

SC panchayat chiefs and National Flag



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Seventy-five years have passed by since we got Independence. But the problem over the Panchyat Presidents belonging to Scheduled Castes hoisting the National Flag still persists in some parts of Tamil Nadu. For the past few years, media has brought to light the fact that Scheduled Caste presidents of panchayats are unable to hoist the National Flag on the Independence and Republic Days.

There are panchayats where the chiefs are unable to not only hoist the Flag but also administer the councils. Now and then media focused on such panchayats, but after a while there has been silence on the issue.

Continuing issues

The panchayat council is a grassroot-level entity constitutionally empowered. The pay for its chief is quite meagre. But there is a

mad scramble for the post because it is not only a money-spinner but also looks like a post of hereditary right or an inheritance.

The colonial-era feudalistic zamindari mindset is still prevalent among several panchayat chiefs.

All these factors are at play when issues crop up as an SC candidate is voted as panchayat chief. For instance, at the Independence Day celebrations in 2022 at the government school in Alangudi taluk in Pudukottai district, the panchayat chief was prevented from taking part in the fete just because he was an SC person. A complaint was lodged in this regard with the Tahsildar. After no solution was reached at the subsequent peace talks, the District Collector intervened and finally the panchayat chief was allowed to hoist the National Flag on August 18.

In fact, the then Chief Secretary to the Tamil Nadu on Aug. 12, 2022 wrote to Collectors of all districts, saying that it was a legal offence to prevent the panchayat chiefs from hoisting the National Flag at the I-Day celebrations because the flag-hoisting was their constitutional right. Yet after three days, the above incident happened in the government school concerned. This is the ground reality.

Local mindset

When an dominant caste man, who has been holding the chief post for a long time, is defeated by some other candidate of the dominant caste, the dominant caste people accept it without murmur. But if the man who defeats the incumbent happens to be an SC, there is an uproar in the village.

The rule of law in such problematic places is watered down by this local mindset. As this local mindset based on caste consciousness has a major say in deciding on electoral fortunes, the political parties too do not like to oppose it. On the contrary, the parties are keen on safeguarding this local mindset.

If an SC candidate faced all these heavy odds and became a panchayat chief and if he/she acted independently in the administration, it was made an issue. That is to say, the SC chief's 'independent administration' is considered by the upper caste people as opposed to the local mindset.

Flag and power

Flag has long been regarded in history as a symbol of power and independence. The flag fluttering atop a post has a semiotic relationship with power and self-governance. Be it a war or a sports tournament, flag has an immense role in success/failure.

Flags had been in use since 11th century BCE in all human civilizations including Egypt, Rome, China and so on. Flag was venerated as much as the king himself. A flag-bearer is an exclusive royal servant and even touching him was considered as crime.

The Latin American and European countries used flags as symbols of their sovereignty in trade wars. When their trade centres over the years turned into colonial countries, their flags symbolically connoted their dominance, power and jurisdictional strength.

As for the history of the flags in Tamil Nadu, there are umpteen literary texts that shed light on it. Fort, ramparts, chariot and war camp sported fluttering flags. The Tamil king Palyagasalai Mudhukudumi Peruvazhudhi was celebrated as the most valiant king who caused shadows in the sky with his flag hoisted atop his elephants (Purananuru: 9:7).

To differentiate the royal elephants from the ordinary, they sported flags tied to them (Kalithogai: 11: 3-4). To cut enemies' flags to pieces was the greatest act of valour (Paripaadal: 2: 38).

All these point to how flag was used as a symbol of jurisdictional limits, proclamation of success and power.

So, flag historically associated with power and dominance has been embedded in human consciousness since time immemorial. It is this psychology which prevents the SC panchayat chiefs from hoisting the National Flag.

While an SC headmaster or an SC police officer or any other SC officer nominated by the government has no hassles in hoisting the National Flag at their workplaces, why does the SC panchayat chief alone face issues on this count? The reason is that the HM or the police officer is a direct representative of the government and so they have no problems. They can work independently within their jurisdictions. In case they cross their limits, the government can in an instant take action.

But that is not the case with the panchayat chief. Action cannot be taken against him/her at the drop of a hat. Even if he/she faces charges, they cannot be removed from the post immediately. If they are popular with the people with their good performance, it is all the more difficult to remove him.

Understanding democracy

As the history of flag is associated with power, the dominant caste people flare up, feeling panicky on seeing an SC leader hold aloft a flag. In fact, a country's flag is the possession of all people. But the people of dominant castes are not ready to accept this fact psychologically.

In order to change this trend, the problems faced by SCs should be viewed as common to all. The rulers must understand that though there is a constitutional safety for fundamental rights, it is weak for all practical purposes locally.

As long as the rulers count on this caste-based local mentality for the sake of sustaining their power, this problem will not be solved.

The flag-hoisting by the SC panchayat presidents will be hassle-free only if the rulers and upper caste people understand that the society alone, where all sections share freely their rights, is healthy.

Translated by V. Mariappan.