

Whither Dravidian Movement?

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The Dravidian movement, which saw its heydays during the period from 1930s through to the 1960s, has no doubt declined drastically during last couple of decades. Starting with the Self-Respect movement during the 1930s it climaxed with the anti-Hindi movement in the 1960s, which resulted in the formation of a powerful regional political party advocating Dravidian politics and culture. With the formation of DMK the heartland of Dravidian culture, Tamil Nadu, came under the domination of Dravidian political parties. Initially the split in DMK did not immediately result in the sidelining of Dravidian politics but what people find now is that ultimately it did sideline Dravidian politics. In fact, the AIADMK is autocratically controlled by a single person leadership, is staunchly Brahminical in nature and stands for everything that is against what the Dravidian movement stood for in the past.

The Dravidian movement in the past focused on fighting and sweeping away Brahminical rituals, domination and superstitions and upheld the glory and great antiquity of the Tamil language and culture. The movement propagated atheism against the prevalent Brahminical pantheon of gods, goddesses and demons. The movement at one time believed that only by liberating the masses of people from the blind alley of superstitions and meaningless rituals could they progress and achieve an egalitarian society. This has turned full circle when a Brahmin lady got the leadership of a prominent faction of the DMK and sought to establish herself as a demigoddess. In fact, there are a few temples where her statue is actually worshipped. Moreover, she is ever ready to align with the most communal and obscurantist stream in national politics. Fortunately, communal politics is yet to strike serious roots in Tamil Nadu.

It is not difficult to understand why an opportunist politician like Jayalalitha resorts to communal politics and obscurantist practices. But what is amazing is the ease with which Mr Karunanidhi, the self-proclaimed atheist and vociferous supreme leader of DMK, is out to please Brahminical ideologues. Of late, it is becoming more and more obvious that the leadership of the DMK is not interested in following the goals of the Dravidian movement any longer. This leaves only fringe groups like Dravida Kazhagam and a few small groups of Tamil nationalist militants as inheritors of the Dravidian movement. In other words, the Dravidian movement as a mass phenomenon is dead or, to put it mildly, dormant. The question arises whether it can ever resurrect with its earlier vibrancy.

The ancient and middle ages of the history of the Tamil land are no doubt inspiring. It is the land where the Bhakthi movement thrived for centuries, which in turn helped to trigger great reformist movements against the caste system across the subcontinent. It is the land that gave rise to empire builders and a powerful maritime civilization; and ancient Tamil gave rise to literature of epic proportions. This history is thousands of years old and it will certainly be a high-handed assertion if anyone says that all this can be rubbed away. This historical past makes it imperative to look at the reasons why the Dravidian identity is

getting obscured and self-proclaimed Dravidian political parties are abandoning their ideological moorings.

If it was Periyar who could galvanise Tamil cultural identity in a forceful manner, it was C N Annadurai, his disciple, who mobilised this newly awakened consciousness into a viable and successful political entity. The violent language agitation during the 1960s played no small role in this mobilisation. Once the DMK came to power factionalism automatically reared its head and power became the focal point, not the Dravidian movement. A popular cine actor in Tamil of Malayalee origin and belonging to the oppressor caste split the DMK and came to power.

Subsequently, his protege came to don the mantle. Along with the systematic dismantling of Dravidian ideology corruption at all levels became rampant. The DMK became a family centred corporation with factions within the family itself. In all this rat race for power the foremost casualty were the values of Dravidian culture nurtured by Periyar and to some extent by Annadurai.

Along with all these political shifts changes were also occurring in the class structure. The Brahmin landlordism that was reigning supreme in the countryside gave way to landownership by the prominent middle castes. But this did not result in any mitigation of the severe caste and class oppression. The Brahmins shifted themselves to the urban centres and being the educated section could easily ensconce themselves in the bureaucracy and super structural sectors. This process had started in earnest during the colonial period itself. Dalit bashing became job of the erstwhile minions of the Brahmins. And this is continuing without any let up to this day. The Brahmins, who barely constitute 3% of the total population, effectively control sectors like higher education, banking, and bureaucracy while the Dalits continue to be predominantly scavengers and landless agricultural workers. Brahmins continue to practise caste oppression only in those sectors in which they are dominant. For example, the Madras Indian Institute of Technology is a Brahmin fortress, where Dalits are perpetually victimised.

Tamil Nadu has of late become a front-ranking State in the fast proceeding competitive globalisation process in the country. The cheapness of labour, abundant land and a fairly developed infrastructure are the main inducing factors in favour of global capital flowing into this State. The rapid expansion of technical educational facilities in the private sector is an important necessary condition for globalisation. This is happening on a mega scale in Tamil Nadu. In fact, technical education has emerged as one of the most high profit areas here. In the immediate post-colonial period it was a question of the Tamil bourgeoisie becoming integrated with the all India big bourgeoisie. Now the process is one of getting integrated with global capital at the cost of traditional industries and primary sector. With each passing day this process is gaining tremendous momentum. This also means widening of social and economic disparities on an unprece-dented scale as well as dispossession of a large number of people because of mega projects.

This integration with global capital as a junior partner and the rapid development of productive forces has certainly impacted on the Dravidian movement in a negative manner. At the same time it has not affected the severe

caste oppression rampant in the State. Again it is the members of the oppressor castes, who are better placed to acquire the necessary qualifications, who gain from globalisation. By and large, the Dalits and Adivasis are left on the roadside gaping at the new found affluence of their traditional oppressors. Let us not forget that one-fifth of the total population of the State are Dalits. Possibly the only positive development concerning them is that they are becoming increasingly assertive of their rights and creating their own political space. Violence is also bound to increase with this assertion as is becoming evident in parts of southern Tamil Nadu where caste violence has become a permanent fixture. Dravidian movement, especially the movement centred on the language question, had achieved a certain degree of unity of the people and the increasing incidence of caste violence indicates the opposite. This is no doubt a reflection of the demise of the movement itself.

The attitude to the language question has also changed to some extent. There is evidence of pragmatism, and in the interests of commerce and business Hindi is now acceptable to larger sections of people and this tendency may grow under the given circumstances. Hindi cinema and film songs have become more popular and there is greater interaction between Tamil and Hindi cinema. Cinema has a disproportionately large influence on the people and is very much linked to politics too, particularly in the context of Tamil Nadu. While there is an emerging attitude among the expatriate 'liberal' Tamil intelligentsia that exclusive love and pride for one's mother tongue is chauvinism, an attitude that is directly linked to the cultural influence of globalisation, emphasis on the teaching and learning of the mother tongue within the educational system is growing.

Love for one's mother tongue is certainly not chauvinism. In this context it is worthwhile to recall that way back in the 1930s the Dravidian movement under the leadership of Periyar had called for the creation of *Dravidasthan* as a confederation of the peninsular States. But what is the situation now? Tamil Nadu is at loggerheads with all her neighbouring States on river waters issues and occasionally these disputes erupt into highly undesirable violence, economic blockade etc. No mainstream political party in Tamil Nadu is ever tired of raising jingoistic and chauvinistic sloganeering on the question of river waters. The very same 'liberal' intelligentsia who label love for Tamil as chauvinism can in the same breath uphold false nationalism when it comes to strategic economic resources like water and electricity. Tamil Nadu is a water scarce State and the pressures of high speed globalisation can exacerbate the situation. But this is a question regarding the priorities of economic planning and not squabbling with neighbours over sharing of resources. With rising counter nationalisms in the neighbouring States a peninsular level Dravidian unity which was visualised by Periyar has receded more than ever. Short-sighted and competitive nationalisms in these peninsular States are nothing but effective means to permanently undermine even the future possibility of any sort of pan Dravidian unity.

The fact is that in spite of the renewed emphasis on Tamil language the political and ideological space for the Dravidian movement is shrinking fast and with the forces of globalisation going virtually unchallenged this shrinking will possibly result in strangulation and death. The scrambling for the crumbs of globalisation is dividing the people further on obscurantist casteist and false nationalist lines.

The mechanical materialist position that caste divisions and oppression will automatically diminish and ultimately disappear with the development of productive forces stands totally discredited in the context of Tamil Nadu. □□□