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Architects, MBAs call the shots at MNS

Most of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena's workers are working professionals. And that is just one of the hallmarks of Raj Thackeray's bold young brigade, which he weaned away from the Shiv Sena with his charisma. Shubhangi Khapre profiles the MNS—the party is making all the news at the moment— and its top leaders

At 11:30am, the shutters are down at the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) office at Borivili. The shopkeeper in the neighbourhood will inform you that the MNS office — or *gadh* (fort), as the party prefers to call it — works after dusk, between 7.30pm and 10pm.

Gadhs are to the MNS what *shakhas* are to the Shiv Sena. Each *gadh* sports a poster of party leader Raj Thackeray, apart from the party flag, which connotes inclusive and broad-based secular politics. The blue stripe on the flag represents Dalits while the green stripe represents the Muslims. The saffron band is the broadest and stands for the minority community. At each and every *gadh*, the guidelines are clear, as is the message from Raj — If you cheat people, you are cheating yourself.

Rites and rituals

What is common to the two warring parties, the Shiv Sena and the MNS, is the way activists greet each other with a 'Jai Maharashtra'. What makes the MNS different is Raj's diktat against touching his feet. When the Shiv Sena was founded by Bal Thackeray, even the most senior leaders would touch to his feet to pay obeisance. Unlike the Sena, which has claimed its rights on the colour saffron by way of badges and scrolls, the MNS is yet to patent any colour.

Activist base

Sanjay Palande, who switched from the Sena to the MNS, says, "I am employed with L&T and begin my day at 5am. I return from office at 5pm. Thereafter, I devote my time for MNS activities." That's pretty much the scene with most of the young workers in the party who divide their time between office and politics.

Rashmi Vichare, a resident of Dadar who works with an educational institution, swears that the MNS is going to be her first and last political party. "I joined politics because I was impressed by Raj Thackeray," she says. Vichare works with the women's wing of the MNS.

Most MNS activists are by-products of the Sena. Raj was heading the Bharatiya Vidyarthi Sena and Shiv Udyog Sena in his parent organisation before he parted ways. When he floated the MNS, a majority of volunteers from these organisations followed him. They truly believed that after Bal Thackeray, it was Raj who deserved to

No hero worship

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take charge of the Sena instead of his cousin, Uddhav. Whether it is Atul Sapotdar, Shirish Parkar, or Nitin Sardesai — all MNS general secretaries — no one thought twice before leaving Uddhav's Sena for Raj's MNS. They are all close friends of Raj who later turned politicians. Sunil Harshe, one such close associate of Raj, says, "The MNS is full of activists from the young generation who are well educated and chose to join politics. We have among our office-bearers highly qualified students of business management, doctors, architects, and theatre artistes." He adds, "In Raj, we have a leader who dares to talk differently. Have you heard any politician talk tourism or hold a book exhibition?"

Organisational structure

The party's structure follows the Sena model. From the president and general secretaries to the *vibhagpramukhs*, the division of labour is clear.

According to Palande, "The thrust of the organisation is to work with local residents. At the lower rung, every MNS worker is accorded the responsibilities of three buildings covering approximately 1,000 persons. He or she has to attend to their local problems."

The MNS workers take up their cause with the authorities concerned regularly, Palande claims. Anyone who wants to interact with Raj is granted an audience at the party headquarters, Rajgad. When in Mumbai, Raj is known to visit the office regularly.

Rajgad office in-charge Sachin More says, "We have a regular staff attending to social issues round the clock. Every worker here is paid a salary on the third of every month." MNS activists believe they have a long way to go before theirs becomes an established political party. But they are proud of their achievements so far. In less than two years, the party has opened its account in local elections in Maharashtra.



MNS activists burning effigies of Samjwadi Party leader Abu Azmi earlier this week -Nitin More

Rajgad-Sena Bhavan: Warning neighbours

Decades-old chawl stands between the headquarters of the Shiv Sena and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena

Eighty-year-old Girdhari Sadan is a two-storey chawl at Dadar, which separates Sena Bhavan from Rajgad, the two headquarters of the Thackeray cousins, Uddhav and Raj. Rajgad is a nine-storey residential building, which houses MNS offices on the first and third floor. It is a modest setup, compared to the Sena Bhavan next door.

Ashok Bhatte, who lives in the rundown chawl, says, "Everything in this neighbourhood has changed. Sena Bhavan was built somewhere around 1975. In 1993, a bomb explosion damaged parts of it. The new Sena Bhavan was completed in 2006." Pointing to Rajgad, he says, "These buildings have come up recently"



Girdhari Sadan separates Sena Bhavan from Rajgad -Anshuman Poyrekar/DNA

As you step inside Rajgad, a security guard nearly pounces upon you, insisting that you sign your name before proceeding. He then politely shows you the way to "Raj's office" on the first floor. The office is aesthetically decorated with bright cotton curtains, minimal furniture, and neat-

ly painted walls. What catches your eye is the artifact hanging on the wall that dates back to Chhatrapati Shivaji's era.

There are no photographs on the wall. Not even that of Sena supremo Bal Thackeray, whom Raj reveres. A senior Sena leader explained, "Ever since Thackeray Senior urged Raj not to use his photographs for political mileage, the MNS has strictly observed the diktat." There are a couple of statues of Lord Ganesha placed on the side tables. Unlike the Sena supremo, who would park himself on a shining 'throne', Raj prefers an office chair. Interestingly, even his cousin Uddhav has done away with the throne culture at Sena Bhavan. The floor is divided into smaller cubicles from where the various cells and wings of the party operate.

Uddhav Thackeray lives at Matoshree in Bandra, while cousin Raj lives at Dadar. But the battle for political space has brought them closer, if only literally.



Photo: Anshuman Poyrekar Imaging: Shailesh Warang

On Hindutva

MNS supports the philosophy of Hindutva. But it has always said that Hindutva politics does not mean hatred against minorities.

On Dalits

In his first speech after floating the MNS, Raj indicated that Dalits will have a prominent place in his organisation. He, however, criticised the quota policy.

On Muslims

The MNS has been clear that it will consider minorities as friends and not foes. The party has taken care not to toe the Sena's Muslim-bashing line.

On Maharashtrians

The decision to flash the sons-of-the-soil card is not new. Raj had always played the Marathi *manoos* card even when he was with the Sena.

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MNS candidates were elected to the BMC in the 2007 civic election