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A CLASS FOR ITSELF: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON GOVERNMENT PENSION AND POLITICAL PATRONAGE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Important Aspects of Governance, Transparency & Accountability including Right to Information and Citizen Charter

The Kerala Governor has stirred up a hornet's nest by demanding the discontinuation of a uniquely Kerala welfare scheme that covers around 1,200 people who served on the personal staff of Ministers, leaders of Opposition and government Chief Whips. The number of people who are eligible for lifetime pensions from the exchequer is set to swell to around 1,500 when the additional beneficiaries, who were recruited during the previous government, are added. Governor Arif Mohammad Khan has called for an end to this practice, terming it unconstitutional and against constitutional morality. The State spends around 8 crore every year on these pensions, according to estimates. The beneficiaries, mostly political activists, draw a minimum pension of 3,550 a month, and dearness allowance. In 1959, the State allowed Ministers to have 20 members on their personal staff; over the years that number has risen to the current 30. In 1994, when the Congress-led United Democratic Front was in power, pensions were sanctioned through an executive order, with retrospective effect from 1982. In the beginning, the eligibility for this cohort was three years in service as opposed to 10 years for regular government employees. As the pension scheme for its regular employees in general became tighter, the government made flagrant exceptions for this class. They are now eligible for pensions after two years. The CPI(M)-led ruling Left Democratic Front has said it would not heed the Governor's demand, and that the pension scheme would continue.

The pension scheme for the personal staff has become a safety net for the fortunate among the cavalry of political parties, but it is a cruel insult to the swelling ranks of the State's unemployed and underemployed youth. As the Governor has pointed out, there is also a pattern of replacing one set of staff with another after two years, in order to cover more people under the pension scheme. Some recent controversies in Kerala also brought to the fore other innovative modes of nepotism, such as arbitrary recruitment of consultants. Towards the end of the previous government, seven people were appointed to the CM's personal staff with retrospective effect, making them eligible for pensions. All parties in Kerala had agreed to this arrangement, a source of political patronage in the resource-starved State. The Governor has now disrupted that comfort zone by not merely challenging it but also launching a public campaign against it. The fact that Kerala is in a financial crisis only makes this pension scheme more unacceptable to the general public. All political parties must take note of the resentment that this preferential treatment to their protégés can create against the political class in general. They must work together for a wealth-creating consensus in the State rather than designing and defending such indefensible schemes.

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