

Is Deputy CM just a paper tiger?



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The imbroglio over who should don the Chief Minister's mantle in Karnataka has somehow been resolved, bringing a sigh of relief to the Congress. The party high command has rung the curtains down on the prolonged drama of suspense by allocating the CM post to senior leader Siddaramaiah and the Deputy CM post to D.K.Shivakumar after an intense bout of wrangling, persuasive and peaceful talks and compromises.

Are there powers really?

In fact, the appointment of Siddaramaiah as CM has sprung no surprise for as a veteran with a popular influence, he had already occupied the gaddi. But the point that merits a deep look here is how Shivakumar has finally agreed to play second fiddle as

Deputy CM, given that he is also billed as eligible for the CM post and no less influential to the point of raising a banner of revolt if his request for the highest position that he had conveyed to the party high command in different words is not granted.

Shivakumar has consented to occupy the lesser post, probably because there are certain special powers vested with the Deputy CM post or for that matter, the party high command has promised to attach some special powers to that post. In that case, the question naturally arises what actually are the powers of a Deputy CM. The answer cannot be found in the books of law but in the past political history.

Peace arrangement

In the past Deputy CM posts were created in several states and stalwarts anointed for the position. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in West Bengal, S. M. Krishna, J. H. Patel, Siddaramaiah, and B.S. Yediyurappa in Karnataka, Sushil Kumar Modi in Bihar, Keshubai Patel in Gujarat and M.K.Stalin and O.Panneerselvam in Tamil Nadu have held the Deputy CM post.

They had several reasons for occupying the Deputy CM post. There were occasions when the Deputy CM post was given to an ally when a minority government was formed with the help of allied parties in a situation wherein there was no single majority party. Besides, when there was a likelihood of showdown arising in a party with a majority in the legislature as two equally strong leaders in the party vied with each other to ascend the throne, the Deputy CM post was given as a sop to one of the contenders.

Nonetheless, no matter the Deputy CM post is given on the platter for certain reasons, the post in itself and of itself is hardly a great one in that it has no immense powers. Even in terms of pay there's not much to gain. That's what the law says. Yes. The Indian Constitution has defined in categorical terms a CM's varied powers such as selection of ministers, convening of Cabinet

meeting, taking policy decisions, drawing up financial schemes, formulating decisions and so on. But the Constitution has no space for a Deputy CM.

Equivalent to minister

It has become a customary practice to appoint one as Deputy CM for political convenience and administrative expediency and exigency. Nitish Kumar, Bihar CM, has appointed Tejaswi of RJD as Deputy CM. In Maharashtra, Shiv Sena CM Eknath Shinde has posted BJP man Devendra Fadnavis as Deputy CM. Andhra Pradesh CM YS Jagan Mohan Reddy has appointed five Deputy CMs. Though they are Deputy CMs, the Constitution treats them just equal to ministers, whose powers are no greater than those of ministers.

This holds good for the Deputy Prime Minister too. Yes. At several points of time in the past, there were Deputy PMs such as Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, Jagjivan Ram, Y B Chavan, Devilal, L. K. Advani and so on. Of course, they were given more rights and concessions in the administration. They were, though, given not much more powers. The Constitution either does not say they should be.

So, this being the case of a Deputy PM, how can a Deputy CM's powers be unlimited or exclusive? Of course, they are not Constitutionally empowered. Yet there are cases wherein they had some political powers or had the powers thrust on them or themselves took upon themselves such powers. Some instances have driven home this fact. While in Bihar the Deputy CM Tejaswai does not override the CM Nitish Kumar's powers, the situation in Maharashtra is topsy-turvy where the CM Eknath Shinde has to seek permission from his deputy Devendra Fadnavis well before speaking out in the Assembly. This exemplifies the political power equation between the CM and the Deputy CM.

Taking powers into hands

An example from our home turf will help make the point all the clearer and stronger. Way back in 2009, Stalin, Local Administration Minister, was made the first Deputy CM of Tamil Nadu in order to ease the burden of the then CM Karunanidhi's administrative work. Stalin was entrusted with the job of taking care of over 20 department including public administration, industry, minorities welfare and so on. As a result, he became the 'more powerful' Deputy CM.

Later when Edappadi K Palaniswami became Chief Minister, O. Panneerselvam became Deputy CM in charge of important departments including Finance. Yet OPS confessed that he had agreed to play second fiddle to the CM only on the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and that the Deputy CM post does not indeed entail any power at all. So, it is manifest that the

question of if the Deputy CM has real powers hinges on the circumstances and on the incumbent concerned.

It is only the portfolios that Karnataka Deputy CM Shivakumar and the ministers supporting him handle and the number of legislators rallying behind him which can determine what kind of power he will be enjoying.

The showdown or power struggle between Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah and the Deputy CM Shivakumar may have come to an end for now. But in the end there is always a beginning; isn't it?

Translated by V. Mariappan