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State Autonomy

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Sezhiyan-Maran Report A Disappointing Document

From Our Special Representative

MADRAS, Jan. 12.—The Sezhiyan-Maran report on State autonomy, presented this week to the DMK executive, is a disappointing document: disappointing to those who had earlier been put off by the ponderous judicial exercise that is the Rajamannar Committee report on Centre-State relations and had looked forward to a clear, coherent and well-argued statement of the precise import of the DMK demand for State autonomy and on the means whereby the party plans to secure it.

The sub-committee, headed by Mr Era Sezhiyan, leader of the DMK parliamentary group, and Mr Maran M.P., and editor of the party's daily, was set up in April 1971 by the DMK General Council to examine the Rajamannar report and suggest "the outlines of utmost autonomy of the States".

The result of their 32 months of labour is the 33-page inexpert and superficial document that in its opening portions is little more than a string of generalizations unsupported by adequate reasoning, and in its later half is largely a verbatim restatement, with some occasional paraphrasing, of the Rajamannar recommendations, plus several arbitrary demands involving sizable amendments of the Constitution.

The DMK sub-committee's broad view seems to be that "no one would have a federal constitution if he could possibly avoid it", but in India a federal polity "is an inevitability" and "national unity should be based on State autonomy" (Those three statements provide a measure of the general tenor of the report.)

The sub-committee adds that it "also" believes in a "strong Centre", but quickly notes "strong in the sense that the Centre should have a strong army, a strong navy and a strong air force" Strength does not lie in "emasculating the initiative of the units and in heaping up hills of files in the Central Secretariat".

FINANCIAL MEASURES

Elsewhere, the committee suggests that, besides defence, it would allocate foreign affairs, communication, railways and currency to the Centre but adds the proviso that before the Central Government takes any action in any matter relating to these subjects, "in so far as it affects the Centre-State relations or a State or States the Inter-State Council should be consulted" That council should, indeed, it adds, have the "opportunity" to discuss all fiscal and financial measures undertaken by the Centre. (But there is confusion over that council: while the sub-committee restates the Rajamannar suggestion on the constitution of such a council "consisting of all the Chief Ministers or their nominees, with equal representation for all States, and the Prime Minister as its chairman" it adds later that the Inter-State Council envisaged by Article 263 of the Constitution "will be ineffective and will not serve any purpose" and finally lays down that such council should be set up only if the sub-committee's other recommendations are accepted.)

The sub-committee finally stipulates, that "the ideal distribution of powers would be the allocation of defence, foreign affairs, Inter-State communications and currency to the Central Government and the allocation of all other powers, including the residuary powers to the States"

But even this seems hardly the final word as the sub-committee goes on to lift verbatim most of the Rajamannar recommendations (with which "we are in total agreement") for stripping the Centre of its powers adding a few of its own (for the "re-structuring" of Centre-State relations). The net effect is to drastically whittle down the Centre's powers

But these additional recommendations are the only interesting portions of the Sezhiyan-Maran report, since they are an index to the DMK mind (for the "investments that become available under this head").

In the legislative field, the sub-committee wants Article 252—on the powers of Parliament to legislate for two or more States by consent—omitted altogether (while the Rajamannar report had recommended powers for State legislatures to amend or repeal such legislation)

On financial relations, the committee suggests at first that it stands for financial autonomy for States Later, rather confusingly it quotes with approval the late Mr Annadurai's definition of Centre-State financial relationship as not that of a lender and debtor

Specifically, however, the Sezhiyan-Maran committee reaches even farther than Mr Rajamannar in demanding, for instance the power to collect Corporation tax, excise duties and cesses and income tax It also suggests that the Finance Commission be appointed in consultation with the Inter-State Council and "empowered to examine the resources and needs not only of the States but of the Centre" Likewise, it recommends the creation of a federal debt commission to deal with loan applications "either by the Centre or any State"

In industrial development the sub-committee seems to suggest that licensing and regulation of even some industries of national importance or those of an all-India character ought to be within the purview of the States It recommends that only industries with a capital of over Rs 100 crores should be under Central control

The DMK political philosophy and approach, being what it is, the sub-committee considers the institution of governors an anachronism and suggests its abolition and in its place the adoption of the West German model of having a Minister President as the head of a State Government. (The Rajamannar report was for the retention of the Governor but had urged that he be appointed in consultation with the State Cabinet).

And on the language issue, the sub-committee insists that all languages in the Eighth Schedule be declared official languages of the country and until that is achieved, English be the official and link language such a council "consisting of all the Chief Ministers or their nominees, with equal representation for all States, and the Prime Minister as its chairman" it adds later that the Inter-State Council envisaged by Article 263 of the Constitution "will be ineffective and will not serve any purpose" and finally lays down that such council should be set up only if the sub-committee's other recommendations are accepted.)

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The sub-committee demands transfer from the Union list to the State list four major subjects: railways ("so as to enable the States also to construct, extend and own railway lines within their territorial limits", as is the case in Australia and Canada), broadcasting and television ("in the Soviet Union every autonomous republic has its own broadcasting system"), banking (to enable States to "play an effective and positive rôle in the control and management of the banking system") and insurance