the

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hope of acquiring posts by the general expansion of the Shiv Sena is failing, re-shuffles open up the avenues of ascension internally. Then those dissenting will stand alone as everybody else is eager to make the most of the redistribution of posts. It triggers considerable nervousness as the possibilities appear immense - even if they are not. But failing to catch them means having missed a chance which does not come about very often. This nervousness alone reorients attention from the disillusionment and the faltering hopes towards internal activities and the eagerness to prove oneself before the party's high command.

## A Symbiotic Existence

When hopes are bound within the structures of the party the close relation between aspiration and loyalty reinforces the myth of unconditional devotion to the centre of command. Charisma is thus just as much the grooming of an image as an organisational principle. It monopolises aspirations, and thus directs action; it integrates autonomy and unity by making autonomous operations the base of success within the internal hierarchy, and linking the strength of the whole to the actions of the single unit - and vice versa: The *shakhas* wielding their influence with the backing of the mighty Sena, and the Sena wielding its influence because of the actionism of the *shakhas*. Unity and solidarity, as well as autonomy, all subsumed under autocratic charisma differentiate the Sena from other parties as a party of accessibility, loyalty and command. The personalisation of relations stipulate the experience of a world, in which each one is given protection, a home and a role, that is personal and of collective importance. It produces the image of accessibility



**Sainiks on a rampage outside a cinema hall : a mere handful of hoodlums make national headlines!**

and informality; and informality keeps all hopes centred on the leader. Moreover, charisma does not exhaust itself; it is perpetuated by all those who ascribe to it because it is the gravitational centre that keeps the system spinning.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Shiv Sena website

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Gupta 1981, 97

<sup>3</sup>"*Sampoorna sanghataneche te swatah karte-darthe aslyane tyanni tharwilelya dhornaas sanghata-netoon koni kho ghalnyachi shakyata sootram nahi.*" *Saamna*, 20.1.1998

<sup>4</sup>On the advocacy for benevolent dictatorship see for example *TOI* 23.1.1997, p. 2; *Onlooker*, May 16-31.1981; see also Gupta 1981, 139.

<sup>5</sup>Shiv Sena website [www.shivsena.org](http://www.shivsena.org)

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>*The Times of India*, 23.1.1997

<sup>8</sup>Anand Dighe, Sena President in Thane, in an interview in *TOI* 14.9.1998

<sup>9</sup>*India Today*, 15.12.1995

<sup>10</sup>Chhagan Bhujbal, former Sena member who later defected to the Congress, quoted in Gupta 1981, 99. □

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