

Nuances Of Tamil Politics and Culture

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RETHINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Edited by S. Anandhi, Karthick Ram Manoharan, M. Vijayabaskar and A. Kalaiyaran
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Rethinking Social Justice was published earlier this year in honour of MSS Pandian, the late historian of South India. The volume comprises an array of essays on a wide range of topics that are thematically organized into five sections: 'Politics of Culture and Identity', 'Critical Social History', 'Nation and Region', 'Political Economy' and 'Cinema and Society'. The thematic organization of the book is representative of the range of Pandian's intellectual interests: the political

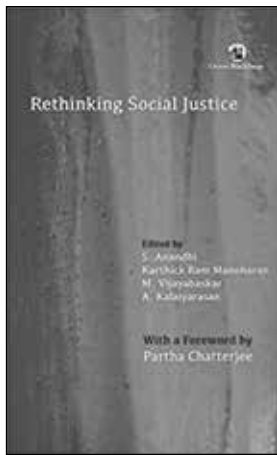
and social history of Tamil Nadu, caste and agrarian politics, the intimate nexus between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu and so on. Some of the essays are co-authored by Pandian himself. The main challenge before the reviewer of such a rich and diverse volume is doing justice to unfamiliar terrains of scholarship. As a scholar of modern Tamil literature, reading the book expanded my own knowledge of the nuances of Tamil politics and culture. For the purposes of this review, I provide a broad overview of some of the essays of the book and pose questions that bear significance to some of the essays.

S Anandhi's reading of Muthulakshmi Reddy's autobiography in two volumes that document her life as the first female medical graduate from Madras Presidency and the first woman to be elected as a member of the Legislative Council in British India. Reddy argued for the public participation of women in national life and demanded that their private lives as mothers and wives

become matters of social and political concern. Her attempt to blur the public-private binary was only directed to the lives of 'respectable, educated working women', a generic category for Reddy, which excluded those who were marked by caste, class and sexuality. However, there is nothing in the essay to substantiate Reddy's desire to blur the distinction between the public and the private. Did Reddy consider the possibility of providing institutional support to mothers and wives who also led political lives? Secondly, if the private lives of women had to become part of the public sphere, it is only natural that men participate in domesticity and childrearing, a possibility Reddy does not seem to address. Thirdly, how would the presence of women who are excluded from her notion of respectability, challenge the public-private dichotomy?

In a study of Ram Manohar Lohia's immanent critique of caste and religion, Arun Kumar Pathak notes that Lohia's

principle of immediacy emphasized change in the present condition of production, governance, class struggle and so on to potentially bring about a socialist future. The opening section of the essay is obscure;



there could have been an introduction to the fundamental categories of Lohia's thought and interventions, if any, in a larger philosophical tradition. Let me pose a series of questions to a set of claims that remain unsubstantiated. Why, for instance, is the human will identified with non-reason in Lohia's principle of immediacy? If one were to grant Pathak's argument that Lohia observed 'plural notions of immediacy' (p. 36) to construct socialism along 'multiple trajectories' (p. 36), how would these trajectories be consolidated to form a socialist society? Although Lohia's emphasis on the present as the locus of political change is crucial, can immediate political change be unrelated to a vision of the future? Further, Ambedkar's thought on Gandhi needs to be historicized and nuanced instead of merely stating that he was neither pro nor anti-Gandhi. Is it possible, as Pathak proposes, for socialism to draw from the ritual networks of caste to get rid of caste? Lohia's readings of mythological figures need to be interrogated or there will be no end to justifying individual moral choice in the name of the polity and the community. Lastly, how can anti-caste movements inform anti-race movements? Although caste, race and class are interlinked, there has to be an acknowledgment of their historical and cultural differences. Turning to the second section, M Arivalagan in his essay titled "Self" Rather than the "Other": Towards a Subjective Ethnography of the Kani Community', draws on what he calls social habit memories of the Kanikkarars, an adivasi community from southern Tamil Nadu and Kerala, to produce an alternative, subjective history of the community. Unlike colonial and postcolonial ethnographies that have interpreted the community's practices in terms of Christian theology and Enlightenment ideas of history, Arivalagan proposes an embodied history of the community, which may capture a collective memory of affect and knowledge. Firstly, would it be accurate to say that all

postcolonial studies of the community or of ethnic communities at large, are guilty of the very assumptions that they seek to challenge? Secondly, the study of such a memory would require a rhetorical and metaphorical reading that accommodates ambiguity. It is crucial to lay down protocols for, interpretations, no matter how contextual/provisional they are, in terms of the community's perception of its own practices, address the unavoidable impact of colonial modernization and postcolonial developmental missions on the collective practices and memories of oral communities.

The third section of the book comprises two chapters. V Ravi Vaithees's reading of CN Annadurai's *Arya Mayai* (1943), a polemical text that exposed the ideological cunning of the Brahmins, which ensured their historical domination in Tamil country. Drawing from colonial missionary sources and Tamil literature, Annadurai constructed a history of the decline of Dravidian civilization at the hands of the Aryans who deployed myths and legends that upheld their own superiority. Unlike the Aryans, the Dravidians were a rational and casteless society that had succumbed to Aryan indoctrination. Caste was seen as an Aryan invention to undermine the possibility of Dravidian unity. As Vaithees observes, the difference between Neo-Shaiva and Annadurai's critiques of Aryan domination is only apparent; any mention of god in Neo-Shaiva discourse is replaced by the nation in Annadurai, which is united by one god and caste. However, unlike Periyar, Annadurai did not subject his own appeal to a glorified Dravidian past and Tamil nationalism to his rationalist critique of religion. (Quasi) religious mobilizations of people in the name of the nation cannot overcome social, cultural and economic differences. What were Annadurai's own negotiations with electoral politics, which would entail an engagement with difference and inequality, and his appeal to an idealized Tamil nation?

In 'An Ethic beyond Anti-Colonialism: A Periyarist Engagement with Fanonism', Karthick Ram Manoharan observes, the anticolonial for Periyar was not a sufficient marker of commonality among Indians who were separated by social hierarchies. Manoharan deploys Periyar to critique Fanon's dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized where the colonized are divided by inequalities that undermine the possibility of solidarity. Unlike Fanon, for whom women were, as Manoharan observes, sexual objects and political instruments, Periyar imagined women and Dalits at the forefront of the struggle against caste

and patriarchy. However, the question of what form Periyar's radicalism would take in terms of a future collectivity remains. I am curious to know if Periyar goes beyond defining Tamil or Non-Brahmin identities in negative terms when they are themselves fractured. Did he have an imagination of a new community? Who would constitute it and on what grounds? I wonder if Fanon has answers.

The second chapter of Part IV is M Vijayabaskar's essay titled, 'Emerging Labour Regimes and Mobilities in Tamil Nadu', which is an insightful study of the socio-economic impact of the growing shift from agricultural to non-agricultural forms of labour as a result of the rapid and dense urbanization of the state. Certain sections of the labour force are neither able to find urban employment nor sustain themselves on agriculture. The category of the commuting worker who travels between village and city on work or goes abroad in search of contractual employment is important here. This has mobilized female labour offering women greater opportunities for employment. The essay, however, stops short of addressing the social and economic effects of itinerant labour on caste, gender relations and the family.

A Kalaiyaran's essay entitled, 'Politics of Dravidian Populism: Understanding Developmental Outcomes in Tamil Nadu', argues that sub-nationalism and anti-caste movements in Tamil Nadu have enabled a more equitable delivery of public services and broad-based development. The paternalist populism of the DMK and AIADMK from the late 1960s onwards made a difference to the material conditions of oppressed caste groups by offering free food, subsidies and education to the rural poor. Fair price shops, which are run by cooperative societies, were set up all over rural Tamil Nadu and many commodities were introduced at an affordable price. To what extent has the paternalist populism of these parties mitigated caste violence? What role has caste played in influencing the distribution of resources and services?

A more elaborate account of Pandian's scholarship in the introduction would have further established the editors' rationale for producing such a volume. And lastly, a foreword that specifically addresses Pandian's scholarship and/or the complex range of issues in the volume would have been appropriate.

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