

Topic: Black day for the Author

Well-known columnist and socio-political-activist **Sudheendra Kulkarni's** face was smeared by **black paint** by some **Shiv Sena** workers. The attack came in the backdrop of Kulkarni's refusal to **cancel an event of a book launch** of former Pakistani foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in Mumbai over Shiv Sena's demand.

Last week, after the saffron party forced the cancellation of a performance by Pakistani musician **Ghulam Ali**, it threatened to launch a "**Sena-style protest**" against the Kasuri event. Kulkarni had reportedly met Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray at his home and asked him to allow the book launch to proceed. But Thackeray refused to back down.

With its attention-grabbing antics and intimidating tactics laced with violence, the Shiv Sena is turning out to be a huge embarrassment for not only the BJP, its senior partner in government at the Centre and in Maharashtra, but also for Indian diplomacy. The black-paint attack in Mumbai by its activists on Sudheendra Kulkarni for organising the launch of a book written by former Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri might have been intended as a challenge to the BJP in Maharashtra, but it also **poses difficulties for India in dealing with Pakistan**, and in seeking the support of other nations against Pakistan. To many in Pakistan, the Indian political class as a whole must have appeared as a mirror image of their own politicians and jihadists, spewing venom and instigating violence.

Not surprisingly, the attack drew criticism from several quarters, including former Indian diplomats who would have known what damage such incidents can do to bilateral relations. The Sena came through no better than those very forces in Pakistan it was seeking to condemn. If it thought that blackening the face of Mr. Kulkarni would appeal to sections beyond its core constituency, the Sena was badly mistaken. **The attack was evidently meant to break the spirit of Mr. Kulkarni**, but it only hardened his resolve: refusing to be intimidated, he faced the media with the paint still on his face, showing up the Sena for its petty-mindedness and cowardliness. Even those who might have sympathized with the Sena's larger intention would have seen how counter-productive its actions turned out to be.

Evidently, the Sena was trying to retrieve lost ground in Maharashtra, and not to make things difficult for Indian diplomats engaging with Pakistan. **The Sena, after having been the senior partner in its alliance with the BJP, is now reduced to the status of a junior partner in the Devendra Fadnavis government.** Not surprisingly, the attack on Mr. Kulkarni saw some sharp comments by Chief Minister Fadnavis, who chided the Sena for bringing disrepute to Maharashtra. The Sena responded by announcing that it would contest the Kalyan-Dombivli Municipal Corporation election without an alliance with the BJP. Thus, besides causing a serious erosion of India's moral authority in dealing with Pakistan, it could unsettle again the BJP's relations with the Sena. Mr. Kulkarni washed away the paint, but the attack on him might have tarred the Sena for a long time to come.

Some **salient features of Kulkarni's political life** so far.

1. IIT Bombay alumni Kulkarni, was originally member of CPI (M).

2. He has worked as a journalist, editing Mumbai-based tabloid *Blitz*.
3. Though he formally joined BJP in 1996, Kulkarni was associated with both Vajpayee and Advani from the late 80s, at a time when the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was just taking off.
4. Kulkarni was the speech writer for former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was known for his stunning oratory and phrases. The man who gave the ideological spin laced with hard data to Vajpayee was the unassuming back-room boy Kulkarni. He formally worked as Director, Communications and Research in the PMO.
5. In 2005, **Kulkarni formally left BJP** after the furore over Advani's speech in Pakistan where he called **Jinnah 'secular'**. Kulkarni was reportedly behind writing that speech. A civil engineer by profession, Sudheendra however said that he had only done what he was asked to do.
6. Kulkarni became associated with BJP again and was part of the Advani's core team in the run-up to the 2009 Lok Sabha elections where the veteran leader was saffron party's PM candidate.
7. After the election debacle, **Kulkarni lambasted BJP's strategies** and also RSS's interference in it, which he believed led to the downfall.
8. Sudheendra Kulkarni masterminded the '**cash for vote' sting in 2008**. The purpose was to show UPA resorting to horse-trading to get numbers after the Left withdrew support on the Indo-US deal. During debate, three BJP MPs showed wads of cash which they claimed were given by the government side to garner their support. BJP also gave 'documentary evidence' to support their proof. Parliamentary committee however found no evidence of bribing. A police investigation started in 2009. An investigation committee recommended action on leaders including Kulkarni. In September 2011, **Kulkarni was arrested** in connection with the scandal. He maintained that his work was only that of a whistleblower. However, within two months he walked out of Tihar jail, with High Court saying the leaders wouldn't have conducted a sting operation if their purpose was to take bribe.
9. In 2012, Kulkarni again became close to BJP and there were reports of him working closely with Nitin Gadkari. He even defended Gadkari over various corruption charges.

Kulkarni is a rare breed of free-thinking intellectual who has found it hard to be part of a structured party and tempering his views according to its norms. Kulkarni may have written a number of erudite articles and his written speeches may have moved many a troubling soul, but the lingering image of him smeared in black ink will be the one he will be remembered for by the coming generations. There lies his greatest tragedy.

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