

Reinvent Republic Day Parade as Cooperative Federalism Pageant

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"ONE great country, One great people"

(OGC-OGP). This is not the latest call fished out from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's treasure trove of visionary ideas. This is a slogan of the 1960s. It was the **"central theme"** of Ministry of Information & Broadcasting's tableau for the 1966 Republic Day Parade (RDP).

OGC-OGP's implementation can help us resolve the raging, avoidable politics over rejection of tableaux of several States and Union Territories (UTs) - a practice whose origin dates back to 1953.

Denial of permission to participate in RDP is a vestige of permit-quota-licence (PQL) raj. It has been whittled down in phases beginning 1991 in economy but kept intact in management of cooperative federalism.

PQL in tableaux arena conflicts with PM's vision - **Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas & Sabka Prayas**

(SS-SV-SV-SP). Absence of dozen or more States and UTs in RDP in any given year pours cold water on Team India vibrancy.

Let OGC-OGP be revived to turn RDP into a golden platform for showcasing cooperative federalism. Let 28 States and 8 union territories be made eternal part of RDP. It should reflect Unity in Diversity and not Unity in Discord.

The Centre should not create situation where discord germinates & at times blossom on such solemn occasions. No State/UT or its residents should feel left out or slighted by exclusion of their tableau from RDP year after year.

Ideally, governance by the Centre should be so good that no extreme or aggrieved section of society such as Maoists and farmers organize boycott/protests on republic day.

The rejection of tableaux of few states and UTs for RDP held on 26th January 2022 was avoidable. It was not taken lightly by Chief Ministers of West Bengal (WB), Tamil Nadu (TN) and Kerala. The trinity penned separate letters to PM, pleading for inclusion of their respective tableau. Mr. Modi, however, remained unmoved by CMs' request. The discord has had ripple effect over RD celebrations in a few State capitals, notably Hyderabad and Kolkata.

The Centre has rationalized the tableaux rejection through news stories attributed to official sources. They contended that the decision to select cultural tableau is decided by an expert committee keeping in view time constraint, aesthetics and other parameters.

The same justification was cited by previous regimes too whenever tableau rejection resulted in controversies inside and outside Parliament. No regime introspected as to why the system of having a tableau selection committee, first constituted in 1953, has been retained to weaken Team India Josh.

If each rejected tableau induction increases RDP's duration by one minute, then three additional minutes should certainly have been squeezed in for WB-TN-Kerala tableaux. Are three minutes more precious for prevention of damage to image of Team India?

It is here pertinent to quote BJP leader A.P. Jithender Reddy, who called for reviewing the selection procedure of tableaux in Lok Sabha during December 2017. He stated:

"The Republic Day Parade is one of the most significant platforms for a State to showcase the uniqueness of their culture and traditions at the national level. Unfortunately, the current system of selection of tableau is devoid of equality with respect to the opportunity that a State get to showcase their tableau".

Tableaux rejection figured perhaps for the first time in Parliament during 1968-69. In the last quarter of 1968, the Centre's tableaux approval committee disapproved erstwhile Delhi Metropolitan Council's proposal to focus on Swami Shradhanand in its tableau for 1969 RDP. The Committee suggested **'Facelift of Delhi'** as the tableau theme.

In 1978, the Centre (Janata Regime) cited time constraint as the chief factor in rejecting tableaux of 7 States & 3 UTs. The Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram told Parliament on 2nd March,

"There being a constraint of time more than 20-25 tableaux (both State & Central tableaux combined) cannot be accommodated in the Parade".

Another major controversy erupted in 1981-82 when West Bengal's tableau was rejected, prompting its Chief Minister to seek PM's intervention via a letter dated 30th November 1981. The Selection Committee reconsidered the State's tableau model but again rejected it on **"comparative merit"**. Of 60 total proposals received from all entities, only 14 Tableaux were selected for 1982 RDP.

The Defence Minister R Venkataraman told Parliament on 26th February 1982:

"The model was of poor quality and did not bring out the theme at all. Since only 14-15 tableaux can be included in the Parade and these selected on the basis of comparative merit, the model was not approved by the Central Tableaux Committee".

UPA regime had its own share of tableau politics too, during its two tenures. In 2006, for instance, Dr. Manmohan Singh Government rejected tableaux of three Hindi heartland states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand. Gujarat, with Mr. Modi as CM, had to cool its heels for successive years under UPA.

In 2012-13, the Centre excluded Assam Tableau from 2013 RDP, inviting public protest. As put by Kumar Deepak Das in Rajya Sabha during December 2011, Assam proposed a tableau depicting General Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom Kingdom.

Mr Das stated: The Centre's expert committee did not accept it,

"and, soon, a big agitation started in the State of Assam. Also, the Committee had said that Sukapha was a foreigner, which is an outright insult to the sentiments of the people of Assam. The soul of Assam is linked with Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom Kingdom. Hence, to disregard his legacy is disregarding the legacy of the people of Assam and hurting the common conscience".

The best-ever RDP from standpoint of Cooperative Federalism perhaps happened during 1958. Of 22 tableaux, 18 were from States, 3 from the Centre and one from TISCO. The very mention of a company's name might upset hyper-nationalists. They should realize that corporate sector plays a vital role in economic security, which is interlinked with national security. Similarly, cooperative federalism is enabler and facilitator of national security.

TISCO/Tata Steel's name is invariably linked with the development of civic facilities/community development. This name recall should thus take us back to the basics: Redefine the objectives of RDP. Is empowering Centre to act as big brother and become cynosure for citizens glued to TVs the foremost objective?

Can RDP blend well two deemed objectives: 1) Awesome display of India's defence prowess and 2) Splendid display of Unity in Diversity reflected well in Cooperative Federalism? Can't RDP accommodate one tableau each from manufacturing, service sector and one from non-advocacy NGOs?

Alternatively, should RDP be turned into an exclusive and enlarged demonstration of India's Defence Forces' might rivalling any super-power? And should the caravan of tableaux of all States and UTs be organized on Independence Day as mega-show of cooperative federalism?

Such issues should be discussed by a committee that should be formed to reinvent RDP for next 68 years of 21st century.

Some States & UTs have been excluded from RDP for many consecutive years. Lakshadweep tableau, for instance, returned to RDP in 2017 after a gap of 23 years! Another case in point is Delhi, which was included in RDP only once (1996) in five years during the nineties.

Off hand, one can assume that on an average more than 50% of States and UTs go unrepresented in RDP. This year, only a dozen States/UTs participated, whereas 13 tableaux were from central ministries and their organizations.

The Centre's presence in RDP has grown over the years. This is understandable because the primary, deemed objective of RDP is demonstration of armed forces' capability to defend the Nation. RDP has always been organized by Ministry of Defence right from the day one.

The first RDP coincided with India turning Republic on 26 January 1950. It saw participation of 3000 personnel from three wings of defence forces and Delhi Police in Irwin Stadium (later renamed as National Stadium). Four heavy bomber aircraft named Liberators, flew over the stadium.

From 1950 to 2022 is long period that has seen countless changes in governance, excluding the 1953 innovation â€” a committee to select tableau for cultural pageant in RDP.

We can't persist with this practice on redeveloped Central Vista where RDP was held. We can't persist with evasive and wrong replies to parliament questions in new Parliament building that is under construction. We can't persist with colonial style of drafting of Gazette notifications and allied notices. It is time to reinvent entire Governance framework.

As aptly put by PM on 16th July 2021 at a Railways event, ***"India's 21st century needs cannot be met by the ways of the 20th century"***.