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Gnani Sankaran: DMK's Hamletian dilemma

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To sit or not to sit. It is a Hamletian dilemma for the DMK in Tamil Nadu. After the drubbing in the May elections, the DMK now has only 31 members in the new assembly, almost half of what the AIADMK had as an opposition party last time (63). The ruling party AIADMK now has 203 MLAs, again one up on DMK, which ruled with only 163 members last time.

When Amma decided to shift the assembly back to the old Fort St George premises, abandoning the new assembly and secretariat built by Karunanidhi at a cost of Rs1100 crore, another surprise and shock awaited the DMK members. Having failed to secure even the main opposition party status (they lost out to the newly formed DMDK of actor Vijayakanth), their physical position in the assembly itself was reduced to an inferior status.

While redesigning the assembly hall, Amma's loyalists saw to it that she had a double seat all for herself. Jayalalithaa doesn't allow anyone to sit next to her since she became chief minister 20 years ago. Even the governor has to sit two feet away from her in public functions. During her early political career, Jayalalithaa's public meetings were marked by a single chair on the dais. Only Amma can sit. All other party colleagues, despite their age and seniority have to stand. Following media criticism, this practice was changed after a few years. But seats next to her on either side had to be at least two feet apart.

On the other hand, M Karunanidhi has become wheelchair-bound. His car was modified so that he could be wheeled in without changing seats. He had to be wheeled into the assembly and his chair had to be spaced out from others to enable it. Now, the new

speaker Jayakumar has allocated seats in such a manner that Karunanidhi would find it very difficult to wheel into his seat. That is if he ever chose to attend the assembly at all.

Both Jayalalitha and Karunnaidhi have a dubious record of not attending the assembly whenever the rival became a chief minister. They would only visit the lobby of the house for signing the attendance register, mandatory to collect their salaries and allowances, but would not enter the assembly and face each other. Both have spent years like this not attending the assembly even while holding the post of the main opposition leader.

This time, Karunanidhi's son MK Stalin has been named the leader of the DMK's legislative group and he has to sit few seats away from the main opposition leader Vijaykanth who is notoriously absent most of the time. Karunanidhi's seat is two seats away from Stalin and it is impossible to wheel his chair to that spot. The real shocker for the DMK is that many of their MLAs have been allotted seats away from their house leader, sandwiched between other parties.

Thus the DMK has been boycotting the assembly for most of the first 100 days of Amma's rule demanding that they be seated together, to enable floor coordination among members. Their absence has given a free run to Amma and her devotees to virtually convert the house into an Amma admiration club. The only exception being some interventions by the Marxists, communists and the Pattali Makkal Katchi of S Ramadoss.

Absence in the house also leads to invisibility in the newspaper pages. DMK was conspicuously absent when Amma moved and passed the 'unanimous' resolution pleading for clemency to Rajiv assassination convicts. DMK leaders had to later issue statements saying that they supported the resolution. (Die-hard ally Congress had the opposite dilemma. Its MLAs were in the house when the resolution was passed and they did not say 'no'. But later they had to issue statements attacking the resolution).

The DMK has now decided to attend the assembly and fight for their right to sit together. After all, seats decide the status in every society. Literally they give or rob you of power. The media propped agitation of Anna Hazare recently had a striking image to market. The Gandhi topi clad Anna, sitting or lying down all alone on a huge stage with Gandhi in the backdrop. No one else in Anna's team had seats on the dais.

Chaplin said it all long ago in his memorable film *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin playing Hitler faced the dilemma of receiving Mussolini in his office. Mussolini was shocked on sitting on the chair offered to him on the other side of Hitler's table. The low-based chair with half-foot legs would enable Hitler to literally look down upon Mussolini.

But Chaplin's Hitler would have a counter shock when Mussolini decides to abandon the chair and sit on Hitler's table itself.

But alas, that is not possible for DMK legislators to try out in the TN assembly. They will have to continue the protracted battle for proper seating until Amma relents and shows some mercy.

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