

# Policy and Practice of Social Justice in Tamil Nadu

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The unifying theme that animates the “foreword” and the 13 individual essays in *Rethinking Social Justice* are the quest for social justice, not only as a purely intellectual concern, but also as a genuine ideological praxis for marching towards progressive and sustainable social change. To “rethink” social justice, it is important to broadly define the concept of social justice in the first place; such a definition should also be capacious enough to accommodate the multiple interpretations that are likely to emerge and jostle for legitimacy. We proceed further in this review by adopting an operational definition of social justice that embeds the pursuit of socio-economic mobility within the context of a culturally heterogeneous society. The essays in this volume drive home the point that the interplay of social movements, political economy, and political ideology decides the pathways of social justice.

This review is divided into three sections. First, we discuss the problems associated with an elite-led quest for social justice. Then, by presenting Tamil Nadu (TN) as an illustrative case study, we outline the constructive possibilities in the realm of social justice when social engineering is undertaken through popular mobilisation that uses the state as an instrumentality of change. Finally, we engage with the need to rethink social justice in light of ever-changing socio-economic realities by identifying critical gaps in TN’s otherwise successful development model.

## Concepts of Social Justice

In prosaic terms, social justice is about democratising access to opportunities for economic empowerment and dignified living; ideally, this should lead to an equitable distribution of power in the society. In a heterogeneous but unequal society,

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rethinking Social Justice** edited by S Anandhi, Karthick Ram Manoharan, M Vijayabaskar and A Kalayarasan, with a foreword by Partha Chatterjee, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020, pp 368, ₹795 (paperback).

nothing short of comprehensive social engineering can produce that desired outcome. But who is going to be at the forefront of this social engineering project? Historically, it is the answer to this question that has determined the trajectory of social change in societies across the world. If dominant social groups arrogate themselves to a position where they claim to speak on behalf of the oppressed and marginalised people to an external oppressor, as was the case with the anti-colonial nationalism in colonial India, there are good reasons to suspect that their narrative will gloss over long-standing internal fault lines to achieve a purportedly larger goal.

Juxtaposing two contrasting perspectives on anti-colonial nationalism in a fascinating essay titled “An Ethic beyond Anti-colonialism: A Periyarist Engagement with Fanon,” Karthick Ram Manoharan makes the following assertion:

The meta-narrative of Indian anti-colonialism in general displayed a gross insensitivity to historical and sociopolitical questions of caste and region. (p 166)

He observes that Frantz Fanon treated anti-colonialism as a virtue in itself and viewed other social movements as useful and legitimate only insofar as those bolstered anti-colonialism. Manoharan’s principal critique of Fanon’s approach is that in foregrounding anti-colonialism as the overarching ethic, it refuses to recognise the persistence of social inequalities inherited from a society’s pre-colonial history and as a consequence views with suspicion the existence of

particularistic identities and pluralistic political groupings. Manoharan contrasts this “abstract universality of Fanon” with the “concrete particularity of Periyar” (“Periyar” E V Ramasamy was a towering 20th-century social reformer) who viewed colonialism as a passing phase in history and instead sought to vanquish indigenous social institutions such as caste which were more prejudicial to the attainment of self-respect.

Periyar, in addition to identifying caste and region as the principal axes of discrimination and exploitation, drew attention to the gender dimension of social injustice. Closely examining the possibilities and pitfalls of Muthulakshmi Reddy’s style of mobilising women to participate in the public sphere, S Anandhi’s essay “The Manifesto and the Modern Self: Reading the Autobiography of Muthulakshmi Reddy” sheds light on the divisions that can exist when there is the presence of an “elite” within a single subaltern group. The exclusionary aspect that informs Reddy’s privileging of the “educated” women as the eligible category for making a positive difference in society is captured by Anandhi’s incisive remark:

What is more, in recovering the educated women as an unswerving category not deflected by other identities, Reddy also denies space for the articulation of other subaltern identities. (p 26)

The chapter “Reflections on C N Annadurai and the Cultural Politics of the Dravidian Movement” by V Ravi Vaithees is probably the first exclusive critical engagement with the eloquent and persuasive C N Annadurai after Marguerite Ross Barnett’s engagement with him in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* published in 1976. In the same vein, the chapter “Lohia’s Immanent Critique of Caste and Religion” by Arun Kumar Patnaik problematises the compelling political offering of the hitherto understudied Ram Manohar Lohia, who is one of the key influencers of subaltern politics in North India.

The key takeaway from these chapters is that the vision of the privileged elite, even if argued to be modern and benevolent,

will invariably fall short of articulating a radically inclusive agenda for the upliftment of the downtrodden because of the absence of lived experiences and a consequent lack of empathy. So how does a society chart its own path towards achieving social justice?

### The Case of Tamil Nadu

Any society that aims to bring about positive social change can use politics and therefore the state as an instrumentality to effect social engineering in a way that alters the balance of power in a more progressive direction. However, we also have the well-renowned "public choice theory," which casts people's elected representatives as "selfish" individuals who look to maximise their personal gains by controlling the levers of state power. In this reading of the state, political elites have very little incentive to alter the status quo as long as it serves their interests; even if they attempt to shake up the extant socio-economic order to create an egalitarian society, such efforts are likely to end up in failure since they possess neither the requisite information nor the instruments to carry out large-scale social engineering exercises. Having said that, it would be useful to survey an example of social engineering that falsifies the conventional understanding of an activist state. One can turn to the experience of TN to find some useful cues for forging a relatively successful attempt to deliver broad-based social justice, driven largely by the backward classes, within a (quasi) federal politico-economic setting.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which assumed political office for the first time in 1967 in the state, was committed to the ideal of social justice. The result of thoughtfully designed affirmative action policies was that there was discernible change in the caste composition of TN's bureaucracy. In his book, *The Dravidian Years: Politics and Welfare in Tamil Nadu*, senior civil servant S Narayan (2018: 41) writes that

Data from the TN Public Service Commission indicates that, between 1960 and 1980, the caste composition of those entering into government service changes considerably, with substantially a greater proportion coming from the backward classes.

Recognising the strong link between the feudal socio-economic structures and accessibility to food in rural areas, Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation was established in 1972 to expand the public distribution system (PDS) through fair price shops to rural areas. This dealt a severe blow to the feudal rural order in TN. State provision of subsidised foodgrain, along with a well-connected public transport system, empowered and enabled landless agricultural workers slaving as attached farm labour to migrate to urban centres in search of decent, dignified, and economically rewarding jobs. The sustained bolstering and expansion of the PDS over many decades has had a definitive impact on poverty as the reach of subsidised foodgrain among the households in the lowest expenditure deciles in TN, according to the National Sample Survey Office data, is the highest in the country. Moreover, as is widely acknowledged today, providing midday meals for children in government-run schools was a pioneering effort that has become a widely acclaimed model emulated in many parts of the world.

It is worth noting that people are guided by a variety of "moral sentiments" and not by self-interest alone. In the case of TN, these moral sentiments have found expression in purposive public action by the politically savvy citizenry to demand effective delivery of essential services not as self-interested individuals but as a collective, to which officialdom has responded with a kind of social policy that ensures broad-based and equitable access. Recent scholarship on the provenance of progressive social policy and superior social development outcomes in TN meticulously documents the role of coherent subnational identity in fostering a solidaristic ethos, which gives birth to a politics of the common good (Srinivasan 2010; Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021).

The essays by A Kalaiyarasan ("Politics of Dravidian Populism: Understanding Developmental Outcomes in Tamil Nadu") and J Jeyaranjan ("Tenancy Reforms in Tamil Nadu: A Study from the Cauvery Delta Region") in the book elaborate on the efficacy of popular mobilisation from below by focusing on

welfarist interventions and tenancy reforms, respectively. Their essays cogently explain that people collectively demanded a variety of rights, goods, services, and welfare entitlements, and those were duly supplied by the state. Very briefly, what this means is that the honouring of the social contract by the state can equip its citizens to take advantage of the opportunities conferred by the market economy. The case of TN demonstrates that if done right, social engineering can bring about progressive social change in the society. The lives of the political leaders who conceived and implemented the aforementioned social policies were marked by years of activism seeking to change the system. Their subaltern backgrounds added the much-important element of pragmatism in policymaking, which made the change they brought about steady and incremental.

### Policy Responses to Social Injustices

The need to rethink social justice could be warranted by its shifting contours as well. Policy responses to social injustices could be both contingent and farsighted in nature, but it needs to adapt to the mutating socio-economic reality as well. For instance, remedying the inequality in landholdings in the countryside through radical redistribution of land can be an assault on crushing social bondage and long-standing economic dependence. It can also pave the way for industrialisation-led rural to urban migration in search of better-paying jobs, raising productivity across the economy. But such a society undergoing transformation faces a different set of challenges that cannot be addressed by land reform or provision of subsidised foodgrain alone. If the industrial sector is internally differentiated due to the presence of small, medium, and large players, then creating safety nets for the smaller players and industrial workers during economic downturns becomes an important part of the social justice agenda. The impressive strides in social and economic development notwithstanding, there are serious political economy issues in TN in the domains of urban spatiality and labour mobility.

Two essays in the book lay out the complex nature of these issues in an attempt to come to terms with the fresh set of challenges on the social justice plane in a rapidly modernising society exposing itself to the forces of globalisation.

In a telling exposition of the neo-liberal logic of exclusion, A Srivathsan and M S S Pandian offer us an analytical framework to understand the remaking and rebranding of Chennai as a "global city" in the 21st century in their essay, "Re-envisioning a City: Chennai as Exhibition/Museum/Backyard." Such a task entails the creation of exclusive zones and enclaves for the elite sections to inhabit, while erasing structures, both aesthetic and material, that do not qualify as "modern".

The new vision for Chennai was built on the premise that a break from the city is necessary to advocate for the exceptional. And unlike the existing city, which is a proliferation of hybrids, the exceptional spaces had to be free of heterogeneity. Within the framework, the existing spaces within the city cannot qualify as the exceptional. (p 189)

Rolling out information technology corridors, allowing the proliferation of gated communities, attempting to demolish heritage sites that do not possess exchange value, converting marshlands and beachfronts into commercial spaces, reclassifying land use and permitting construction of commercial and residential buildings on river bodies are among the measures taken by governments over the last 25 years as part of their concerted effort to make Chennai an attractive investment destination. It is worth reminding ourselves that environmental and spatial justice are very much part of social justice and important to resist the temptation to turn people, nature, and culture into income-generating assets in the quest to create a brand identity for our cities.

When urban spaces are redesigned with the purpose of attracting investments, capital gains an upper hand over labour because of the obvious asymmetry in their relative spatial mobility. The last four decades have witnessed a steady decline in the bargaining power of workers across the world, thanks to the hegemonic

rise of footloose capital, which wields the threat of "exit" to extract explicit and implicit concessions from the state. This has resulted in increasing contractualisation and casualisation of the workforce, which has to make do without guaranteed job security and social security. This trend is visible in TN as well. From M Vijayabaskar's highly informative and insightful essay "Emerging Labour Regimes and Mobilities" emerge two pointed inferences: (i) spatial mobility in the form of rural to urban migration need not necessarily translate into economic mobility as evidenced by the increasing casualisation of the workforce, and (ii) the limited spatial and occupational mobility that exists has been possible because of the safety nets provided by successive governments in the state over the years. His essay meditates on the intersection of the state-citizen, capital-labour and state-capital relationships, and concludes by posing a critical question—"how do we envisage a politics of social justice that recognises the legitimacy of such aspirations of mobility in an increasingly unequal economy?" (p 227).

### In Conclusion

Since TN can be counted among the handful of states in India that approximate a social-democratic model of governance combining a high rate of economic growth and impressive social development

through effective redistribution, one can surmise that it is well within the capacity of the state to remedy the precarity of workers not only by expanding existing safety nets but also by institutionalising their rights.

In conclusion, the essays in *Rethinking Social Justice* not only critically evaluate the many dimensions of social justice, but also pose an important question: How can social policy be harnessed to regulate the excesses of the market and the concomitant resurgence and furthering of the latent social prejudices in a society's journey towards social justice?

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