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Book Review: S. Narayan. 2018. The Dravidian Years: Politics and Welfare in Tamil Nadu. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, xxii +262 pp. ₹650. ISBN: 9780199488179 (Hardback)

Narayan's book *The Dravidian Years* provides a rare glimpse of the political economy landscape of the most transformative period in Tamil Nadu's social history from an insider's perspective of a former public administrator who has served for three decades in the Indian bureaucracy. The book depicts the southern Indian state's evolution from a deeply casteist British province to one with a radical social justice agenda, which over time however mutates into a more diluted hybrid amalgamation of capitalistic economic development with an ingrained ethos of populist social welfare.

At the outset, the book focuses on the genesis of the Dravidian movement with the 1916 non-Brahmin manifesto, which set the vision for social equality for the next century. Consequently, the 1917 Montague-Chelmsford reforms by the British Raj ensured that the Madras Presidency was the first in the country to initiate affirmative action for the non-Brahmin majority, to dislodge the hegemony of the Brahmins who formed less than three percent of the population but monopolized the British administrative machinery.

Drawing on these early forays, the book also chronologically analyses the genesis of Tamil Nadu's welfare state in three distinct phases. The early years of the iconic Self-Respect Movement (SRM) (1916-1967) were led by the iconoclast E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (later revered as Periyar). The next phase was dominated by former film scriptwriter, Annadurai's political party (1967-1976), with a social change impetus focused on affirmative action. Lastly, the decade (1977 to 1987) was helmed by M.G. Ramchandran (MGR), the former film thespian, who in keeping with his reel image of 'saviour of the poor' (p.83) focused on nutrition and social welfare programmes.

Since 1967, the two Dravidian parties, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), as offshoots of the original Justice Party which initiated the non-Brahmin manifesto, have held power in Tamil Nadu continuously for five decades, nearly in rotation. Both, adopted the core ethos and political agenda of the SRM in the realm of governance. These decades of political commitment were so transformative that the percentage of non-Brahmins in the government administration increased from only 19 percent in 1927 to more than half in post-independent Tamil Nadu from the 1970s (Jaffrelot, 2003). The real contribution of Narayan's book is this analysis of the gradual 'politicization of the bureaucracy' which over time transformed its caste and class composition alongside its commitment to the 'ideas of social justice' which was undoubtedly 'a major reason for the success of the programmes' (p.17). In a virtuous self-reinforcing cycle, public pressure for services enhanced the effectiveness of delivery of the administrative machinery, as well as generated the necessary political will to fulfill the expectations of a restive electorate.

In this broader context, Narayan outlines the various progressive reforms systematically implemented by different regimes in the Tamil Nadu political landscape. This includes the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005) (Vivek, 2015). He also briefly delves on the 'revolving door relationship' (Vaasanthi, 2006) between political parties, the Tamil film industry and the Dravidian movement epitomized in populist pro-poor programmes. But the most important dimension of the analysis, particularly for me with a keen interest in food policy, were the two case studies in the book. Chapters 4 and 5 break the momentum to analyse in-depth pioneering initiatives to provide nutritious food to children.

In 1956, K. Kamaraj, as the chief minister introduced Mid-Day Meals (MDM) for the first time in India, prepared in central kitchens and delivered on bicycles. However the universal expansion of nutritious school meals in 1982 was the 'brainchild of MGR' born of his own childhood of 'extreme starvation at an age when I knew only to cry when I was hungry' (p.81). This insight draws attention to affect triggers which are often more powerful propellers for real-world policy change than the technocratic fad for 'evidence-based' research which often ignore the power of experiential insights to build commitment to improving lived realities (Drèze, 2002). The book also includes interesting asides on the typical behind-the-scenes negotiations for policy change. Interestingly, despite initial policy evaluations being unable to quantify the nutritional benefits, the programme found greater acceptability only two decades later (Vishwanath, 2006), especially after a successful Supreme Court Public Interest Litigation (PIL) ensured that universal school meals were expanded nationwide. Thereafter, numerous research studies have recognised its manifold benefits (Khera, 2006) to increase school enrolment and retention especially of girls and marginalised communities, reduce drop-out and malnutrition along with providing employment for women as cooks and increase demand for farm, dairy and poultry produce.

The second case study in Chapter 5 on the Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Programme (TINP) which was later merged with the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) is equally interesting. In the 1980s, 9000 Community Nutrition Centres (CNCs) were opened to serve half the rural population of the state. The focus was solely on growth monitoring, nutrition education, and supplementary nutrition targeted at pregnant and lactating women and children under three. Rather than a solely drop-in centre model, the emphasis was on home visits for outreach to at-risk families.

By the turn of the millennium, Tamil Nadu's outlay on nutrition alone was more than all the other states cumulatively. In MDM, TINP and ICDS alone more than 200,000 workers, mostly women, were also employed. Further, with the strategy of capitalising on interlocking synergies, schools in Tamil Nadu also include health programmes. In addition, to ensure optimisation, pensioners and pregnant women are also encouraged to eat meals with pre-schoolers.

Chapters 6 to 8 again revert to a chronological timescale to analyse the welfare politics of the former film actor and chief minister J. Jayalalitha (1991-1996) and her political rival, former film writer, M. Karunanidhi (1996-2006) during his premiership, followed by the decade (2006-2016) of competitive electoral freebies.

Narayan also mines memories from his own education for insights into the shift in Dravidian politics and tenor of social reform policies. However, some of the pronouncements seem overly sweeping. For example, the author claims that unlike Tamil Nadu, 'in other states of India, there is no evidence of a distinct social ideology driving development during this period', (p.11) which discounts the analogous development trajectories of West Bengal (and Kerala whose ascendancy began a century earlier) which made socio-political strides with a left-wing government in power for thirty-four years (1977 to 2011). Also, as Narayan himself admits, the sustainability of some of the competitive social policies in Tamil Nadu have been hampered by ballooning salary expenditure, corruption and gargantuan outlays for electoral freebies. Further the book also does not delve into structural issues of violence, geographical segregation and constrained access to public services of dalits in rural Tamil Nadu.

Nevertheless, analysis such as these are invaluable as they combine rich socio-cultural and political-economy insights to depict the evolution of distinct development trajectories of pioneering states, which have built a lasting legacy in re-negotiating caste hegemonies, shaped by historical inflection points to renegotiate political settlements and social contracts to build a robust edifice for universal social policies.

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