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Opposition: Shooting in the Dark

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Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi, former JD(U) president Sharad Yadav and CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechuri attend a day-long convention 'Sajha Virasat Bachao Sammelan' in New Delhi on August 17, 2017. Photo: PTI

Renewed efforts are on to unite the Indian Opposition against the ruling dispensation led by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. But the Opposition is up against a near unbeatable team in Modi and Shah who have been chipping away at the Opposition towards the ultimate goal of an "Opposition-mukt Bharat". Nitish Kumar who was in the reckoning to form a national level Mahaghatbandhan, has reunited with Modi, forgetting his pledge to save India from Modi's "divisive politics". It is anybody's guess how many of those currently ranged against Modi will stay the course -- a task rendered more difficult by the strange phenomenon India is currently

witnessing of a failing government becoming more popular even as a withering, tentative Opposition gets witchhunted. In this analysis, Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, argues that if there is a way out of this for the Opposition it lies in forming ground-level alliances with the disaffected who cover a wide range of population, from the very poor, farmers, traders and daily wage labour to those affected by job losses in the IT sector.

So the burden of saving India's composite culture and forming a national-level Mahaghatbandhan (MGB: grand alliance) against the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been placed on the shoulders of Sharad Yadav – a recent rebel against Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

At an Opposition meeting held on August 17, 2017, 14 political parties and Dalit and farmer groups in the Capital ¹, Yadav found himself hailed as a hero for breaking with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar over the latter's decision to dump the Lalu Prasad Yadav-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) for a reunion with the BJP. The assemblage also looked to Yadav to draw up a roadmap for the intended national MGB ahead of the 2019 general election.

The Congress, which just weeks earlier had agreed to oversee this roadmap, seemed only too glad to step back. The largest party in the Opposition, the Congress currently holds only 44 seats in the Lok Sabha, a tally so minuscule that it could not even claim the formal position of the Leader of the Opposition in the lower House. This plus Rahul Gandhi's continuing status as a reluctant leader of his own party, was probably why the Opposition looked to Nitish Kumar to replicate at the national level the MGB he had successfully forged in Bihar. With Kumar's defection to the BJP and the collapse of the Bihar MGB, whatever little life there was in Opposition unity efforts seemed to have ebbed away.

Until Sharad Yadav emerged in an unlikely new avatar – both as a challenger to once close aide Nitish Kumar and the new beacon of hope for national level Opposition unity. Yadav called Kumar's unilateral dissolution of the Bihar MGB a travesty, a disrespect to the secular mandate of 2015 and made it clear that he was going to up his fight against Kumar and the BJP by taking them on nationally on the slogan of Sanjhi Virasat Bachao (save India's composite culture).

Opposition parties floundering for a way to deal with the powerful Modi-Shah combination, and left especially bereft after Nitish Kumar's desertion, clutched at the new slogan and seemed relieved that Yadav was willing to take up a cause that to them and to most outsiders seemed

hopelessly lost. Indeed, at the above mentioned meet, Congress leaders -- among them three heavyweights, former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, party Vice-President Rahul Gandhi and political adviser to Sonia Gandhi, Ahmed Patel – held up Yadav as a symbol of “secularism” for his defiance of Nitish Kumar and refusal to join the BJP bandwagon despite the temptation of a Cabinet berth in the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government. After this shower of praise for an act deemed heroic, it was only natural that Yadav would emerge as the opposition’s key strategist. The only two Opposition leaders with strong ground support, the Trinamool Congress’s Mamata Banerjee and the RJD’s Lalu Prasad Yadav did not attend the meet but nonetheless gave their blessings to the Sharad Yadav-led unity moves.

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Unfortunately for the Opposition, there are too many ifs and buts confronting them, starting with Yadav’s less than illustrious background. So who exactly is Sharad Yadav? Yadav’s name is most famously associated with the Women’s Reservation Bill (The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill). He threatened to consume poison in the event the Bill was passed without a sub-quota for tribal and OBC women. He also coined the word parkati (bobbed hair) for women championing the gender quota.

Yadav’s recent history is even more interesting. He was the convener of the BJP-led NDA until Nitish Kumar broke his 17-year partnership with the party in 2013. However, up until that moment, Yadav was completely invested in the BJP. Which also meant that in that capacity he would strongly oppose the Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

Appearing on India TV host Rajat Sharma’s *Aap ki Adalat* programme in 2012 ², Yadav had poured scorn on the Congress and then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Using a mix of satire, idiom and innuendo, he said, all he wanted was for Manmohan Singh to go home and sleep and not ever come back. Yadav had also gathered the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal (Secular) on one platform to fight the Congress.

Not just this. Yadav had cautioned Nitish Kumar against breaking with the BJP, arguing that there were consequences to consider. He himself tried hard to save the alliance between the

JD (United) and the BJP, holding repeated strategy meetings with emissaries from the BJP and sending conciliatory messages through the press ³. In the end, he couldn't convince Kumar and reluctantly went along with his decision to quit the alliance with the BJP.

The sequence of events suggests a reversal of roles between Yadav and Kumar with respect to the BJP. In 2013, Kumar was adamant that he would have nothing to do with the BJP while Yadav wanted the issue soft-pedalled. Four years later, Kumar has returned to the BJP while Yadav has joined forces with the Opposition and is spearheading a campaign against the BJP's "communalism".

Can Yadav shape the Opposition into a credible force against the might of the BJP's election machinery? How credible is his own role as a torch-bearer of secularism given his long and uncritical association with the BJP? As this piece was being written, came news that former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati had anointed herself the head of the combined Opposition. This was denied by her but a poster purportedly put out to this effect by the BSP was endorsed by the party's own social media unit on twitter. A peeved Mayawati has since announced that she will not attend a follow-up rally of the Opposition scheduled to be held on August 27, 2017 in Patna. Mamata Banerjee meanwhile has been quoted as saying that she favoured Prime Minister Modi but not BJP chief Amit Shah. The latter quickly grabbed the chance and thanked her for "reaching out" to the Prime Minister ⁴.

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The welter of confusing statements, the absence of a strong, credible leader with a consistent track record, not to mention the lack of a well-thought-out strategy and ideological coherence and conviction, have all made guessing the future of the Indian Opposition a difficult bet. Does Mamata Banerjee's praise of Modi indicate a softening of stand towards the BJP? Will the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), whose MLAs voted against Ahmed Patel in the recent Rajya Sabha election, but which otherwise has been broadly supportive of the Opposition, stick with the Opposition or once and for all end its ambiguity and land up on the side of Modi and Shah? Can it be said about anyone currently opposed to the Modi regime that they will

not change sides? At the moment there are only three parties about whom it can be said with certainty that they will remain implacably opposed to Modi and the BJP. And these are the Congress, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the RJD. Within the Congress, it is only the leadership that has shown ideological conviction. The cadre have proven to be extremely vulnerable to poaching. Local units as a whole have crossed over to the BJP in some states in the North-East.

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So on the one hand we have the hazy, unsure outlines of a combined Opposition and on the other the aggression of the BJP led by Modi and Shah. Amit Shah, often compared to Chanakya, if unfairly to the latter, has shown the kind of energy and strategic cunning not seen in a party leader since perhaps Indira Gandhi. Travelling extensively across the country, he has assiduously courted Dalits and OBCs and pursued potential partners across regions, using blandishments, threats and other means to bring them on board, the latest to be courted being the reunited All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam expectedly shortly to join the NDA.

It is the sort of warfare calculated to wither the toughest opponent. Over and above this is the fact that the BJP has been on an winning spree, which makes defection a temptation hard to resist. The BJP has won big victories in Assam and Uttar Pradesh, and where it has not won as in Bihar, it has manipulated to wreck the incumbent government and place itself in power. There is no example better than the flip-flop of Nitish Kumar to establish the tentativeness of any political-ideological opposition to Modi and the BJP. Consider the following excerpts from a speech made by Kumar after his 2013 break up with the BJP.

"The reason why we took this step [to end our alliance] is clear. When the proceedings of the House began, the slogans they raised ['The leader of the country should be someone like Narendra Modi'] gives enough reason...

Our country is so diverse in terms of lived culture, language, food habits. You need to take everyone together. The RSS made a statement that they will follow Hindutva ...

We said the person who leads the country should be secular, should have a vision of inclusive growth. This country was constituted under a Constitution whose basic values, egalitarianism, pluralism and inclusiveness, together form what we call Bharat ka darshan or the idea of India. The question before us is: will the constitutional vision triumph or will we surrender to the ideology of division and polarisation? But let me promise you: we will never allow the politics of division to destroy this country. The people of this country will not tolerate it.

There is only one idea that can go forward in this country and that is the Idea of India. If the other vision succeeds, the country will disintegrate and the Idea of India will collapse. India cannot be destroyed; we will not allow it to be destroyed..."

It had indeed been a bitter parting of ways between Kumar and the BJP in 2013. The partners said the foulest of things to each other and swore eternal hate and enmity. Kumar said he would disappear into the bowels of the earth but not engage with Modi. Such was his contempt for the then Gujarat Chief Minister that he felt it an affront even to take his name. In Kumar's angry imagination, Modi occupied the same dark space as J.K. Rowling's Lord Voldemort, "He who must not be named."

Yet there was a stand-out piece in the swirl of accusations. Kumar's June 19, 2013 speech [5](#), made in the Bihar assembly while seeking a fresh vote of confidence, rose above petty grievances to raise fundamental questions about India and its future. The speech, excerpts from which are quoted above, summed up exactly what it was that Mr. Kumar rejected when he ended his 17-year long partnership with the BJP. The choice, he said, was between a plural and inclusivist Constitutional vision and a destructive counter vision (obviously that of Modi) founded on the politics of division and polarisation. And he, Nitish Kumar, would not allow the latter to succeed: "Let me promise you: we will never allow the politics of division to destroy this country."

Having treated his rupture with the BJP as a service to the country, as a personal sacrifice to prevent its ideological colonisation, worse its likely vivisection, Kumar today conveniently forgets the BJP's disruptive ideology and tells us instead that there is no issue more important to him than the corruption of Lalu Prasad Yadav and his young son and former Deputy Chief Minister, Tejashwi Yadav. Kumar's decision to preserve himself rather than the country he was once prepared to die for, shows of course that his affected moral superiority notwithstanding, the Chief Minister of Bihar is cut from the same cloth as the rest of the political crowd. But this is not all there is to this speedy journey from secular absolutism to sectarian

iffiness. If today Kumar's conscience allows him not only to name "he who must not be named" but also embrace him in full view of the world, it is because he has realised the futility of fighting Prime Minister Modi who has proved himself to be without a peer in India's politics. This also means that any political future there is is only with him. One of the constraints that forced Kumar to break with the BJP in 2013 was the Muslim vote which was a key element in Bihar Chief Minister's electoral calculations. Modi has proved the irrelevance of Muslims in electoral politics by winning huge majorities entirely on the votes of Hindus.

In 2013, Kumar feared an ideological takeover by the BJP. It isn't as if that threat is over. Far from it, the BJP in power has pretty much followed the scary script Mr. Kumar envisioned in 2013. In the more than three years since Modi won a record majority, the BJP has moved closer and closer to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh's's dream of a Hindu Rashtra – not in the sense of a formal theocracy but in the sense of a nation Hindu in all respects, numerically, culturally and above all for being able to claim a '5000-year old' civilisational legacy. This antiquity of culture and land demanded that all inhabitants acknowledge their common Hindu ancestry and agree too that this ancestry necessarily overrode any subsequent conversion to Islam or Christianity.

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The Hindu aggression implicit in this formulation was always a threat to minority citizens but perhaps never more so than now with the ruling regime seen to be unapologetically majoritarian both in its politics and policies. Mob lynchings of mainly Muslims may appear to be unconnected to state policy but these in fact stem from a state-promoted prioritisation of cows over human lives and the proscription of beef as a food choice. The assertion of Hinduness is evident in in all spheres, cultural, social and in individual family and food choices and in politics in the increasing and unconscionable marginalisation of Muslims. The BJP's candidate list for the March 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly election did not have a single Muslim, signaling the arrival of Muslim-free electoral politics.

This is the mirror opposite of the ideal Kumar held up in 2013. Even on corruption he has turned out to be on slippery ground with the surfacing of scams in BJP-run states, earlier in Madhya Pradesh and more recently in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. It should be evident to

anyone that the Vyapam recruitment scandal with its startling cash-crime-multiple murder angle hasn't been sufficiently investigated. In Bihar itself, a ten-year long scam involving the illegal transfer of treasury funds to the accounts of an NGO, Srijan, has surfaced. A report based on the sworn affidavits of Bihar MLAs ⁶ shows that more than 75 per cent of ministers in the new JD(U)-BJP government have criminal cases against them, higher than the criminal cases registered against ministers in the MGB cabinet. The BJP seems able and willing to explore alliances with parties with dubious financial past, among them the AIADMK and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Remember Modi calling the latter the "Naturally Corrupt Party?" The Right to Information Act, which had thoroughly and ruinously exposed the UPA's corruption, has been given a quiet burial.

Can it be Kumar's case that corruption by the Opposition and corruption by the BJP must be treated differently? That in the latter case, corruption gets cleansed simply by being associated with the BJP? Yet that is exactly what Mr. Kumar has willed himself to believe and with him an ever growing constituency of Mr. Modi's supporters. The BJP and Modi are always right and where there is an obvious wrong – such as when an alarming number of soldiers die on the borders – the guilt must be pinned on the Opposition rather than the Congress. Private TV channels have morphed into vicious Opposition-eating maggots. Ideally they would like to beam Modi's activities 24 into 7. But that would mean sparing the Opposition, the decimation of which has to be a higher calling.

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The Modi Government's dismal record on the economy, the devastating consequences of demonetisation (brought out by a parliamentary committee and confirmed by the fall in GDP numbers), a failing farm sector, job losses and the deteriorating situation on the borders have paradoxically all added to the popularity of Mr. Modi and established that people will believe the wildest untruth if it is wrapped in nationalist colours. Nationalism is coopting an ever widening circle of people, with dissenters shamed as traitors and worse. An astonishing number of people today believe Modi can at once defeat India and China.

Kumar has grasped the jingoistic popular mood and Modi's unassailability for the foreseeable future. His exit has dealt a near-fatal blow to Opposition unity efforts, notwithstanding renewed attempts to revive them via the Sharad Yadav- coined slogan, Sanjhi Virasat Bachao. But as this article argued earlier, the Opposition is up against a near invincible team in Modi and Shah, who have been prising away elements from the Opposition towards the ultimate goal of an "Opposition-mukt Bharat" (and India without an Opposition). Those that resist this cooption have found themselves cornered in multiple ways – party ticket, ministerial berths and corruption charges among them.

Indeed, Indian politics is in a phase never seen before. The collective targeting of Opposition parties for corruption is an unseen first. Whether in 1977, 1989 or in 2012-2013 when the Anna agitation was at its peak, public anger was directed at the corrupt government, not the Opposition.

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Following its 1977 victory, the Janata Party Government made every effort to pin corruption charges on Indira Gandhi who instead thrived in the hostile atmosphere. People saw it as a witchhunt and brought her back. That is not happening today. If there is a way out of this for the Opposition it lies in forming ground-level alliances with the disaffected who cover a wide range of population, from the very poor, farmers, daily wage labour and traders to those affected by job losses in the IT sector. These sections are currently mesmerised by Modi and his ability to spin magic with words. But their suffering is real and the Opposition must find a way to reach out to them.

[A shorter version of this article, [The mood of the moment: the collective targeting of Opposition](#) appeared in *The Hindu* (Aug 9, 2017)]

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