

Book Review

Narayan, S. 2019. *Dravidian Years: Politics and Welfare in Tamil Nadu*. Oxford University Publications, New Delhi.

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S. Narayan's book "Dravidian Years: Politics and Welfare in Tamil Nadu" is a welcome addition to the ever-burgeoning literature on Tamil Nadu's successful populist and welfare measures. It tries to answer the ubiquitous question: How have welfare policies been successfully implemented despite rampant political corruption? The book, written by a civil servant turned researcher, provides fresh information, anecdotes and analysis of the state's trajectory of health and nutrition administration. Providing an insider perspective, it throws light on the various factors such as political ideology, lower caste mobilisation, centre-state relations, messianic populism and electoral compulsions in shaping the state and society as it stands today.

The book is presented in nine chapters covering TN politics, from the rise of DMK as a political party to contemporary times. The author has thematically dealt with the Dravidian political time into the Early DMK Period, MGR Period and later Karunanidhi-Jayalalitha Period. He observes that the turn towards welfare was initiated by the early DMK government which built upon the infrastructural and administrative foundations of the colonial and Kamaraj periods. The response of DMK in opposition to the food crisis of 1964 and the backward classes movement spearheaded by the party will shape its policies when in power. Once in power by 1967, DMK will implement several reforms such as reservations in recruitment to public office, expansion of the public distribution system, tenancy, the appointment of village officers in revenue administration at the lowest level and institutional capture of agri-cooperatives. The author notes that the Madras bureaucracy, which was known for efficiency, also adjusted to these reforms, actively aided by the change in the social background of the new officers.

The lion's share of the discussion in the book revolves around two programmes that redefined the welfare policies in the state and will become an international model – The Noon Meal Programme (NMP) and Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Programme (TINP). These chapters bring out the various negotiations the political class and the administration engaged with each other and the centre in successfully implementing these programmes. Post-emergency, the DMK lost its power to its splinter, MGR's ADMK, following accusations of corruption and growing discontentment among the poorer sections of the non-brahmin masses. While MGR will face initial setbacks due to his attempts to alter socio-economic reservations and end prohibition, he will venture on to introduce major programmes aimed at ameliorating women and child health and promoting literacy rates.

The flagship Noon Meal programme was designed to provide noon food to children and thereby retain them in schools. The book reveals that the decision to implement the scheme was unilaterally taken by MGR, with none of its technical details being supported by any research or recommendations. The NMP and TINP will go on to

boost the human development indices of the state in terms of maternal and child health. These schemes also created lakhs of local social welfare workers, creating vote banks for the ruling party, stakeholders for the programme and accountability to the local community. Interestingly, the book brings out fascinating backdoor discussions that occurred between political bosses in realising these programmes. Two such meetings of MGR, one with Indira Gandhi and another with Manmohan Singh, reveal not only the individual interests of MGR, the politician, but also the role of geopolitics. Apart from these programmes, the book also throws light on several other commendable commercial initiatives, such as the establishment of the Tamil Nadu Papers and Newsprints Limited and the Tamil Nadu Medical Supplies Corporation. While the Newsprints became a highly successful public sector entity, the TNMSC along with the sturdy medical infrastructure, ensured a patient spends only one-tenth for medical treatment compared to UP or Bihar.

The author notes a crucial shift in Tamil politics when the ideological orientation of welfare gets replaced by freebies with neoliberal reforms and the rise of Jayalalitha. These chapters have only broadly covered the events in this period, making them appear thin. Written by a career bureaucrat who has turned to research, the book shows limitations with respect to establishing an interrelation between nutritional development and other developmental parameters. A more elaborate discussion on the role of various political actors and influences on the budgetary allocations and implementation of the schemes is found wanting. More importantly, the role of popular mobilisation and the pressure from below though acknowledged is not adequately explained.

The work is a welcome addition to the debates on the ‘Periyar Hypothesis’, a term coined by Sarah Hodges (Hodges, 2008) to denote the academically ubiquitous tendency to ascribe the exceptional developmental indices of Tamil Nadu to the Self Respect Movement led by EVR Periyar. The author argues that the decisive impact on the democratic trajectory of the state was affected by the Dravidian Movement, especially DMK. However, the book establishes the quintessential role of MGR’s personal dispositions towards the poor in addition to political compulsions as the quintessential factors in launching the most important programmes of social welfare in the State. He also suggests endurance of the cultural effect of the Dravidian self-respect movement, a socio-political movement. One must remember that MGR’s political victory over DMK is partly a legacy and partly a counter-movement to DMK’s politics and the ideology of the Self Respect Movement. It was only after facing popular backlash to his attempts to introduce a creamy layer to backward classes reservation and reservation for weaker sections in upper castes did MGR resort to such comprehensive popular welfare measures.

On the one hand, it would be interesting to juxtapose the arguments in the book with the “Dravidian Movement as left populism” thesis put forward by A. Kalaiyaran and M. Vijayabaskar in their book “Dravidian Model” (Kalaiyaran & Vijayabaskar, 2021). They argue that the Dravidian Movement has impacted and shaped the overall policy framework of the peculiar developmental trajectory of Tamil Nadu right from its inception by collecting multiple oppressed and marginal sections in a flexible umbrella alliance. Thus most of the developmental measures taken even during the Pre-DMK period are ascribed to the forces of assertion, aspiration and entrepreneurialism thrown open by the Dravidian movement. This line of argument would also minimise the individual role of charismatic leaders, including MGR to one

as a political response to a much diffuse but concrete popular assertion of backward classes against upper caste and North Indian social and economic domination. On the other hand, the role of MGR in improving women and child health in the State, as the book presents, stands as a corrective to the ascription of MGR's mass appeal among women majorly to his charisma, as argued by the historian MSS Pandian in his book , *The Image Trap* (Pandian, 1992). The book is a very valuable and timely exposition of the role of various socio-political factors, including ideology, committed bureaucracy and individual charismatic leaders, in shaping the Dravidian developmental model.

Reference

- Hodges, S. (2008). *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce: Birth Control in South India, 1920-1940*. Routledge Publications.
- Kalaiyaran, A. & Vijayabaskar, M. (2021). *Dravidian Model: Interpreting the Political Economy of Tamil Nadu*. Cambridge University Press.
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