

ISAS Brief

No. 510 – 6 September 2017

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Tamil Nadu in a Muddle: The Politics of Admissions to Medical Colleges

The Indian State of Tamil Nadu opposed the National Entrance Eligibility Test (NEET), which was introduced this year as a requirement to determine the eligibility for admissions to private and government medical colleges in the country. In doing so, the State has isolated itself as well as drawn attention to the weaknesses in its school curriculum. This is likely to anger parents who feel disadvantaged over the State's lack of governance which has resulted in their children not being able to enter medical colleges. The NEET saga could have severe repercussions for the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Tamil Nadu government at the elections in 2019.

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Politics in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu is in considerable flux. Interestingly, after the two factions of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – led by the former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam and the current Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami, respectively – came together, there is still a group that has aligned itself with the imprisoned V K Sasikala and her nephew T T V Dhinakaran. At the most recent meeting held on 28

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August 2017, several members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) belonging to the two now-reconciled factions did not attend, fuelling speculation that they had switched allegiance to the Dhinakaran faction. If true, this would be a severe blow to the aspirations of the national ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in Tamil Nadu. The game plan of the BJP has quite clearly been to marginalise the Sasikala faction and gain the support of the other two factions, in preparation for an alliance for the 2019 elections.

The BJP has made several miscalculations with respect to Tamil Nadu. One of these is the manner in which it has handled the issue of the National Eligibility and Entrance Test (NEET) – this is likely to affect the BJP and its potential ally, the AIADMK, quite seriously at the hustings. The test was mandated by the Central Government and, subsequently, by the Supreme Court of India as a requirement to determine the eligibility for admissions to private and government medical colleges in the country. The NEET was supposed to have been introduced in 2016. However, due to some operational delays, it was introduced only in 2017. Ever since the scheme was announced, Tamil Nadu has been protesting strongly against it. It has been arguing that a national scheme for the allocation of seats in medical colleges would discriminate against the students of the State.

There are 2,652 seats available each year in Tamil Nadu for the admission of students to medical colleges – private and government. A number of private medical colleges are owned either by businessmen with political connections or by politicians themselves. Admissions have been based on the marks obtained in the final results at school (12th class). Students study the syllabus of the Tamil Nadu State Board or the syllabus of the Central Board of Secondary Education and that of other streams as well. There is a considerable difference in the levels of education imparted by the two streams, and there has been no review of the State Board syllabus for over 10 years. A large number of students have also studied all subjects in the local language – Tamil.

Before the NEET was introduced, admissions were predominantly based on the marks obtained under the Tamil Nadu State Board syllabus. This year, only nine per cent of the students from Tamil Nadu cleared the NEET. One student, Krithika, who scored 1,184 marks out of 1,200 in the State Board examinations (98.66 per cent overall) could not qualify for the NEET and appealed to the High Court, which stated that it could not do anything about the eligibility criteria.

This has become a serious political issue as well for several reasons. First, it clearly establishes that both the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the AIADMK have paid little attention to the curriculum and that the educational standards in the State Board schools are much lower than elsewhere in the country. This is a reflection on governance. In a State where there is considerable awareness even in the rural areas about the value of educational achievements, this has naturally incensed a large number of families against the ineptness of the government. Parents, especially from the rural areas, who have struggled and sacrificed to put their offspring through schools, aspiring for their children to become doctors, are naturally not going to take kindly to a government that has made no attempts to enable its students to prepare themselves for the NEET. The grievance of the parents is that the State could have, at least, arranged for opportunities for special coaching for the brighter students – this is an opportunity which the State has lost. The NEET was announced more than a year ago. However, everyone seemed busy with politics.

Second, there is commercial anxiety as well. Several private colleges had been charging high admission- and capitation-fees, which went to the respective management. They also had the flexibility of choosing and market-pricing admissions. That advantage is now totally lost. These private colleges are not sure of the extent of the adverse impact on their incomes. Their owners are influential people, and they blame the state of affairs on the ruling politicians.

The ruling AIADMK tried to get Tamil Nadu out of the purview of the NEET. When J Jayalalithaa, now deceased, was in hospital, the State, then under her as Chief Minister, tried to bring in legislation to secure exemption for Tamil Nadu from the NEET admission criteria. It is now evident that the follow-up on this attempt was poor and the legislation did not reach the table of the President of India for his consideration. In a political attempt to woo the AIADMK factions, one Central minister remarked in July 2017 that a one-year exemption could be considered for Tamil Nadu. The government again rushed to prepare the legislation to this effect. However, the Central Government let the Tamil Nadu government down before the Supreme Court. The Advocate General informed the Supreme Court that a presidential ordinance for Tamil Nadu's exemption would not be supported by the Central Government, and the Supreme Court ordered that admissions to the medical colleges be completed before 4 September 2017, in accordance with the results of the NEET.

This has certainly made the Tamil Nadu Government unpopular, and it is placing the blame squarely on the BJP. Several very bright students from Tamil Nadu will not make it to medical colleges this year, only because the State Government has been negligent in not upgrading the syllabus or in helping the students to prepare for the NEET. For these parents, it is a permanent setback which they would be unlikely to forget when the 2019 elections come around.

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