By Sidharth Mishra

In the last phase of ‘achche din’ (good times) of Delhi Congress, the local party unit had two camps. The one led by then chief minister Sheila Dikshit and the other by then Union Minister Ajay Maken. Dikshit camp was much stronger and the role of the Maken camp was largely of spoil sport.

From an outsider in 1998 to a three-term chief minister, Dikshit had risen in stature both as a political leader and a fine administrator. This saw dwarfing of old-timers like Har Kishan Lal Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar as several from their camps came to join the Dikshit rank. Her detractors in the party high-command like Ahmed Patel, Ghulam Nabi Azad, P Chidambaram, Kamal Nath and several others resented this.

They tried propping dissidence in the party through Subhash Chopra, Chowdhary Prem Singh and Rambabu Sharma but none were successful. Dikshit-baiters finally found their wager in Ajay Maken, who had moved away from his erstwhile mentor and maintaining distance from the Dikshit camp. Maken possessed similar cultural and political finesse as Dikshit, which others lacked, thus he could measure up to her.

Following the exit of the Congress from Delhi government and also at Centre, with Dikshit moving into hibernation, Maken emerged as a powerful leader of Delhi Congress. The bitterness between the two grew manifolds with then All Indian Congress Committee in-charge for Delhi PC Chacko adding fuel to fire. Ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Dikshit was recalled and made Delhi Congress president to revive the party.

Leaving nothing to chance, Maken did his best to thwart return of Dikshit to centre stage. Chacko and Maken supported an alliance with AAP in Delhi which was strongly resisted by Dikshit and her followers. The alliance did not come about, and Congress lost on all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, albeit pushing AAP to the third position on all the seats. Bitterness only

increased thereafter to end only with the death of Dikshit.

The clock has turned a full circle with Maken now advocating no sympathy for the AAP, which is facing a lifetime challenge with its two senior leaders in jail on corruption charges. Just two days after Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge telephoned Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal following CBI summons to express solidarity with him, Maken tweeted saying that all Congress leaders should understand that Kejriwal has used money gained through corruption to be used against Congress in states like Punjab, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Delhi.

Maken said in his statement that individuals like Kejriwal and his associates who face serious corruption charges should not be shown any sympathy or support, “the allegations must be thoroughly investigated and those found guilty should be punished.” The Sheila camp, which is now represented by her son and former MP Sandeep Dikshit, has remained steadfast in its opposition to Kejriwal. In fact, much before Maken’s tweet, Sandeep Dikshit had met Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena individually to press corruption charges against Kejriwal government.

This coming together of the two foremost camps in Delhi Congress, is propelled by recent developments. The main being the desertion of Muslim and Dalit voters from AAP ranks in large numbers during the last municipal polls.

The second is the chance of dismemberment of AAP in the event of Arvind Kejriwal being slammed with corruption charges and forced to quit. That looks distant, it may not even happen, as TS Eliot had said ‘between idea and reality there lies a shadow’. Nevertheless it’s indeed the right time for Congress in Delhi to close ranks and not miss the opportunity when it comes their way.

(First Published in The Morning Standard)