



Anything you can do I can do worse

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Every passing day brings an alarming new twist to Karnataka's politics, with the competitive exposure of corruption between various political forces. There is great intrigue and drama, and a sense of despair among the citizens.

Having won a reprieve from his party leadership, Chief Minister B.S.Yeddyurappa has decided to put his government in overdrive to showcase corrupt practices by past chief ministers (especially his immediate predecessor H.D. Kumaraswamy) and thus "tell" the citizens of his state that there is a tradition of misuse of power! Offence being the best form of defence, government machinery has been diverted to the task of digging out illegal actions by previous governments.

Lok Ayukta Santosh Hegde had observed that the fine art of abusing power to denotify land has been fine-tuned and improved by successive chief ministers. Each new minister seems to have refined his methodology in the light of his predecessor's experience.

Meanwhile, governance has ground to a halt. When the chief minister emerged triumphant in his battle with his detractors and was "allowed" to continue, many hoped that there would now be greater focus on the effective delivery of public services. But the priorities of the leadership are clearly different, as it focuses on abuse of power during previous dispensations. This is a reflection of the wider culture of politics in the state. When the major acts of omission and commission of the big political actors were exposed, their reaction was interesting. In all cases, the justification was that their action was "nothing new", and had occurred in the past as well, implying that one wrong justifies another. Secondly, there was an attempt to come up with a spirited defence, insisting that all actions were "within the framework of the law" and past conventions.

When those who enjoyed proximity to power were allotted sites, this was defended as the spoils of office. What was the use of discretionary power if it could not be wielded at the discretion of the powerful? There was not even the smallest attempt to cloak it in the facade of "public interest". The common refrain that echoed through the sound bytes offered by political leaders was — "do those close to me have no right to do business?"

Karnataka is going through a political free-for-all, where there isn't a pretence of probity. As far as excavating the actions of its detractors goes, the government's primary target for the moment is the JD(S) leadership, with the chief minister vowing to expose the wrongdoings of Deve Gowda's entire family. He is convinced that the sustained campaign by members of the Gowda clan has partly driven the crisis he finds himself in. The many political minefields laid in the chief minister's way have been largely created by the machinations of the former chief minister, H.D. Kumaraswamy, and now it is payback time. This means that the season of allegations and counter-allegations is likely to go on for a while. The administration is clearly going to be obsessed with the ghosts of past misdeeds, leaving little time and energy (or motivation and inclination) for any citizen-oriented action. An auto-rickshaw driver succinctly summed up public mood when he said: "We are fed up of hearing which leader did what wrong. Can someone show us what they can do right"? Is anyone in the political class listening?

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