

The importance of being Sharad Pawar



PANDEMIC PERUSING

ADITI PHADNIS

Sharad Pawar refuses to go away. He was moved enough to write a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the conduct of Maharashtra Governor B S Koshiyari that he found “shocking and surprising”, after Mr Koshiyari had written to Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray asking him if he was still a Hindutva votary and why re-opening of temples was delayed.

Mr Thackeray’s reply (“I don’t need lessons on Hindutva from you”) was reminiscent of a retort by a rude 14-year old. But Mr Pawar’s complaint evoked some thought: What was he *really* trying to do? Distance himself pointedly from a governor who swore in his nephew as deputy chief minister in an early morning coup expecting that Mr Pawar and his band of MLAs would follow? Making a point to the minority followers of the government? Daring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to attack him? Hinting that the Congress should also stand up and be counted?

So many questions...because with Sharad Pawar, you never can tell. For no other politician have the lines *kahin pe nigaahen, kahin pe nishana* been more apt. Re-reading *On My Terms*, Sharad Pawar’s 2015 autobiography, brought it all back, the multilayered talent of the man and all the incidents that were left out of the book. When he was defence minister (1991), Mr Pawar was caught in

the vortex of a storm beyond his control. Then Chief of Army Staff, General SF Rodrigues had, in an interview to *The Pioneer* newspaper, called politicians “bandicoots” and suggested a role for the army in governance, given that there was so much “misgovernance” around. Parliament was in session and George Fernandes, Jaswant Singh and other Opposition leaders were absolutely furious, seeking the general’s resignation. There was nothing for it but to apologise. It is here that Mr Pawar used his outreach to the Opposition — he called Jaswant Singh, said apologetically that he wasn’t that strong on drafting and sought his help in framing the apology. Obviously Jaswant Singh couldn’t refuse — and the Opposition could hardly rail against an apology it had itself helped draft! The matter could have escalated (given that PV Narasimha Rao had only a slender majority in the Lok Sabha) but Mr Pawar saved the day.

If only the BJP had adopted the

strategy Mr Pawar did, of reaching out to the Opposition. The government is huffing and puffing to convince farmers that abolition of Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) would break the monopoly of vested interests. They needed only to have fallen at Mr Pawar’s feet, asking him to explain this to the farmer community: Maharashtra liberated farmers from the stranglehold of APMCs years ago with the result that agro-processing enterprises were allowed to bypass APMCs and buy raw material directly from the farmer.

Mr Pawar writes in his biography that this became a win-win situation for both. Farmers got authentic guidance from agro-processing units, higher and assured prices and a captive buyer. The move encouraged contract farming and ensured an adequate supply of raw materials to the processing units. This is probably why there is so little protest in Maharashtra and no demand that MSP

be guaranteed and written into the law. And Mr Pawar would certainly not have dubbed as “liars”, those very people who were part of the government till last month and have been the BJP’s longest alliance partners, just because they are opposing farm reform now.

Mr Pawar’s genius lies in choosing the battles he can fight — and turning away from the ones he can’t. After playing a key role in dethroning Sitaram Kesari as Congress president and inviting Sonia Gandhi to lead the Congress, he left the Congress to form the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) along with Tariq Anwar and PA Sangma. The reason? The foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi. But immediately after the 1999 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections he had no hesitation in joining hands with the Congress to form a government in Maharashtra and becoming a minister in the United Progressive Alliance government in 2004, where the dominant party was the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress.

And yet, when it comes to dealing with political rivals, Mr Pawar is a Congress politician cast in the old mould

— one who does not believe in turning political rivalries into personal feuds. He has never used harsh language against his political opponents even in election rallies. In fact, he always tried to build bridges with political opponents which is why, despite being in fierce competition for the number one slot in Maharashtra, he shared an excellent personal rapport with Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray. To the point where in 2006 when his daughter Supriya was seeking election to the Rajya Sabha, he got a call from Balasaheb offering his support. “I have seen her since she was a little girl, knee high. This is a big step in her career. My party will make sure she goes to Rajya Sabha unopposed.” To his troubled query about Sena’s alliance with the BJP in Maharashtra, Balasaheb chuckled: “Oh don’t worry about Kamalabai [“kamal”, or lotus, being the BJP’s poll symbol]. She will do what I say”.

So his defence of the Uddhav Thackeray government might not be some diabolical political strategy at all — it might be nothing more than repaying an old debt.