



power point • Sachidananda Murthy

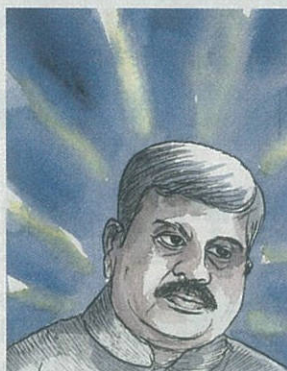
Pradhan of Odisha

Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan is on a purple patch of his political career. He is the chief election campaigner of the BJP in Odisha, his home state. Pradhan was tickled when the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), which has ruled Odisha since 2000, blamed him for instigating the party's poster boy, Baijayant "Jay" Panda, for his outbursts against the state administration. The Union minister, who has embarked on a spree of sanctioning petroleum and natural gas projects for the east coast state, is the most visible face of the BJP, which once was a junior partner of the BJD.

Pradhan is the centrepiece of Narendra Modi's strategy for expanding the saffron rule to the eastern coast. The BJP finds the other coastal states—West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu—hard nuts to crack, but feels it has a big chance in Odisha for two reasons. One, Naveen Patnaik is a septuagenarian and has no designated political successor. Second, the Congress which was the main opposition party is in terminal decline, after losing four assembly elections in a row. Pradhan himself has won elections to Lok Sabha and state assembly, but is now a Rajya Sabha member from Bihar. A product of the ABVP and later president of the party's youth wing, Pradhan had been recognised by L.K. Advani as a young spark and was groomed in the party hierarchy. He is a

protege of Arun Jaitley, a powerful member in the Modi cabinet. He is spending more time in Odisha, always careful to be on the side of the leadership. Pradhan had been overenthusiastic to claim credit for BJP's performance in Odisha local body elections, but was told by seniors that he had to give full credit to the prime minister. Yet this was not a blemish, immediately Modi promoted him to cabinet level, with an extra portfolio.

The petroleum and natural gas ministry is on a roll, thanks to the low oil prices and higher consumer prices. Pradhan, too, has been hyperactive in pushing programmes like Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, where gas stoves and cylinders are given to rural women, and in completion of pending projects. Prodded by Jaitley, who is in favour of consolidation of public



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sector units, Pradhan has kickstarted the process of acquisition of Hindustan Petroleum by Oil and Natural Gas Commission. However, Pradhan has not made any headway in the skill development ministry, as he does not have enough funds, and it also needs to generate more jobs. His controversial deputy in the ministry had described the department as a well without water. That is also because Pradhan is using his skills to achieve a political target in Odisha, rather than getting bogged down in the ministerial silos of Delhi.

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