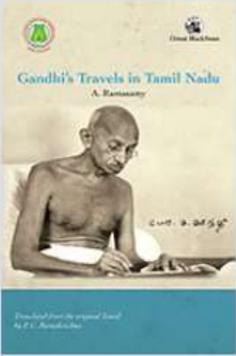


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## Dravidian Politics vs. Gandhian Ideology

**GANDHI'S TRAVELS IN TAMIL NADU** by A. Ramasamy. Translated from the original Tamil by P.C. Ramakrishna  
*Orient BlackSwan, 2023, 673 pp., INR 1995*

**THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN SOUTH INDIA** by Marguerite Ross Barnett  
*Princeton University Press, 1976, Indian subcontinent print edition, 2022, 386 pp., INR 899*

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A Ramasamy's *Thamizhnaatil Gandhi*, published in 1969, is a tender love story between the Mahatma and the Tamils. According to Ramasamy, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's affection for the people of Tamil Nadu originated in South Africa, where he first met—and later grew close to—young Tamil martyrs to the satyagraha cause, like the 16-year-old Valliammal, 20-year-olds—Nagappan and Narayanasami, among several others. In fact, Gandhi's first encounter with a badly abused Tamil contract labourer, Balasundaram, within a few months of his arrival as a practicing lawyer in South Africa in 1893, was a cultural breakthrough of sorts, by introducing him to a member of an unfamiliar community. Gandhi finally won this pro bono case.

Ramasamy's book meticulously tracks every single journey by Gandhi to different places in Tamil Nadu, from October 1896 to January 1946. While the obsessive chronicling of the many personalities present at all the places visited by Gandhi can get a tad tiresome, the overall narrative is not without entertainment. Ramasamy's intention may have been to celebrate the many virtues of the Mahatma. What the reader in the 21st century gets is a measure of the man, MK Gandhi.

As is well known, after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi launched the noncooperation movement in the 1920s and the civil disobedience satyagraha in the 1930s. These were the decades when the loin cloth-clad Gandhi was viewed as a bit of a rustic rockstar by the people of Tamil Nadu. Wherever Gandhi travelled in the old Madras State, people would get wind of his whereabouts and proceed to mob him in hundreds or thousands. During scheduled meetings, the crowds were so dense that sometimes Gandhi would have to be seated on a chair and hoisted with ropes onto the dais. In most places, speeches were made and translated into Tamil and somehow heard above the din. At times, when Gandhi found it impossible to leave a venue, a few of his volunteers would arm themselves with bamboo sticks and make a few martial moves, thereby dispelling the crowds. Once, Gandhi was so irked by the general pandemonium in the audience that he launched a mini satyagraha by lying down on the dais for a few hours, just waiting for the deafening noise to subside and for the crowds to disperse.

In one village in Thoothukudi district, the organizers had engaged a skilled engineer who managed to convert night into day, with brilliant lighting of the entire venue. Instead of showering praise on the organizers or on the engineer for his achievement, Gandhi roundly scolded all of them for wasting good money that could have been better utilized for the Khadi Fund. In fact, in the middle of the night, Gandhi woke everyone up and insisted on examining the accounts pertaining to the event.

Indeed, so obsessed was Gandhi with his project of spinning khadi that he refused to give autographs to persons who were not wearing khadi. Unfortunate ladies wearing gold ornaments in Gandhi's presence were often shamed into sacrificing them for the cause of khadi. To Gandhi's delight, Tiruppur soon became the centre of khadi production in the State. Ironically, now the same Tiruppur has become the hub of mill-produced 'export rejects' in the form of jeans and t-shirts with faux brand labels!

Ramasamy refers to several events of national importance in his book. Personalities like Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Mirabehn, and Rabindranath Tagore are merely mentioned in passing. Ramasamy, however, correctly assesses the importance of the 1920 Khilafat movement led by Gandhi with the Ali brothers fundamentally as a protest against the imperialist ambitions of Britain and France in Turkey, following its defeat in World War I. In fact, when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk took over the Turkish government, the rationale for the movement in India was no longer valid.

No doubt Ramasamy's principal focus is on events in Tamil Nadu. Even here, some events, like the initial difference of opinion between Gandhi and Annie Besant, are well delineated, while other local events of importance are not explained in much detail. For instance, the reasons for Periyar leaving the Congress Party in 1925 are not explicitly stated, even though there is a brief description of his protest against the establishment of separate dining spaces for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students in a hostel run by a Congressman in Tirunelveli district.

Apart from khadi cloth spinning, liquor prohibition, and promotion of the Hindi language, Gandhi took up the cause of eradication of untouchability, even though he had no moral objection to varnashrama dharma. Some of these ideals were criticized by various groups—the orthodox Sanatanis, communists, and Dravidian ideologues. As the African-American scholar Marguerite Ross Barnett (1942-1992) informs us, the 1927 issue of *Justice* (which was a newspaper run by the Justice Party) castigated Gandhi's ideas on caste: 'We are told that Mahatma Gandhi held up as a lofty institution of varnashrama dharma and extolled Brahminism. No doubt he referred to a few incidents like untouchability, and child marriage and the spoliation of young children of twelve years of age and stated that they were a parody of Brahminism. But if these did not exist, he adored Brahminism and varnashrama dharma' (p. 23).

Dr Barnett points out one of the reasons the Justice Party was established in 1916. According to her, it was in order to counter the Tamil Brahmins' tendency to characterize all non-Brahmins as 'Suddras', especially in urban areas. The earlier rural experience of the elite non-Brahmin groups like Vellalars (who had adopted vegetarianism and a general concern for 'purity') was that of being considered politically and culturally close to Brahmins. In fact, often poor Brahmins in villages had shown deference to the powerful Vellalars. These subtle power relations had dissolved with increasing urbanization.

The author exhibits a fine grasp of Dravidian politics, and confines much of her study to the crucial period of 1949-1973—that is, from the creation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) by Annadurai in 1949 to the formation of the breakaway party, Anna-Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (A-DMK), by matinee idol MG Ramachandran in 1973. The story of different constellations in Dravidian politics began with the Self-Respect Movement started by Periyar, when he left the Congress Party in 1925. This movement morphed into the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1944 and simultaneously led to the decline of the Justice Party, which—as a party of elite non-Brahmins—had alienated Muslims, Dalits, and lower-rung non-Brahmins, especially from groups like the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya and Muukolathur.

As early as 1937, C Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), as Prime Minister of Madras Presidency, imposed Hindi as a compulsory language. In response, DK demanded Dravida Nadu as a separate and independent land for Dravidians—a demand that was continued to be made by the DMK from 1949 till the Indo-China War of 1962. The 16th Amendment Act of 1963 was enacted by Parliament soon after the India-China war. This Amendment included the notion of sovereignty and integrity in the oaths and declarations to be made by legislators, ministers, and judges. As a result, the electorally ambitious DMK swiftly gave up the idea of Dravida Nadu.

While the primary identity of DMK was its non-Brahmin membership, it had to deal with a new challenge from the Congress Party in 1954, in the person of the popular non-Brahmin Chief Minister of Madras State, Kamaraj Nadar. Surprisingly, Periyar extended his support to 'Kamaraj Congress'. What is more, in 1949, Periyar had even sought the Brahmin Rajaji's moral support for his marriage, at age 71, to a 29 year-old party worker. Dr Barnett seems to suggest that the formation of the DMK was a form of protest against the authority of Periyar, following his second marriage to a young woman several decades his junior.

The second agitation against the imposition of Hindi by the Lal Bahadur Shastri Government in 1965 proved to be far more violent than the first, and with far-reaching consequences. In 1967, the Congress-led Bhaktavatsalam Government was ousted in elections and the first Dravidian Government led by Annadurai was sworn in. But it was one thing to win an election; it was quite another for a fledgling Government to govern with confidence and efficacy. The previous Congress Governments were experienced and had already established several welfare measures, including some for Dalits (or 'Harijans', as Gandhi called them). As for the language issue, it was a challenge for both Annadurai and his successor, M Karunanidhi,

to maintain a balancing act between cultural nationalism and pragmatic considerations, while confronting a disgruntled student community that eschewed Tamil in favour of English as medium of instruction.

Mercifully, there were other forms of Tamil nationalism that proved to be less controversial, like putting Tiruvalluvar quotations inside public transport, holding World Tamil Conferences, and so on. Economic policies, like providing a measure of rice for one rupee and bringing down the price of all commodities, were very popular. In spite of these measures, the State Government had to grapple with industrial workers' unrest as well as hostility from the largely Brahmin bureaucracy in place. Zealots within the DMK, who tried to push their agenda of religious reform, promoting Self-Respect marriages and secularization of public places, ran into a lot of trouble, given the intransigence of caste and religious prejudices even within the political party.

The November 13, 1968 issue of *Navasakthi* made the following acerbic comment on the situation: Should the order [that all religious pictures be taken down in government offices] be enforced, the government will be constrained to ask the Muslims to give up the room in the fort [Fort St. George] which has been converted into their prayer room for offering namaz, failing which somebody is sure to take up the matter to the government on the grounds that the government is discriminating. Calling itself a secular state, would it be fair to grant facilities to one particular religion? Annadurai is struggling as between two wives (p. 272).

Given the near-impossibility of imposing top-down legislation on an unwilling populace, the DMK leaders quietly sacrificed their lofty ideals on the altar of pragmatism. After Annadurai's untimely death in 1969, Karunanidhi became the new Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Quite unexpectedly, by 1973, there was a major split in the Party, when the hugely charismatic MG Ramachandran formed the A-DMK. Dr Barnett's theoretical and empirical analysis throws much light on events that occurred several decades ago. What is significant is that these events have ineluctably shaped Dravidian politics in the present day. What is perhaps even more significant is that, in Tamil Nadu at least, Dravidian politics has proved to be far more durable than Gandhian ideology.

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