



Kalmadi empire stood on urban dreams, political sustenance

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Pune : So, Pune is now being represented from behind the bars, at least for a week. This distinction has been brought to the city by sitting Congress MP (now expelled from the party) Suresh Kalmadi. For those not incensed by the moral aspect, one task is to understand the Kalmadi phenomenon and look beyond.

Cut to the late seventies. A much younger Kalmadi as Youth Congress activist tried to block the vehicle carrying the then PM Morarji Desai in protest against harassment of Indira Gandhi by the Janata Party government. That act brought Kalmadi to limelight as an 'Indira loyalist'.

The mettle of the man, however, must be very distinct. He could be an Indira loyalist but he could also contest Lok Sabha election as an Independent with Shiv Sena-BJP support; he could be once known as close to Sharad Pawar and yet constellate around him anti-Pawar political forces in the city; he could come back to the Congress and be handed down the ticket for a Parliamentary seat.

Kalmadi always played for the stakes at Delhi and for national positions, even in sports organizations. But he does control MLAs (and once he was supposed to be controlling even opposition MLAs) and has a tight control over the Pune Municipal Corporation and its politics. Such has been the political journey of Kalmadi so far.

Ever since the Commonwealth Games scandals started making a splash, everyone seems to be pointing an accusing finger at Kalmadi, among others. But we need to pause and ask why in the first place the city chose him as MP and allowed him to have decision-making powers in the PMC. This was possible for two reasons: firstly, Kalmadi represented the amoral search of the urban locale for city's unbridled 'development'. The likes of Kalmadi who promise everything from flyovers to skyways always become acceptable to this urban sensibility. Much of the mess Pune is in today would owe its existence to this urban sensibility and representatives like Kalmadi, corrupt or not corrupt.

Secondly, Kalmadi's politics is based on a shrewd set of political skills. Without getting into issues of ideology, Kalmadi evolved an edifice of political actors who depended upon him for political sustenance. He would get them votes and get them resources. The networks he built consisted mostly of aspiring political elite who did not belong to the city's traditional political classes of the Brahmins and the Marathas. In one sense, these were all first-generation politicians wanting to 'make it' in the politics of an ever-growing city, who found Kalmadi a dependable political chieftain.

That is why these 'Kalmadi supporters' are now in a bind: they will have to make a show of sympathy and support; but since Congress has expelled Kalmadi, they cannot stretch this act further. On the other hand, within the party, many a knives will already be out for them. When such political cliques operate in growing cities, they cannot remain leaderless for long. So, the crucial question thrown up by the Kalmadi episode is, who is going to inherit Kalmadi's political empire. In the months to come, Pune might witness a war over its material resources. Of course with cell phones and what not, Kalmadi will definitely continue to be one important player in that war.

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