

AN UNWARRANTED DELAY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

Silence has its own power. This seems to be the case with regard to the controversy over the Bill, seeking to exempt government seats in undergraduate medical and dental courses from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET). Though over two months have passed since the Tamil Nadu Assembly returned the Bill to Governor R.N. Ravi to be forwarded to President Ram Nath Kovind for consideration, the Governor has not yet sent it to the President. Mr. Ravi has not even publicly given any explanation why he is taking time in forwarding the Bill. It is this “silence” that made Chief Minister M.K. Stalin and his Cabinet stay away from tea — “At Home” — hosted by the Governor on the Tamil New Year Day (April 14) as also the unveiling of the statue of the nationalist poet, Subramania Bharati.

Though Tamil Nadu too has a track record of differences between Chief Ministers and Governors, it is not frequently that the two dignitaries avoid each other. In January 1994, the then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa and her Cabinet boycotted the customary tea hosted by the then Governor M. Channa Reddy on Republic Day. Unlike this time when two Ministers Thangam Thennarasu and Ma. Subramanian met Mr. Ravi to seek clarity on the NEET legislation issue, there was no such interaction between Ministers of the State and the Governor then. The then Chief Secretary T.V. Venkataraman did take part in the tea, along with senior government and police officers. Earlier, in the day, Jayalalithaa and only two of her colleagues V.R. Nedunchezhian (Finance) and E. Madhusudhanan (Handlooms and Textiles) were present when the Governor hoisted the national flag on the Marina. Differences between Raj Bhavan and the government arose on a host of issues including the selection of a candidate for the post of Vice-Chancellor of Madras University. In January 1994, a Bill was adopted by the Assembly, making the Chief Minister Chancellor of universities instead of the Governor.

This time, Mr. Stalin followed up his absence with a well-drafted letter to the Governor in which he justified his decision not to attend the event. He pointed out that since no positive assurance was given during the discussion between his two Ministers and Mr. Ravi, it was deemed “inappropriate” to attend the tea hosted at the Raj Bhavan, “where the collective will of our society as well as our Legislative Assembly have not been given its due regard”. Mr. Stalin, in his *suo motu* statement before the House on Monday, also mentioned that while his personal ties with the Governor were smooth, the decision to boycott the tea was made from his understanding that it was his duty to defend the dignity of the century-old Assembly.

The Bill was adopted by the Assembly on September 13 while it was returned by Mr. Ravi on February 1 for reconsideration of the House. A week later (February 8), the Assembly sent back the Bill to him without amendments. What is pertinent here is that the piece of legislation has to be sent to the President anyway, given the situation that the Bill, envisaging the exemption from NEET is in conflict with the central law that makes it mandatory and, therefore, can only be saved by the President’s assent. The popular view is that the Governor, under the given circumstances or Article 200 of the Constitution, has no option other than sending the Bill to the President for his eventual decision.

The people of the State are eagerly awaiting the day when Mr. Ravi will break his silence and send the Bill to the President, especially in the light of Mr. Stalin’s observation in the Assembly, referring to media reports that the Governor had made up his mind to send the Bill to Mr. Kovind.

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