



Goa chief minister Manohar Parrikar inspecting the arrangements of International Film Festival of India in 2004. INDIA TODAY

INSIDE PARRIKAR'S GOA

As India's smallest state tackles political uncertainty, a look at the fading legacy of the BJP's original can-do visionary

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 PANJIM



The first time I set eyes on Manohar Parrikar, he was standing in the middle of the road and directing traffic. It was the opening night of the 2004 International Film Festival of India (IFFI), and the everyday bucolic atmosphere of Goa's capital city of Panjim had succumbed to mass hysteria. Star-struck crowds pressed in from all directions to the Kala Academy arts complex on the Mandovi riverfront. The pavements were sardine-packed frenzy, and the roads paralyzed to standstill.

Exactly then, the chief minister of India's smallest state waded into the thick of the melee. With all attention riveted on him, he commanded the surrounding vehicles to follow his instructions. From my vantage just a few feet from his elbow, it was fascinating to observe how he restored order by sheer force of personality, in a scant couple of minutes. Then he disappeared anew, a small smile of satisfaction clearly visible on his face.

This was vintage Parrikar, the perfectionist, putting finishing touches on an extraordinary feat that no one—least of all his constituents—had previously imagined possible. Just months earlier, he'd improbably convinced the information and broadcasting ministry to try out the country's oldest and biggest film festival in Goa for the first time, declaring up front "we will make the event so wonderful that it will be impossible not to grant Panjim permanent venue status".

In short order, he spent over ₹100 crore to beautifully restore the city's waterfront promenade, and construct a new bridge as well as the state's first multiplex, while creating a stunning heritage precinct for the festival centre around the imposing Latinate headquarters of the former Escola Médica-Cirúrgica de Goa, the oldest medical college in Asia. Here again, circumstances bent to his bidding, and IFFI did have itself permanently in Panjim (where it returns with much fanfare each November, except now the locals are far too blasé to cause any kind of commotion about it).

Looking back from what are undeniably the waning moments of Parrikar's remarkable decades in power, it's already clear that was the golden period. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) star per-

former became chief minister for the first time in 2000 with an immense burst of enthusiasm and energy that was immediately reciprocated by uncommon adulation and fierce loyalty from virtually every part of Goa's many-layered electorate, accompanied by entirely justifiable national attention.

We were all witnessing an unprecedented phenomenon: the first-ever IIT-educated chief minister, plain-speaking, disarmingly unpretentious, hard-working and exceptionally competent. His rise put an end to the see-sawing instability which had bedevilled the state previously, with incessant defections resulting in 13 separate governments over just 12 years. From that point, politics in Goa has been all about Parrikar the colossus. He has thoroughly dominated throughout, whether as chief minister, or as the paradoxically all-powerful leader of the opposition.

"What Amitabh Bachchan was to Hindi films, Manohar Parrikar was to Goan politics," says Raju Sulerkar, a soft-spoken Panjim-based businessman and senior leader of the state Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who has remained staunch friends with the Goa leader for three decades. He recalls, "there was something different about him from the moment he entered the state assembly in 1987, which really showed itself when he was appointed leader of the opposition in 1999. He was the first really competent professional politician we had seen, who did his research and easily quoted facts, figures and relevant clauses. The ruling party was truly afraid of him. And the people embraced him because he really was an effective member of the legislative assembly (MLA). He totally

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THE EARLY DAYS
 Manohar Gopal Krishna Prabhu Parrikar was born on 13 December 1955, in what was still the Estado da Índia, ruled from Lisbon by the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. Just six years later in 1961, Indian troops swiftly decapitated feeble resistance to bring an abrupt end to more

changed the image of Goan politics, just like Amitabh did for Bollywood heroes."

MINT SHORT STORY

WHO

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WHAT

For the most part of this year, Parrikar has been away from Goa due to a debilitating illness. This has led to a political crisis in the 40-member state assembly, with the opposition staking claim to form the government.

WHY

In his initial years in power, the first-ever IIT-educated chief minister Parrikar seized Goa's imagination. However, his inability to deliver over the years has disenchanted many of his supporters.

than 450 years of Portuguese colonialism. Goa was formally annexed into the Indian union, and eventually became a state on 30 May 1987.

After an initially zealous couple of centuries of proselytizing, the European regime in Goa lapsed to laissez-faire accommodation between religions, and syncretism flourished to an unusual degree. But all that changed after 1961, which ushered in pronounced Hindu revivalist fervour, that was accompanied by considerable backtracking and adaptation by the Goan Hindu establishment as it endeavoured to erase differences from what it perceived to be the national mainstream.

This is when the RSS entered the picture for the first time. Identically to its conduct during the previous nationwide freedom struggle in the first half of the 20th century, the right-wing organization had stayed on the sidelines during the fight against Salazar. But then it stepped in to win the peace. Today, Parrikar is only the most prominent of any number of influential Goans of every party affiliation

who developed their political consciousness from attending daily shakhas.

Ask those who know him most closely, and everyone says the same thing. Parrikar is sincerely passionate about Goa, but his utmost fealty lies with the Sangh Parivar and its leaders based in Nagpur. In 2016, while serving Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the cabinet as defence minister, he even credited the RSS for inspiring the notorious "surgical strikes" when the Indian Army is said to have crossed into Pakistan to combat terrorists. "I wonder, with the combination of Prime Minister who comes from Mahatma Gandhi's home state, and I, defence minister, coming from Goa which never had any martial race, and how we handled the surgical strikes. Maybe the RSS teaching was at the core," he said then.

But as important as the RSS was to the young Parrikar, it was effectively invisible in Goa's political sphere throughout the 20th century. Instead, the nascent polity was substantially shaped by what another fine Goa University historian has described as "the story of political will". In his landmark 2015 book, *India's First Democratic Revolution: Dayanand Bandodkar and the Rise of the Bahujan in Goa*, Parag Porosho writes, "Long before lower castes elsewhere in the nation had recognized as a group what their numerical strength could do for them in a democracy, Goa's Bahujan Samaj—a loose conglomeration of lower castes—rallied behind Dayanand Bandodkar, a lower caste mine-owner who eventually went on to become the first chief minister."

This pioneering "lower caste capitalist" demolished feudal land relations, and—in diametrical opposition to Nehruvian policies of the same time—invested heavily in human development. As a result, Goa prospered and Goans flourished. By the 1990s, the tiny state was the richest in the country by most economic indicators.

SUM OF DIFFERENT PARTS

When Manohar Parrikar was first elected to the state assembly in 1994, he was just 39, and there were only four other BJP members in the state assembly. But it was already apparent he was unlike anyone else. Claude Alvares, whose activist Goa Foundation has been a formidable bulwark against unsustainable development since 1986, says "Parrikar had the opportunity to strike out on his own because he did not come from the normal political ranks of either the BJP or

the Congress. In fact, he was loaned to the BJP by the RSS. Few people know that this person—whom the IIT Mumbai gave its distinguished alumnus award—was part of the crowd that travelled to Ayodhya for the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Even if that was a well hidden event of his life, he still cultivated a simple lifestyle, drove his own car, dropped his own children to school, sat in roadside stalls to eat with his fingers, and, my favourite, declined to wear a tie, suit and boots in his entire life. That's my kind of man. But once he became entangled in the political tentacles of the BJP and got wrongly convinced that the BJP would carry out the RSS agenda, there was very little he could do to carry out his own programmes."

There's no doubt that the BJP in Goa is an unwieldy political animal. Of its 14 current MLAs, an astounding seven are Catholics. For much of Parrikar's career he has enjoyed tacit support from the Church hierarchy, which translates directly to policies widely divergent from the party's national agenda. For example, after their own Devendra Fadnis banned beef in neighbouring Maharashtra, Goa's BJP leadership insisted it would procure beef in other parts of India to import and distribute at affordable prices.

Along with other issues, this incensed the state's longstanding RSS head Subhash Velingkar, who complains "Parrikar has personally been indulging in a frenzied sort of Catholic appeasement at the cost of Goa's welfare because he is hand-in-glove with the Archbishop here. Parrikar was possessed by this desire to show himself as the one who could also manage the minorities in Goa. But here in Goa, the opposite has happened. It is the minority community which has managed Parrikar

He took U-turns and failed to deliver on many promises. Even those closest to Parrikar cannot mask their sense of betrayal

and BJP. Even the children in Goa know Parrikar as a U-turn minister."

Velingkar'sibes strike hard, because it is manifestly evident the original can-do visionary who seized Goa's imagination is nowadays nowhere to be seen. Instead it has only been a deeply disappointing and heavily compromised Parrikar. The prominent Konkani writer, Damodar Matuz, told me "he had such a charisma of his own, such leadership qualities. I really

expected him to act firmly with conviction. However, he took so many U-turns that I lost faith. He did not deliver on any of the things he promised." Those sentiments are reflected across the Goan electorate. Even those closest to Parrikar cannot mask their painful sense of betrayal.

Valmiki Naik, 42, grew up in Panjim, and was a vocal member of the 2011 India Against Corruption (IAC) movement. He says, "Parrikar had a clean reputation at the time and did seem very genuine about fighting corruption. But soon after he got elected in 2012, he changed colours quite quickly, backpedalling from his grand promises, and enacting various amendments to the Lokayukta Act to make it weaker instead of stronger. We made many attempts to dissuade and counter him, and I remember one of the last times the IAC team went to meet him in the chief minister's office to make a final effort, and he just wouldn't budge. As the realization dawned on me that Parrikar had never intended to keep his pre-election assurances, in a moment of utter frustration and disappointment, I raised my voice and promised him that the very same people who he had taken advantage of to come to power, would bring his government down one day. He is known to respond immediately and strongly to such provocative attacks, but I remember him holding back and staying completely silent, taken back I suppose at the audacity of a whipper-snapper of an activist." Today, Naik is the Aam Aadmi Party candidate for Panjim.

Two issues rankle most among friends and foes alike. The first is his supplication to the revived casinos, which persist in the Mandovi river due to his personal fiat. Alvares recalls when Parrikar was in the

opposition, "he threatened strong action if the casinos were not closed. However, by the time of his second inauguration as chief minister, Jaidev Mody, owner of most of Goa's casinos, was sitting in the front bench of VPs." Arguably even more intractable is Parrikar's subject failure to mentor the next generation of leaders for his party and state. Raju Sulerkar says, "We noticed some of these have started to wear their shirts out, and wear chappals, just like Parrikar. Some even put three pens in their shirt pockets, like him. It's so ridiculous. You need to do a lot more than that to fill the shoes of a man like him."

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