

Divisive Politics in Tamizh Nadu

K.R. Shyam Sundar*

While the Dravidian movement is surely a necessary counter to historical and even contemporary oppressive politics played by Brahmins and other upper castes, their militant politics and intellectually untenable propositions prove to be counter-productive.

*** XLRI, Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur. Email: krshyams@gmail.com**

Vairamuthu one of the celebrated poets of modern times in Tamizh cine industry has wittingly (I should say) kicked up (surely he did) an unsavoury storm in Tamizh Nadu by calling Sri Andal as a devadasi. Coming as it does during the sacred month of Marghazhi when millions worship Sri Andal and Lord Vishnu, this is stirring the hornet's nest by Vairamuthu. Tamizh Nadu is not unused to these controversies. The rise of Dravidian movement since the early 1920s has systematically and understandably aggressively hit out at upper casteism in general and Brahmanism in particular and the so-called Aryanism.

Economics, religion, politics and social aspects dictated Dravidian ideological framework and the typical pattern was to hit at two sections, viz. Brahmins and Aryans. The Dravidian movement is basically an identity politics and built on Dravidian (read Tamizh) Pride (because Dravidianism is not equal to Southernism in India) on the one hand and utter hatred towards upper castes and Brahmins on the other. While this has to be seen as an important counter to historical and contemporary partisan social outlook and politics of exclusion, it is important to understand the complex nature of this politics.

Tamizh was glorified (even though Periyar called it as a barbarian language) and was purged of external (mainly Sanskrit) influences (a typical identity assertion). Tamizh became poorer to that extent in one sense and richer in another sense as institutional and cultural support was given to enriching Tamizh. Languages like English have retained foreign words and become richer while the Tamizh pride sees them as pollutions and a reminder of cultural dominance and social inequities and even impositions. In fact, the butt of current controversy, the Alvars, contributed significantly to the enrichment of Tamizh by composing their hymns (the Dravidian Veda, *Nalayira Divya Prabhandam*, a collation of compositions of Alvars) mostly in Tamizh.

The Dravidian movement's anti-North gained popularity as it had wider social legitimacy. The Dravidian movement was characterised by internal contradictions as was the "other segment". Periyar envisioned social movement and fought shy of political power while Annadurai and others dreamt of the latter and pursued it successfully even if it meant political splintering of Dravidian movement. Periyar's aggressive and even rude politics achieved several worthwhile social goals such as social justice, women empowerment, etc. even though his rude politics (such as garlanding Lord Rama's idol with slippers) earned him social wrath. Dravidian movement quietly consigned to historical dustbin of separatist demand which indicated its compromising pragmatic politics.

Again, they target soft realm such as Brahmins (who lack[ed] physical and institutional muscles literally) and Hindus. The oft repeated taunt (and even in the current controversy) is that Dravidian leaders dare not attack “hard” religions or realms like Islamic or Christian institutions and their practices. The Dravidian leaders rejoice even legitimise their participation in religious festivals and practices of “other religions” as being reflective of their universality and secularist outlook. In a sense, this taunt betrays a subtle social psychological trait which can have universal implications. In a sense, this derision transcends this controversy; it is universal and it can be applied to all divisive politics.

In a deep moral sense, one should be happy that aggression is only towards a particular segment and not others. Searching for social equity in violence is a reflection of serious moral deprivation from the demand side and politics of exclusion on the supply side. It is not reflective of pragmatism but indefensible lack of character. It is at once the expression of frustration that they are not inherently militant and hegemonical as others are and a reflection of a desire to have the “bad people” being bashed up by militants elsewhere. Or in a sense as we note below it is the beginning of identity assertion by a visible hand rather than sulking.

The ironies inherent in politics in Tamizh Nadu is that people of different even radically poised ideological or social or religious identities can move in and move out of this package thanks to internal contradictions. Glorification of Tamizh appealed to the imagination of all irrespective of other divisions as much as anti-Hindi or anti-North (read Aryans) agenda. People were all gripped by fear that nationalisation of Hindi would deprive non-Hindi speaking people resources, jobs, even awards in arts (read cinema) and the apprehension is immanent in social, political and economic spheres. But over time, these hard politics withered away thanks to dynamics of economic compulsions such as the need to have competitive human resource endowments including Hindi knowledge though Tamizh language pride is immanent even now. None can excel like people of Tamizh Nadu in fierce primordial politics. Federal politics of empowering states is a demonstration of this deeply embedded feeling.

If the Dravidian movement is characterised by contradictions, the other side is not pure either. There are deep and serious divisions within Hinduism and Brahmanism which have fanned partisan social/religious practices. There are divisions within Iyengar (read Vaishnavism) and these divisions based on some fine philosophical distinctions have often led to absurd conflicts – say for example, whether the temple elephant in Kanchi Sri Varadarajan temple should bear Thenkalai or Vadakali mark on its forehead? Divisions within Iyers (Sruta-Smartha) exist. Serious social conflicts have emerged in inter caste marriages (forget inter-religion).

But this conflict has shown some interesting social and political angles. Historically, withdrawal mode amongst Brahmins was prominent and leaving the sinners (according to their belief system) to be punished by the Lord (“Go yards away from a Dushtan” attitude). But in the recent past, there has been an increasing sense of assertion by Brahmins in particular and Hindus in general in the country to tear away from the shells of individualism and intensify social counters and flex their muscles. Further, as conflict theorists have observed any conflict and aggression leads to consolidation of forces within a social realm even if fragmented within. Vairamuthu and others are unwittingly contributing to social consolidation.

Secondly, if Vairamuthu lowered his moral and intellectual status the counter attackers stooped to Vairamuthu's level by using worst possible abusive language. Thirdly, social

media and networks like whatsapp are being used to make gentle expressions of protest and identity assertion. For example, Sri Andal's portrait has become the DP of many. Fourthly, there is a revival of religious feeling and a new found sense of comfort in religious symbols which even leaders of Mutts could not have achieved but Vairamuthus has! People are reciting hymns of Sri Andal in the last few days and celebrating Hinduism in a mass and even hysterical manner. Vedic and religious scriptures scholars are being heard patiently as they serve powerful counter to the assaults to their identities inflicted by Vairamuthu. The most ironical part in society, like a ban on a book or a film reviving their fortunes, Vairamuthus are reviving the mobilisation of the very social institution that they seek to berate. Pressure group politics is becoming intensive along social lines. In India, history is a source of divisive politics.

Religion is a social institution and thrives on symbols, images, rules, and social markers. But there are finer aspects of religion which lie beyond the materialistic aspects of existence and those who practise it are a class apart. Faith systems and social institutions can be divisive. Mind is basically divisive. But spirituality and divinity are cohesive and a realm apart. In this sense, a large section of the population will not even pay credence to what Vairamuthus utter. How do his views alter Andal and the Lord? Even if she were in the least probabilistic sense was a Devadasi as imagined by Vairamuthu it is Lord's business to embrace her or not! We have enough instances in history to show that the Lord irrespective of Devotees' attributes has always embraced them. Indeed, social metrics lose relevance in the Divine Realm. She and the Lord reside in realms beyond human Frailties. While the Dravidian movement is surely a necessary counter to historical and even contemporary oppressive politics played by Brahmins and other upper castes, their militant politics and intellectually untenable propositions prove to be counter-productive. To be sure, they constitute the dynamics of social progress and moral sermonising from without is as dangerous as the foul practices by upper castes are. But the dynamics of movements will play out the way they should by making course corrections.

But Andal and the Lord remain in the personal domain of pure devotees and they cannot either be polluted by Vairamuthu and the army of atheists or be protected by counter movement. Sree Andal Thiruvadigale Saranam!