

**By Sidharth Mishra**



Delhi has no full stops and it is not at all a static city – this was something which acted as the governing principle for Sheila Dikshit, the Congress leader who ruled the city for three consecutive terms as its Chief Minister from December 1998 to December 2013 and passed away on Saturday fighting a battle to revive the fortunes of her party as the president of its Delhi unit.

The first reaction of people on hearing of her demise was, the city is going to miss her. She closely identified with Delhi and carried out her work with an extra-ordinary passion, never ever distracted with any ambition to look beyond the precincts of the city government.

Development of Delhi for her were defined by two parameters – make Delhi into a World Class city but also get it the tag of the Heritage City.

“Development is not only about cement and concrete but also a definite change in the social ethos, which would make the society move towards a progressive thought process and open mindedness. Such thought process should also get reflected in the building of the infrastructure, and that was what my government tried to achieve. It needed a lot of effort and balancing act but we could manage it,” the leader had recounted in recent personal tête-à-tête.

Born to an Army officer at Kapurthala, Dikshit was educated in Delhi at Jesus and Mary Convent and Miranda House. She took a Master's degree in history and married her college-time beau Vinod Dikshit, who was in St Stephen's College. Though Vinod Dikshit was son of noted freedom fighter, Union Minister and backbone of the Congress organisation Uma Shankar Dikshit, on joining the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) he remained aloof from Congress politics.

Vinod Dikshit was from the Uttar Pradesh cadre, which was also his father's turf but maintained a discreet distance. In fact Vinod was trusted greatly by the Lok Dal leader and former Prime Minister Chowdhary Charan Singh, who had also served as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for some time. As an officer of the government Vinod worked rising above ideologies. He remained close aide of another UP CM Chandra Bhanu Gupta, who was Uma Shanker Dikshit's political rival. Objectivity in governance was an article of faith with Vinod and for Sheila too, as it got reflected in her dealing with Delhi's bureaucracy, which works under multiple commands.

She was pitchforked into city's politics in 1998 when asked by party president Sonia Gandhi to contest the Lok Sabha polls from East Delhi seat. From almost a state of political hibernation, she now had a colossal task to perform. This huge constituency with 20 assembly seats for long had remained a pocket borough of Congress veteran Har Kishan Lal Bhagat before he lost in the 1991 polls. Thereafter, BJP managed to turn this seat into its stronghold winning it again in 1996 general elections and 1997 bypolls.

Dikshit was asked to test waters on the seat despite it having several claimants from Bhagat's political stable and the veteran himself not having given up yet. The media too did not give her much of a chance, with such screaming headlines as, "Sheila who, Dikshit or Kaul." Sheila Kaul was a Minister in the PV Narasimha Rao government and had remained in news for the scams attributed to her office.

Despite the adverse prevailing situation, and a definite pro-BJP mood among the electorate, she managed to give a run for his money to the sitting MP, Lal Bihari Tiwari. Dikshit mobilized a ramshackle organization and polled 517721 votes, till then highest ever by any Congress leader on any seat in Delhi. Though she lost the poll, the party leadership was convinced about having found the person to revive the Congress in the national Capital.

In less than six-month time she was asked to take charge at the dilapidated Talkatora Road office of Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee as its president with the almost insurmountable challenge to defeat the BJP in the assembly polls scheduled for year-end. Sonia Gandhi by now was in firm command of the party with leaders from erstwhile Congress (Tiwari) like Arjun Singh, ML Fotedar and K Natwar Singh playing important role. Since Dikshit too was part of Congress (Tiwari), there was no doubt in the mind of party workers that she enjoyed the leadership's absolute backing and they closed ranks behind her.

## Sheila Dikshit: Delhi's Leader, Delhi's Loss

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In less than three months, focusing on the issue of mal-governance of the city and spiraling prices of onion, she set panic in the BJP camp. The ruling party in the meanwhile was caught in infighting between the Madanlal Khurana and Sahib Singh Verma factions. Khurana had demitted office of the Chief Minister a few years back on being named in the Jain Hawala case. Now exonerated, he wanted the office back, which incumbent Sahib Singh Verma resented.

Caught in a cleft stick, BJP leadership brought Lok Sabha member from South Delhi Sushma Swaraj as the Chief Minister. They thought that they would kill two birds with one stone -- end the factional feud and pitchfork a woman against a woman in the polls which were getting near. "It proved counter-productive. In political battles it's important that you first and foremost have the confidence and the goodwill of the political workers. If they are with you, the voter too gets galvanized. Poor Sushma had nothing working for her, I felt bad for her. Though she was an opponent in the battle, but I respected her as an emerging woman leader in the party not known to be very favourably deposed towards the womenfolk," Dikshit had said.

On that December morning in 1998, when chill had just started to set into Delhi, BJP's candidate and sitting MLA from Gole Market assembly seat Kirit Azad, a burly former national cricketer, gave a hug to diminutive Dikshit at the Navodaya School counting booth saying, "Bua (aunt) you have won." Azad, is son of Congress veteran Bhagwat Jha Azad, a former Bihar Chief Minister, who had joined Congress (Tiwari) as had Sheila Dikshit, when it was formed in 1994.

Outside in the corridor, the Congress strongman from Outer Delhi Sajjan Kumar was talking loudly to reporters with a keen eye that his baritone voice would register with Dikshit too. "Mere 12 MLA to Sheilaji ke liye hein (My 12 MLAs are for Sheila)," he had said, setting the ball rolling for the appointment of the next Chief Minister. Having been trained in politics under the tutelage of her father-in-law Uma Shanker Dikshit, Sheila knew how to react in such situations.

On coming out from the counting booth, she took compliments from the workers and told her son Sandeep Dikshit, who had then taken a break from his work in Bhopal, to manage her campaign, "I am going to meet Soniaji, you please remain with the workers." The statement that morning reflected the fine balance she managed between the party leadership and political workers.

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The victory had not come riding alone on the spiraling price of onion, though its role can't be denied. In the little time that she had in the Delhi Congress, she broke the stereotypes. She gave tickets to a mix of youth leaders, established workers, educated persons and a fair number of women. They made a very enthusiastic team, each trying to outperform the other on their respective turf. This enthusiasm paid rich dividends as the Congress turned tables on the BJP bagging 52 of the 70 seats and more than 47 percent of the vote share.

On taking over as Chief Minister, she gave a very positive message to the bureaucracy. She appointed S Reghunathan, who was an important functionary in the outgoing government, as her principle secretary. Reghunathan was to remain a very strong bureaucrat for the large part of her tenure rising to become the Chief Secretary. On her appointing Shakti Sinha, a private secretary to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as her government's powerful Principal Secretary of Finance and Power, she had interesting point to make.

"He (Shakti Sinha) had tremendous exposure working in the PMO and why I should have lost on utilizing his experience when I got the opportunity," Dikshit, who had worked as Minister in-charge of the PMO during Rajiv Gandhi's term as the Prime Minister, had said. Despite the cadre-control of the officers with the central government and the Lieutenant Governor, their personal loyalty to Dikshit remained legendary.

If the bureaucracy had not come along she would have not delivered on the Delhi Metro, the 75-odd flyovers including elevated roads, several underpasses, several kilometers long water pipelines, numerous hospitals including some world class, several college buildings, new universities, new fleet of buses, the social security schemes, cultural verticles and so on. The bureaucracy was integrated as part of her vision; She trusted them and they delivered.

Her famous citizen partnership programme -- Bhagidari (partnership) was not just the name of a government scheme but the driving force of her tenure. For those 15 years citizen groups did work as partners and got the best inputs for the city and delivered services in the best possible way. She achieved the unimaginable as the people and the bureaucracy worked together to convert Delhi into a city of hope and aspiration.

Her Bhagidari project earned accolades at the national and international levels getting recognition from the UN. She extended this partnership also at the level of inter-government interaction. She managed to get the best from Atal Bihari Vajpayee government at the Centre with LK Advani as Home Minister and Vijai Kapoor as the Lieutenant Governor. The BJP-ruled

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MCDs too really did not have much to complain against her government.

“There was also a concerted effort to convert Delhi assembly from being a debating society into a serious legislative body. I told my MLAs that if there was quality in debate, people would have to take us seriously. My stint as Parliamentary Affairs Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government came in handy. I admired and patiently listened to speakers from Opposition bench like Jagdish Mukhi, Harsh Vardhan and later Vijay Kumar Malhotra,” Dikshit had said adding, “Outside the house there were Sahib Singh Verma and Madanlal Khurana, always ready with their incisive criticism, which I took sportingly.”

On what's remorse she carried from her long tenure, she had said that the successful organization of the Commonwealth Games did not get its due recognition. The foreign participants and delegates had said that a better game had not been organized in the history of CWG. It gave Delhi a major boost in infrastructure. But what followed was a campaign of slander, though she came out of it clean despite committees being set-up to investigate her. Delhi today survives on the infrastructure built for the Commonwealth Games.

What should have been celebrated got drowned in the cacophony created by Anna Hazare movement. Media went to town about the collapse of a small pedestrian bridge but none talked about the Barapullah elevated corridor. She too lost in the polls.

It was not that mere support of Gandhi family ensured a smooth ride for her within the party. Dissidence raised its head in the early years of her tenure. Fresh blood had been infused into the party; the old guard was reluctant to give space. A struggle had to ensue and Dikshit was prepared for it, and resolved it in her own manner.

Her rivals like HKL Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler and Chowdhary Prem Singh were virtually sidelined and slowly faded away. She held her ground in dealing with AICC functionaries like Ahmed Patel, Kamal Nath and Ghulam Nabi Azad. Dikshit steered Congress to victory in the two subsequent assembly elections in 2003 and 2008 on the basis of her image of a doer, which came to be recognized nationally. She also led the Congress to win six of the seven Lok Sabha seats from the city in 2004 and a perfect seven out of seven in 2009.

Last summer she was sent back to helm the Delhi Congress again and she immediately

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started to lead from the front taking on her rivals both inside and outside the party. Who knows she could have turned the fortunes of the Congress in Delhi in 2020 polls?

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