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REVIEW ARTICLE

De-centring Indian politics: remembering M. S. S. Pandian

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The book for review here is a collection of essays written in his honour by friends and colleagues of the late M. S. S. Pandian, who died in 2014 at the tragically early age of 56. The publication of the book is an occasion for remembering the life and work of a feisty scholar who was a maverick and a contrarian, and certainly among the more outstanding social scientists of his generation. He was a true intellectual who, like the Philosophes of the Enlightenment was always questioning – not least his own ideas. He came from the very far south of Tamil Nadu, and I remember him once telling me how much of an outsider he felt when he arrived in the Madras Christian College to pursue his MA in Economics. And I think that he never quite lost the sense of being an outsider – reflecting his positioning as a 'non-Brahmin' from South India – for all the recognition that he eventually received, nationally and internationally. This is reflected in the title of the book that he planned, as I understand, but was only completed after his death by his partner, Anandhi: *The strangeness of Tamil Nadu: Contemporary history and political culture in Tamil Nadu* (2019). The papers brought together in *Rethinking social justice* encourage readers to reflect critically upon Indian politics from the vantage point of the very distinctive political culture and practices of Pandian's home state, which does indeed sometimes feel both very remote from the centre and very different.

Following his MA, Pandian undertook his PhD under the supervision of C. T. Kurien at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), and the thesis (submitted in 1985) became his first book, *The political economy of agrarian change: Nanchilnadu 1880–1939* (1990), in which he engaged with the debates of the time over agrarian change. He was one of the first, however, to bring into these studies a stronger focus on environmental concerns, reflected in an original article that he published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* entitled 'Rainfall as an instrument of production in late nineteenth century Nanchilnadu' (1987b). A central theme in his work had to do with the way in which state intervention in the later nineteenth century, notably for forest conservation, disrupted the ecological balance that had been maintained between paddy cultivation on the irrigated plains and the drylands and forest, which were the sources of critical inputs. The consequence was that peasants became more dependent upon the market

for necessary inputs and that many were driven into crippling debt in the 1930s (and see Pandian 1987a).

After completing his doctorate Pandian spent some time as a Fellow of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta/Kolkata – about which period Janaki Nair tells some interesting tales in her affectionate memoir (2014) – before returning to MIDS as a Fellow in 1989. There, as Janaki Nair remembers, his light corner office became a meeting place for scholars and activists from far and near. Early on in his tenure, however, he spent a year at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London as a Commonwealth post-doctoral fellow. It was in this time that the shift in his interests away from agrarian political economy to social and political history and cultural studies took place, leading to the publication in 1992 of the book for which he is probably still most widely known, *The image trap: M. G. Ramachandran in film and politics*. More than thirty years after the death of MGR, it is perhaps hard to appreciate the adulation of which he was the object, but the idea that he was the patron saint of the poor remains alive in Tamil Nadu. Yet, as Pandian argues in the Preface to *The image trap*, 'His eleven year rule (1977-87) was … one of the darkest periods in the contemporary history of the state', when profiteering was rampant and any expression of dissent was crushed by 'the well-honed police machinery' (1992, 12). The period saw no improvement in the lives of the poor, if not their further immiseration. They paid more into the coffers of the state, especially through the taxation of liquor, than they received in the form of welfare benefits, even including the celebrated Chief Minister's Noon Meals Scheme. How was it, then, that MGR and his Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) enjoyed such extraordinary political supremacy among the common people? The book is a remarkable exercise in Gramscian analysis of popular common sense, and the politics of hegemony, drawing on a penetrating study of the cinematic image that MGR projected in his films, and showing how it may have resonated among so many of the Tamil people (though this part of the argument was not substantiated, unfortunately, with ethnographic or other evidence). As the editors of *Rethinking social justice* say, it took some courage on Pandian's part to publish a work that was so critical of MGR at a time when Tamil Nadu lived under the repressive rule of his successor, Jayalalithaa (see also Subramanian 1999, pp. 298–300).

Following the publication of *The image trap*, Pandian continued writing a steady stream of articles, the great majority of them appearing in the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*. The *EPW* archive lists well over 50 contributions by him, starting with pieces on current events in Tamil Nadu under the rubric of 'From Our Correspondent', some of them written while he was still a research student. Central arguments of *The image trap* appeared first in two articles for the *EPW*. And what was, I believe, his last article appeared in that remarkable weekly journal not long before his death. Jointly written with a graduate student, Satyaki Roy, at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) – where Pandian had become a professor of history in 2009 – it was one of his few commentaries on national politics (Pandian and Roy 2014). It was both a profound and prescient statement about the politics of Narendra Modi, drawing on some arguments of the conservative German jurist Carl Schmitt, who was a prominent member of the Nazi party,

about 'decisionism'. This is the phenomenon of a craving among people for firm decisions by political leaders in circumstances of what are perceived to be drift and uncertainty (such as were held to characterise the last years of the second UPA government of India, of 2009–2014). 'Decisionism', as it has turned out, has indeed been an important factor in the hegemony that Modi has come to exercise. Demonetisation in 2016, for instance, though it caused widespread suffering, and has had a negative longer run impact on India's economic growth, was widely viewed favourably, as demonstrating the prime minister's decisiveness and willingness to take risks (as Modi claimed) for the good of the common people. Much the same, it seems, is true of his decision over the imposition of a particularly stringent lockdown in response to coronavirus, even among migrant workers who have experienced the loss of their livelihoods.

In his articles Pandian analysed trends in the politics of Tamil Nadu, the history of Dravidian politics and the ideas and arguments of thinkers associated with the Dravidian movement, and a range of other themes. They included an essay, published in 1995, titled 'Beyond colonial crumbs' that develops a critique of the work on the history of Tamil politics of Christopher Baker and David Washbrook, of the so-called 'Cambridge School'. Pandian held them to task for their unwillingness to allow for the significance of caste identity, and for their failure to recognise the importance of the Self-Respect Movement, or more generally the role of ideas in politics – as opposed to the pursuit of self-interest through the machinations of political factions. Against the arguments of Baker and Washbrook, he sketched an account of the emergence of a 'subaltern counter-public' in early twentieth century Madras that, he held, had been 'rendered voiceless by the Cambridge historians by assuming their politics as that of clients without will' (1995a, p. 389). He went on to elaborate on the account that he gave of the subaltern counter-public in later essays, and in the book that was his major work, *Brahmin and non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil political present* (2007).

The book, as Pandian says, 'plots the genealogies of the opposition between Brahmin and non-Brahmin, of how this opposition has become taken for granted, self-evident and naturalized in the Tamil region' (2007, 6). He argues, in the end, that in contemporary Tamil Nadu these reified categories have come in the way of Dalit mobilisation – so recognising, at least implicitly, the limitations of Dravidianism as a progressive force in a way that perhaps sat uncomfortably with his commitment to the DMK. He shows in the book how the encounters between Christian missionaries and Indians rendered 'Hinduism' (a construction of Orientalism), caste and Brahminism objects of public debate, and resulted in demands being made on Brahmins – in their own perception – to be both culturally authentic as 'Hindus' and modern. The Theosophical Society, he shows, played some part in bringing about an equation between Hinduism and the Brahmin, and the idea of the nation. Finally, the way in which Brahmin power came to operate 'both in the realm of everyday religious practice as well as in the politics of a nation that was predominantly being imagined as Brahmin-Hindu by mainstream nationalism' (2007, 187) was what became the focus of the critique of religion and of nationalism developed by E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (EVR, or 'Periyar'). Tracing the 'injuries' of non-Brahmins – of caste and occupation,

gender, language and region – back to the Brahmin, EVR effectively brought about the formation of a new subaltern non-Brahmin counter-public. Pandian's book both illuminates the contemporary history of Tamil Nadu and challenges mainstream ideas about the character of Indian nationalism. He shared in EVR's driving concern about the place of subordinate groups in the nation (a theme brought out in Manoharan's essay in *Rethinking social justice*). In the book, too, and in an essay that contributed to it – 'One step outside modernity: Caste, identity politics and the public sphere' (2002) – Pandian puts forward a challenging argument about the differences of language regarding caste, on the parts of upper castes and lower castes, and their political significance. Modernity, he argues – informed in part by a critique of some of the writing of the sociologist M. N. Srinivas – 'inscribes itself silently as upper caste'. Caste, the 'other' of modernity, seems to belong to lower castes (2002, p. 1738).

Pandian had snapped his long-standing ties with MIDS in 2001, and from then until his appointment at JNU in 2009, as an independent scholar he took up several fellowships, including one with the Sarai Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, and he spent some semesters teaching in the United States. It was in this period that he was associated with the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD), which provided support for his work in the early 2000s with A. Srivathsan on the 'staging' of Chennai as a global city – about which Srivathsan writes in *Rethinking social justice*. It was in this time, too, that as a member of the Subaltern Studies collective, Pandian became responsible, with Shail Mayaram and Ajay Skaria, for the editing of the last Subaltern Studies collection to have been published, on *Muslims, Dalits and the fabrications of history* (2005).

Commentators on the Subaltern Studies project have often criticised it for having moved away from its initial concern for the subaltern voice into a preoccupation with Foucauldian theory. But for Pandian the subaltern voice always remained of passionate concern. This is shown up very clearly in one of his later essays: 'Writing ordinary lives' (2008). The article engages with Gopal Guru's writings on the problems faced by Dalit intellectuals amid what he sees as the hierarchies of knowledge in the social sciences. Pandian's concern is to draw on an examination of two narratives, by Dalit authors, both written in Tamil, comparing them with social science theory about caste (Srinivas being a whipping boy again), to show how such writings can 'facilitate the re-imagination of the political' (2008, p. 35) – whereas, he argued, 'the protocols of neutrality and objectivity' of social science theory can end up by depoliticising exclusion and oppression.

A later article, 'Being "Hindu" and being "secular"' (2012) is in part a work of self-criticism. Pandian, in common with a good many other writers around the turn of the century (including the present writer: see Harriss 2002), anticipated that the Hindu right would become much more powerful in Tamil Nadu than was the case by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. What he had failed to recognise, he thought, was the significance of the forms of Hindu religiosity among non-Brahmins in the state – developed at least in part in response to the ideological compromises made by the DMK on rationalism

and atheism – that have encouraged tolerance and have embraced Muslims under the Tamil identity.

Finally, in the year before his untimely death, Pandian published a set of three essays on caste in Tamil Nadu (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) that have been of great value to scholars who study Tamil society and politics. The first of these concerned recent efforts to erase references in textbooks to the past of influential Nadars as 'untouchables', and to the role of Christian missionaries in their later mobility; the second is about Vanniyar (OBC) violence against (Dalit) Paraiyars; and the third, focused on Arunthathiyars of western Tamil Nadu, reflects on contestations among Dalits, noting that 'caste as a system of graded inequality continues to work – even amongst the most oppressed communities in Tamil Nadu' (2013c, p. 20).

In his work on the co-production of Brahmin and non-Brahmin identities Pandian wanted to show how then existing socio-political arrangements were unsettled, ushering in 'fundamentally new notions of "diversity, justice and legitimacy"' (2007, p. 7). He saw a comparable process taking place in the present, through Dalit politics, and he concluded *Brahmin and non-Brahmin* with the words, 'The politics of becoming is yet again at work, promising us newer notions of "diversity, justice and legitimacy"' (2007, p. 245). His unflagging concern for those who are subordinated and oppressed explains the editors' and writers' intentions and their choice of the title *Rethinking social justice* – drawn from that of a lecture given by Yogendra Yadav in Pandian's memory- for the book that they have published in his honour. The Introduction, describing Pandian as 'a Dravidian scholar', provides a brief account of his life and intellectual commitments, and of the approach that came to inform his work – what has been called 'cultural political economy' – one that 'recognises the importance of semiotic and discursive practices in constituting material relations and the production of hegemony' (p. 4). As the editors say, the essays in the volume, which range very widely, 'are not direct deliberations on the philosophy and theories of social justice'. What the volume aims to do is, instead, 'to bring perspectives from across disciplines to rethink the question of social justice in a heterodox manner' (p. 12). And disparate though the essays are, indeed they are in their very different ways concerned with social justice.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the essays do not engage more directly with Pandian's work – some of chapters make no reference to any of his publications. This is not the case, however, in the first essay in the book, by Anandhi, which analyses the autobiographical writings of Muthulakshmi Reddy, a middle-class feminist from colonial Tamil Nadu, and clearly reflects the interest in autobiographical writing that informed some of Pandian's work. Anandhi shows how Reddy's politics, 'even while being radical in fissuring the male-controlled public sphere, could not help othering lower class/caste women as embodied subjects unfit to be part of the modern public sphere and silencing subaltern identities such as caste' (p. 26) – an argument that very clearly echoes some of those put by Pandian (2002, 2008). The second essay, too, by Arun Kumar Patnaik, picks up on Pandian's continuing concerns about caste, in a discussion of Ram Manohar Lohia's critique of caste and religion. The point that challenging the caste order requires not only change in its material conditions but also an

ideological critique through the construction of 'what Lohia calls "counter-cultural traditions"' (p. 6) resonates strongly with arguments about the politics of becoming that underpin *Brahmin and non-Brahmin*.

In the second section of the book, on 'Critical social history', Sundar Kaali engages in a critique of Sundar Sarukkai's phenomenological approach to understanding untouchability with an historical study of Dalit saints and their relations with Brahmins. M. Arivalagan reports on a critical reading of colonial and postcolonial ethnographies of the Kannikaran communities who live in southern parts of the Western Ghats, partly in Tamil Nadu and partly in Kerala, showing how the objectification of the community in these ethnographies has 'fed the tribal development discourse and welfare politics of the postcolonial government' (p. 7). He goes on to propose an alternative approach – partly inspired by Pandian's 'Writing ordinary lives' – based on social memory, life experiences and oral history as a means to recover the voices of the community' (p. 83). Finally, in this section of the book Ajit Menon writes about conservation politics in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, drawing some inspiration from an early paper of Pandian's about colonial game-hunting in the Nilgiris (Pandian 1995b). Latterly, we learn, in Mudumalai as in so many other conservation areas across the world, 'local people with perhaps very small ecological footprints are perceived as threats, while tourists can continue to visit in large numbers despite their potential adverse impacts' (p. 120).

There follow two essays on 'Nation and region'. In the first of them V. Ravi Vaithees, in a rather sprawling paper, after briefly discussing Pandian's work on the transformation of the Dravidian movement by Periyar, aims to illuminate understanding of the more mature phase of the movement and of how under second generation leaders, most importantly C. N. Annadurai, it was able to capture state power. He does this through a study of Anna's *Arya mayai* (roughly, 'Aryan illusion'), emphasizing the differences between Anna's thinking, based on his deep engagement with the Tamil cultural revival and Tamil nationalism, and that of Periyar. The nub of the argument is that 'with Anna's break away and the founding of the DMK, what was finally released for popular mobilization was a form of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism' (p. 153). In the following paper, however, we return to Periyar, as Karthik Ram Manoharan offers a fascinating critique of Fanon's ideas through comparison with Periyar, contrasting Fanon's arguments about the solidarity among social groups in a colonised territory with Periyar's critical view of essentialised ideas about an 'Indian nation' and his concern about the internal oppression of people as well as their oppression by the external force of colonialism.

Four chapters deal with different aspects of the political economy of Tamil Nadu which was always a keen interest of Pandian's, even if – apart from his work with Srivathsan which appears here – he wrote rather little about it in the latter part of his career. M. Vijayabaskar's article on 'Emerging labour regimes and mobilities in Tamil Nadu' explores the implications of what is described as the 'truncated agrarian transition' that Tamil Nadu has experienced, the movement of labour out of agriculture, and the different patterns of labour mobility – and, in some cases of immobility – that now characterise the

state. A. Kalaiyarasan offers an account of social policy in the state, and J. Jeyaranjan reports on detailed fieldwork carried out in a village in the Kaveri delta to challenge what have been more or less 'standard' ideas about the failure of tenancy reforms, by showing that '*de facto*, land relations have been transformed much more in favour of lower-caste tenants than what has been said in existing literature' (p. 11).

Srivathsan's paper which draws substantially, he says, on unpublished work that he did with Pandian, resulting from their three years of research on how Chennai was sought to be re-invented as a 'global city' in the early 2000s, is a particularly powerful piece, and one that strongly reflects concerns over social justice. Srivathsan and Pandian frame their analysis with reference to the metaphors of 'exhibition' and 'museum' that were suggested by Timothy Mitchell in his work on colonial Cairo, and that can be seen as spatialised forms of civil society and political society, as these were distinguished by Partha Chatterjee. The aim of the politicians, planners and businesspeople who wanted to transform Chennai was to impose a new aesthetics over the city (shades here of the work of Asher Ghertner (2015) on Delhi – though it is not referred to), and to sweep away the remnants of the past (the 'museum') in asserting the 'exhibition', the new global city. But the older spaces of the city are also 'backyards' that sustain the modern city, and the attempt to erase them was to do violence to the lives and living spaces of many of the common people. The article recounts and analyses the history of the construction of the so-called 'IT corridor' of Chennai, and of the facilities clustered around it that 'fostered and catered to the desire of the urban elite to secede from the existing city' (p. 187), and it then takes up the stories of the efforts that were made to 'cleanse' the city of cattle, and the Marina Beach of fishermen. A telling conclusion is that 'urban planning practices have very little to do with the notion of the citizen, though this is evoked relentlessly' (p. 198).

The bookends that frame the collection are a Foreword by Partha Chatterjee, based on his 2018 Memorial Lecture for Pandian, developing an argument about Indian federalism and popular consciousness of the Indian nation in different regions of the country, and finally two essays that refer to Pandian's abiding interest in cinema. Venkatesh Chakravarty analyses the controversial film *Hey Ram* that starred one of the leading figures of the Tamil film industry, Kamal Haasan, and Madhava Prasad discusses the decline of the era of 'sovereign stars' in Tamil Nadu.

The collection will, no doubt, most attract the interest of scholars who are engaged in one way or another with the history and the present of Tamil society and politics, but some of the essays, certainly, like Pandian's own work, deserve a very much wider readership because they illuminate large theoretical or historical questions. Pandian himself did much to de-centre the study of Indian politics, and to bring to the fore counter-hegemonic voices from the south that challenge what Perry Anderson referred to as 'the Indian ideology' (2012). These voices include, of course that of Periyar (whose thought, as reflected in 37 volumes of his writings, is the subject of a major research project being undertaken by Karthik Ram Manoharan at the University of Wolverhampton) – but those of Dalit writers, too. Chapters of *Rethinking social justice* extend these concerns – as in Patnaik's essay on Lohia, and those by Manoharan

and Ravi Vaithees – and enter, as well, into studies of political economy, notably those by Srivathsan and by Vijyabaskar, that address big questions of wide significance. The authors have succeeded in doing justice to the legacy of their friend, who was such a singular scholar.

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