

India: The limitations of the Dravidian model

Friday 19 July 2024, by [GEETHA V.](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2024).

Two recent books conjure up a society and polity in Tamil Nadu bound by a Dravidian consensus, but they fail to explore the economic and social contexts behind fissures in the Dravidian compact - especially when it comes to the Dalit question

On 6 March 2024, Justice Anita Sumanth, officiating at the Madras High Court, delivered a judgment in what has come to be known as the Sanatana Dharma case. In September 2023, Udhayanidhi Stalin, the minister for sports in the Tamil Nadu state government under the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, had spoken at a conference on abolishing Sanatana Dharma, convened by the Tamil Progressive Writers and Artists Association. He noted that any dharma that proclaimed itself as having existed forever, as Sanatana Dharma does, was bound to turn moribund and rigid. In this particular instance, it had become just that, and so had helped legitimise the caste system and foment hatred and violence. It therefore needed to be eradicated, he argued, as one would eradicate dread diseases. In contrast to those who abide by Sanatan Dharma's "eternal" values, Udhayanidhi declared, Dravidian and communist ideologues favour a critique of all that existed earlier and set store by such change. He also pointed to the achievements of the "Dravidian" government ruling the state in sustaining a culture of peace and fraternity unlike the atmosphere of hatred and hurt fostered by those who claim to adhere to Sanatana Dharma.

A writ petition was filed in the Madras High Court objecting to the minister's remarks. The petitioner asked that a writ of quo warranto be issued against Udhayanidhi, and that he should show cause as to under what authority of law he could continue to hold his post. The petitioner's lawyer argued that the minister had deliberately or otherwise misconstrued the meaning of Sanatana Dharma, which was not the same as varna dharma, which prescribes caste duties and ordains caste-based vocations. Rather, the petitioner held, Sanatan Dharma was another name for Hinduism. In other words, the minister had sought to malign Hinduism.

Justice Sumanth ruled that the writ petition was not maintainable given that the "list of enumerated disqualifications" of ministers in law was not applicable in this case. Besides, in constitutional terms, this list was to be viewed as "sacrosanct ... a Lakshman rekha that cannot be breached." But, she went on to note, the minister's call for the eradication of a religious value system was patently offensive - he sought to "spew hate against a particular community, the Hindus", and his speech "constitutes disinformation." The judge also acknowledged the sincere intent of the petitioner, who had approached the court because he rightly believed that Udhayanidhi was engaged in "the vice of disintegration and fomenting of fissiparous tendencies." She further observed that the minister's statement regarding Sanatana Dharma was based on ignorance of original Sanskrit texts on the subject. In this context, she referred to the readings of Sanatana Dharma produced in court by the minister's legal team and noted that they drew from obscure texts that, therefore, may not be considered reliable.

This judgment is intriguing. For one, it repeats well-worn responses to the criticisms of Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma by individuals and parties that one may group under the broad umbrella of the Dravidian movement. These responses have existed for well over a century, going back to the

roots of the Dravidian movement in the non-Brahmin movement formed under the aegis of the South Indian Liberal Federation, or Justice Party, in 1917. At the time, what was then the Madras Presidency witnessed protests against Brahmin dominance in public employment and education, and also sharp criticisms against the caste order and untouchability, as well as the justifications offered for these by Brahmin thinkers and ideologues. Predictably enough, the Brahmins defended their views, often with acrimony and contempt. But even when they did not, they expressed a certain bias that was not lost on their critics.

Consider these views voiced by Justice T Sadashiva Iyer, a respected reformer of the time, in the weekly *New India* in July 1916. He noted that prevailing anti-Brahmin sentiments echoed latter-day Buddhist ideas and those of the Christian evangelists. This was not to deny Brahmanical arrogance, or to assert too tight an alignment between birth and status, or indeed between birth and occupation; rather, it was to point to the critics' unfamiliarity with the values of the ancient Hindus. It was clear to him, Iyer added, that Sanatana Dharma ought not to be abandoned – for it was a grand and enduring tree, and if the nests built on it had been spoilt they must be removed, but new nests must be built using “as much as can be saved from the old material and on the same branch of the same tree.” For instance, he argued, birth-based identities must give way in the future to those based on character and merit, but varna divisions must stay even if they could be modified to allow greater mobility within the varna system. He maintained that untouchability ought to be abolished, and the so-called “panchamas” should be brought into the “shudra” category.

Non-Brahmin thinkers, including many who would go on to become major figures in non-Brahmin politics, refused to accept arguments such as these. They called for a wholesale reimagining of social values, and in this context pointed to the distinctive nature of Dravidian civilisation and culture. Ancient Tamil literature, they held, reflected ideals that were contrary to Brahmanical pronouncements on caste and ingrained inequality. They also characterised Brahmins as “Aryan” interlopers in the “Dravidian” realm of southern India, who had set about to malign and distort extant local cultures that were more egalitarian than theirs.

These views would be repeated and rethought over the decades – except that during the heyday of the Self-Respect Movement, an antecedent of the Dravidian Movement, they were understood differently, less in terms of civilisational values and more from a radical, rational, democratic standpoint. Rather than only assert the difference they considered inherent in Dravidian and Tamil cultures, the Self-Respecters invoked a global republican and socialist culture to uphold their claims to radical equality, fraternity and liberty of thought.

In this sense, the courtroom drama triggered by Udhayanidhi's remarks had been scripted much earlier. The difference this time, though, was this: Since 1967, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which traces its political lineage from the Justice Party and the Self-Respect Movement, as well as the Dravidar Kazhagam, has been in power in Tamil Nadu for considerable periods of time. Not only are its ideologues familiar with this script, but they have ensured that its content – particularly the fundamentals of the Dravidian position – has passed into political commonsense in the state. One might even argue that, for this very reason, these ideas possess rhetorical rather than substantive value. In view of the Hindu Right's assertive presence in Indian public life today, with the Bharatiya Janata Party in national power since 2014, such ideas contesting conservative Hindu positions have acquired a new lease on life – yet it remains to be seen how well and how much they resonate with the citizenry at large, how consequential they have been to governance and rule, and to determining the relationships between classes, castes and communities.

Two books published in recent years help us examine discussions around the so-called Dravidian model of government, which has been marketed as a veritable antidote to the politics and culture of the Hindu Right.

Dravidian discourse

The Dravidian Model: Interpreting the Political Economy of Tamil Nadu (2021), written by A Kalaiyarasan and M Vijayabaskar, suggests that a viable and democratic Dravidian model of rule has been established in Tamil Nadu. The model is viewed as comprising the following: productive and inclusive economic growth through the modernisation of a caste-ridden agrarian economy; social justice through caste-based reservations; distributive equality through a slew of welfare schemes; and the practice of a federal politics.

The authors argue that this model of rule has been evolved to realise the founding ideals of the Dravidian movement, and that it is the outcome of earnest and organised political labour. This began with the formation of a bloc of subaltern classes and castes that, historically, were denied equality and humanity by the Brahmanical varna-jati system. The book maintains that the bloc was mobilised into a political constituency by the DMK through the dissemination of a set of ideas to do with economic and social justice, which had been legion in the Tamil country since the early twentieth century.

The Dravidian Model examines the making of Dravidian ideology and politics through an examination of select texts, debates and interventions by leading thinkers of the Dravidian movement, especially those associated with the DMK. Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar suggest that Dravidian ideology – especially its ideas to do with equality and justice as voiced by Tamil Nadu's first chief minister, C N Annadurai – may be seen as informing government policies in the state.

Whether this has to do with democratising access to education through reservations, scholarships and other and special provisions for social and economically backward classes, including Dalits, or with improving public health through efficient medical administration and a well-knit hospital network, the authors note that the Dravidian model has ensured that the government has not abdicated its responsibilities to marginalised citizens in spite of the pressures from private players in these domains. The authors also suggest that even the expansion of capital in Tamil Nadu has to be viewed as not necessarily leading to lop-sided development: on one hand, local capital accumulation and investment must be seen as a response to the control that the pan-Indian industrial bourgeoisie has sought to exercise over economic life; on the other, it has to be seen in tandem with state-supported industrialisation, which was necessary to break the stranglehold of caste on the economy – for urban growth and industrial expansion have ensured that the poor have options to exit the caste-based agrarian order and those traditional occupations that have been deliberately downgraded and devalued by caste belief.

While agreeing that not all subaltern interests have been equally served by these policies, the authors assure us that no interest has suffered complete neglect. Various sorts of inequalities have been registered as important, and have thus acquired political visibility under the Dravidian project. This is no mean achievement, and has been possible because of a tacit compact forged between the rulers and the ruled.

The book *Rule of the Commoner: DMK and the Formations of the Political in Tamil Nadu, 1949-1967* (2022) makes the case that this compact ought to be viewed as a left-populist mobilisation of various claimants to justice, not all of whom are equal and some of whom might be ranged against others. The authors – Rajan Kurai Krishnan, Ravindra Sriramachandran and V M S Subagunarajan – note, however, that these varied people were brought together under the aegis of a “Dravidian” identity that was set against powerful class and caste groups, against a unitary state that guarded and represented these groups, and against the ideologies which validated their power. In this context, to be “Dravidian” was to proclaim an opposition to the caste order and to uphold civilisational values based on equality and justice. Equally, it meant that one did not subscribe to the

idea of a unitary nation-state, and stood by federalist and republican values.

Both these books argue their case from the perspective of the government and those who wield political power. *Rule of the Commoner* does this by building a repository of ideas that have ostensibly influenced policy decisions and governance; while *The Dravidian Model* teases out the details of this rule in terms of its outcomes, which it then goes on to relate to the Dravidian movement's founding ideals.

A critical balance sheet

There are two major problems with this analytical framework. One has to do with the curious sleight of hand that both sets of authors indulge in when they identify the Dravidian model with governance under the DMK, though aspects of this same model were also upheld by the rival All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in the periods that it was in power in the state. Both M G Ramachandran and J Jayalalithaa, the two AIADMK leaders to have ruled the state to date, attempted to integrate their party's ideals within the terms of unitary nationalism, with the latter also courting the Hindu Right. Simultaneously, they were careful not to disturb existing arrangements to do with reservations, and both sought to evolve an extensive welfare regime. Also, neither of these two leaders was opposed to regional capitalist growth.

This raises questions about the relationship between ideologies and governance, and also about the instrumental use of ideologies in order to forge political consensus. In this context, it is important to examine the use of the term populism. Kurai Krishnan and his co-authors use the term in a discursive rather than historical sense. The authors' base their understanding on specific texts, particularly Annadurai's writings, and do not quite examine details of rule and governance. They also assume a certain positive valence to the word, while ignoring its harsher meanings, which include demagoguery and strategic manipulation of popular concerns.

How does one characterise the IADMK's populism, given that it was built on and expanded what the DMK had set in motion? Was that party equally committed to a left wing inflection of Dravidian politics? Or since they appear to have not drawn on discursive aspects of the Dravidian movement, do we, therefore, attribute their populism to a politics of charisma, something that both Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa traded on, quite successfully? In any event, it would seem that populism is as populism does and cannot be read off ideological intent.

The second problem is that the arguments in both books conjure up a polity and society that appear bound by the Dravidian consensus. Even when the authors admit that there are fissures in this consensus, they do not explore either the economic and social contexts that have made for these breaks in the "populist" compact, nor do they analyse the class and caste forces that have sought to work this compact to their advantage. Thus, we end up with a frozen and finished model of rule, whose virtues appear always and already evident.

In this context, it is important to pose the following questions: Who gained and who had to make do with what was offered to them by the mix of policies realised by Dravidian rule? What has really been achieved and what limits these achievements? How might we draw up a critical balance sheet?

In order to address these questions, we need to examine a few key phenomena. First is the coexistence of social justice in a formal sense – realised in and through caste-based reservations and a measure of upward mobility for all non-Brahmin castes, as well as sections of Dalit communities – and continuing violence against Dalits. Second, there are the social outcomes of an unchecked privatisation of school and college education, in progress since the early 1980s, coupled with severely limited expansion of state-supported higher education. Third are the dispersed and uneven

consequences of urban-centric economic growth, which has not quite severed all the links between caste and occupation, redefining the relationship between caste status and livelihood options for labouring castes only.

This last becomes an especially important concern. In an economy where capital accumulation as well as labour choices are driven by the possession or absence of caste capital, what difference has the Dravidian model made in terms of the work options available to Dalits, for example, compared to those that await dominant-caste Hindus? In an economy that is geared to expand aspirational mobility, where do women stand, especially when they bear the heaviest burden of debts incurred largely to sustain social reproduction – that is, primarily, to obtain healthcare and education, necessary for the perpetuation of families, castes and labour arrangements? Importantly, how might we view criticisms of the Dravidian compact, as these have emerged at various times and places, and how might we align them to the workings or failures of aspects of the Dravidian model?

These questions point to the complexity of the endeavour that awaits a political party and movement which looks to realise its “ideology” in and through meaningful governance. The ruling dispensation has to reckon with an economy that is driven by both state-led and capitalist growth, but which is often unmindful of how its policies affect the most marginal and attends to the consequences of loss and dispossession with only paltry offers of compensation. Dravidian governance is also limited by an imperfect federal model on the one hand and the exigencies of electoral democracy on the other. Populism notwithstanding, state power in India is steeped in impunity, and the poor and marginalised encounter it in their everyday interactions with the police station, the tehsildar’s office, the collectorate. The everyday workings of the state thus set limits to policy outcomes.

Dalits in the Dravidian compact

The Dravidian model would appear more credible if it were viewed as a project in process, and its populism not only celebrated but also subjected to careful and granular analysis with a focus on the fissures that attend it. To consider one such fissure: how would the Dravidian model look if we assess its outcomes keeping in focus major instances of caste conflict resulting in violence against Dalits? Almost every decade since the 1950s has witnessed such conflicts in Tamil Nadu, and each of these conflicts may be viewed in the context of political and social developments to do with democracy and justice. Not all of them unfolded under DMK rule, but they all push us to take note of how a particular event may reveal the tensions and problems that beset both governance and the governed, especially in an imperfect democracy and a republic whose existence is constantly under threat from an unequal and violent social order.

The Mudukulathur riots of 1957, which occurred when the Congress was in power in Tamil Nadu, may be read as signifying a clash between social and political democracy. When Dalits seek to assert their right to political representation on their own terms, as they did in this instance, they are served ill by locally dominant castes, translating to a violent reality that persists to this day.

The burning of 44 Dalits in Keezhvenmani in 1968 – within a year of the DMK assuming office for the first time – points to how Dalit demands for better wages, social dignity and the right to radical politics are met with punitive violence. Why was the DMK ineffective in forestalling this dastardly act, even when it knew of the extremely polarised class and caste situation in the area?

The violence against Dalits in Villupuram in 1978, when the AIADMK was in power, calls attention to the ways in which dominant-caste groups seek to maintain caste boundaries in urban life – which, to an extent, has been liberating for Dalits. It is clear that the actual unfolding of modern economic life does not upend the relationships between dominant-caste groups and Dalits; rather, it reconstitutes them in ways we are yet to fully comprehend.

The violence in Tamil Nadu's southern districts in the 1980s, during AIADMK rule, point to the effects of dominant-caste consolidation in the wake of support to certain caste groups from the ruling party and the state. This has resulted in acts of violence against Dalits when they refuse to abide by caste authority. The violence that unfolded in Kodiyankulam and neighbouring villages in the 1990s, and also in the Thamirabarani delta, under both DMK and AIADMK rule, may be read as an instance of how not only dominant-caste groups but also the parties in power refuse to heed Dalit political autonomy and social mobility, both made possible through education, the emergence of organic Dalit intellectuals and leaders, and improved economic prospects for these communities.

Such a reading of contemporary Tamil history will afford us a view not only of what governments do but also what (un)civil society does, and show how social relations of production and caste continue to be salient even when state policies ostensibly seek to disturb existing arrangements. Equally, such a reading would point to how the Dravidian consensus has not worked with Dalit histories and aspirations, or with Dalits' radical claims to equality. This is evident from the fact that neither book calls attention to how Dalit intellectuals, as well as Dalit political and social movements in Tamil Nadu, have expanded the sphere of democracy and redefined the meanings of equality and self-respect.

The sad fact is that while Dalits have laid claim to the Dravidian model, the latter has not sought to work their concerns into its framework. It is not a question of Dalits being one more unequal segment of society that has to be included in the Dravidian compact; Dalit rights and claims ought to be viewed as constituting the very measure of democracy and justice. For it is this standard, and not only opposition to Sanatana Dharma, that is most likely to unpack for us the untruths of the Hindu Right. While the opposition to conservative Hindu belief is necessary, it is not adequate for challenging the Hindu Right. It has to be countered from the standpoint of radical equality and justice.

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