

Private success, public failure

Despite The State:

Why India Lets its People Down and How they Cope

By M. Rajshekar

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Award-winning financial journalist M Rajshekar's book *Despite The State: Why India Lets Its People Down And How They Cope* is a critical enquiry into why representative government in India is flagging. His reportage is complemented by a thoughtful Afterword by the Chennai-based feminist and historian, V Geetha, which not only a succinct summation but also an unexpected critique of Rajshekar's work.

Books critical of Indian democracy have appeared in the past. Three which come to mind are: Ronald Segal's *The Crisis of India* (1965), David Selbourne's *An Eye to India — The Unmasking of a Tyranny* (1977) and KS Komireddi's more recent *Malevolent Republic — A Short History of the New India* (2019). Rajshekar's book is different.

His is not a grand narrative of Indian democracy in decline. Rather, it is an attempt at finding out how the actions of the State "have left most Indians trapped in poorly realised lives". He does this by taking a deep look at six Indian states broadly representative of the country — Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. In an annexure, Rajshekar also briefly comments on Manipur. Unsurprisingly, in all these states, Rajshekar finds that "their governments had failed to deliver health, education and justice". He remarks:

In state after state, I started to see political parties not as emissaries of regional, religious or caste-class interests, but as self-interested institutions that sourced electoral power from their constituencies. In state after state, political parties seemed to share four traits: they were extractive, dominant, centralized and clientelist.

Rajshekar's book cites several examples of people being forced to live miserable lives, putting up with run down hospitals, poor schools and enduring diseases that many of us would have hardly heard of. Reiterating the title of the book, Rajshekar writes, "most Indians live despite the state as opposed to flourishing under it."

While political corruption enriches political parties and politicians, the price people, and the states they belong to pay is enormous and long-lasting in human, financial and environmental terms. Rajshekar's book brings out in some detail how this self-serving political class benefits by conniving with unscrupulous business interests. These range from Public Works Department (PWD) contractors in Mizoram to private mining companies exporting iron ore from Orissa and others carrying out large-scale extraction of sand from river beds in Tamil Nadu, causing a dramatic reduction in groundwater, severely affecting agriculture in the state's traditionally fertile areas.

Corruption takes many forms in India. In Bihar politicians help themselves to the considerable developmental funds the state receives from the Government of India. In Punjab one political family headed by Prakash Singh Badal as chief minister for a decade, controlled the lucrative liquor trade as well as the cable television, luxury bus and stone crushing businesses. It even dominated major religious bodies like the Akal Takht and the Shiromani

Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee.

In Gujarat, Rajshekar sees state support for big business to the detriment of smaller ones. In this regard, the growth of Adani's business empire under Modi's watch as chief minister is noteworthy. The politicisation of the venerable Amul milk cooperative by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its questionable business decisions that followed, such as purchasing 8700 tonnes of cheddar from a firm in

Manipur bordering the rich narcotic lands in Myanmar.

In his short note on Manipur, Rajshekar highlights the corrosive impact of a state suffering from a decades-old insurgency which has now morphed into an extortion racket in connivance with local politicians. What makes the situation so fraught is the Indian Army, protected by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, operating with impunity in the state.

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Tamil Nadu despite having a cheese-making plant nearby, are well exposed by Rajshekar. So also, the decline — deliberately induced, it would appear — of the groundnut oil industry that contributed to India becoming a net importer of edible oils constituting the second-most expensive item on our import list.

His essay on Mizoram, and shorter note on Manipur, flags how the Government of India neglects our strategically important north-eastern states. The irregular and sometimes whimsical manner in which the central government funds Mizoram is a case in point. This has, Rajshekar explains, stalled a programme to wean Mizos away from the traditional slash and burn cultivation (*jhum*) through the New Use Land Policy (NULP). Delayed funding has also resulted in frequent late disbursement of salaries to forest staff guarding one of our country's most vulnerable tropical forests. It has also hit an ambitious and successful programme to contain HIV and drug addiction in Mizoram and

Rajshekar's book is an excellent introduction to the governance challenges faced by Indian states, and even more so for its attention on the otherwise neglected Northeast. All this makes his work an ideal textbook for any public policy programme. However, it has a few shortcomings that need highlighting.

Rajshekar's impression that "India's founders saw state governments as one check against an overweening centre" needs corrective scrutiny. The Indian Constitution envisages a strong centre to avert what Jawaharlal Nehru feared most — fissiparous tendencies that will break India. If India's states have acquired some semblance of federalism, it was after the Emergency in 1977, when regional and linguistic pride and support from the Supreme Court have made them more assertive.

We also need to take a more objective view of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India than Rajshekar does. While we have to be constantly alert to a creeping "Talibanisation" of Hinduism, it does us little good to exaggerate its scope or

reach. We can take heart from the fact that even formerly anti-Muslim parties like the Shiv Sena are now singing to a different and more secular beat. The recent West Bengal Assembly election has shown that secularism still holds a substantial appeal in one of India's largest states. Major parts of the country remain ambivalent to Hindutva. The struggle against Hindu fundamentalism is being pursued mostly by Hindus. This is no country on its way to becoming a fundamentalist state.

In his famous 1882 lecture, "What is a Nation", delivered at the Sorbonne, the French historian Ernest Renan observed:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which in truth are but one constitutes this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.

India is a young country and it takes time to coalesce as a nation as Renan defined it.

India today is wealthier, far better educated and industrialised than it was even 25 years back. It produces more than enough to feed itself, something unthinkable just 60 years ago. Indian space probes have gone around the moon and reached Mars and the country even has a presence in Antarctica. India also enjoys a demographic dividend which is a long way from tapering off. Contrary to all that is said, the country is better equipped today with money and technology to get this dividend to work to its advantage.

These capacities have accrued over years and it took a perceptive writer like VS Naipal to notice it. In his 1990 book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* he observed:

Many thousands of people have worked ... without any sense of a personal drama, many millions; it had added up in the 40 years since independence to an immense national effort. The results of that effort were now noticeable. What looked sudden had been long prepared. The increased wealth showed the new confidence of people once poor showed.

Who in 1947, standing on the ruins of Empire and in the smouldering wreck of Partition would have guessed any of this would come to pass? Bleak as things look as the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the country, the long-term prognosis for India is good. The country, like the United States, is in the midst of a messy transformation and not an implosion.

In an interview to *Firstpost* (26 September 2012) Gurcharan Das, author of *India Groves by Night — A Liberal Case for A Strong India*, said:

The basic idea is that India has risen from below... And because our success is from below, it is more heroic and also more enduring. But ... we should reform our institutions of the state, so that they contribute much more to the growth of the country. We cannot have a story of private success and public failure in India.

Reading Rajshekar tells us why that is the story. ■

Stalwart of Dravidian politics

Karunanidhi: A Life

By A. S. Panneerselvan

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BHARAT BHUSHAN



Muthuvel Karunanidhi, prolific writer, poet and masterly communicator, was five times chief minister of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He never lost an election. His life and achievements mirrored the growth of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu — he was at its forefront along with Periyar EV Ramasamy Naicker and CN Annadurai and led it for the longest time. The 14-year-old school dropout who jumped into politics might have never imagined that he would go on to shape state and national politics over eight decades.

The biography of this extraordinarily versatile statesman by AS Panneerselvan, eminent journalist, and currently *The Hindu* newspaper's Readers' Editor, is a fascinating read. It is both the story of Karunanidhi's lifelong struggles as well as a riveting history of the Dravidian Self-Respect and Language movements. Indeed, it is the story of the emergence of modern Tamil Nadu. The book is essential reading for the understanding of social justice, caste oppression and the importance of linguistic and cultural identities in India. It also explains the post-Independence evolution of Indian federalism due to the development of strong regional political parties.

Straddling the worlds of literature, cinema and politics with ease, the book offers deep insights into how Karunanidhi pressed art into the service of revolutionary social and political transformation. A message was embedded in the scripts he wrote for plays and songs and over 70 films, preparing Tamil society for his party's social justice agenda. His film scripts and dialogues transformed Tamil film actors into larger-than-life stars and messengers of social change. Karunanidhi argued that art and literature needed a purpose, saying: "The distracting act of trying to insulate art from the gruelling reality is akin to unleashing untold violence on the creative urge of a society."

Panneerselvan traces Karunanidhi's politicisation as a teenager through exposure to the literature of the Self-Respect movement led by Periyar and Annadurai and how he later bloomed into a scriptwriter of films with latent political messaging. He came of age as a political activist by choosing Annadurai's path over Periyar's. Periyar saw the transfer of power from British colonialists to upper-caste Hindus as a mere change in the oppressor, while Annadurai "was convinced that decolonisation was the first step towards fighting the hegemony of the upper castes". Karunanidhi chose the politics of making incremental gains

through reconciliation advocated by Annadurai over the confrontational politics of Periyar. On the language issue, too, Annadurai was his mentor, for as Panneerselvan points out, "for Periyar, language was an instrument for communication, nothing more; for Annadurai, language was an organic, sociocultural oeuvre that lends a distinct identity and a sense of pride and belonging to the people."

Karunanidhi also learnt from Annadurai to see broad political coalitions not as a compromise but as "recognition of the plural tradition of the subcontinent". Initially, alliance formation by the DMK did not lead to government formation in the 1962

land-redistribution to the landless, empowering tenants and agricultural labourers, making Tamil Nadu an industrial hub and reducing the rural-urban gap. He laid the foundation for industrial development through the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation and the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu between 1969 and 1971. The industrial estates and land banks created by them made the state investment-ready when the Indian economy was liberalised two decades later.

Successive governments in Tamil Nadu built on these foundations. MGR who formed his own party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

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Madras state assembly elections. However, the strategy paid much better dividends in 1967 when the DMK became the only Opposition party to win a majority on its own in a state despite contesting the election in a coalition. The Congress lost in nine states to Samyukta Vidhayak Dal coalitions of the Opposition but no single opposition party could perform as well as the DMK. Compromise for staying relevant in politics was also demonstrated by the dropping of the demand for Dravida Nadu, in the wake of the 16th Constitution Amendment Bill, commonly referred to as the 'Anti-secession Bill'.

Karunanidhi's major contribution to Tamil Nadu was the new development paradigm he ushered in after he became chief minister following Anna's demise in February 1969. Anna had promised subsidised food — three measures (about 4.5 kg) of rice for a rupee. Under Karunanidhi, not only did provisioning for the underprivileged increase, but so did poverty eradication by addressing rural distress, introducing free education, initiating land reforms and

(AIADMK) and defeated the DMK in 1977, started the revolutionary free mid-day meal scheme, permitted private engineering colleges and increased reservation for Backward Classes to 50% (in addition to 18% for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). Karunanidhi increased the ST quota by 1% when he came to power again in 1989, taking reservations in Tamil Nadu to 69%.

Jayalalitha in her last years also advanced the programme of a welfare state with her 'gifts' of mixer-grinders to women to reduce working hours in the kitchen, milch-cattle, and improving the public distribution system. "This facet of the Dravidian Movement and Dravidian parties, as a promoter of development, is often buried under the charges made against them of corruption, nepotism and linguistic chauvinism," Panneerselvan notes.

Karunanidhi's influence on national politics was significant. His emphasis on decentralisation received a push with the formation of the National Front. Apart from securing linguistic rights, he hoped checking centralising

forces would hasten social justice for economically backward classes of India, that is the promise of the Mandal Commission. Panneerselvan notes that Karunanidhi "was convinced that the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations delay-ed the ascendance of the Hindu Right by two decades".

While DMK support for governments led by HD Devegowda and IK Gujral was understandable, its alliance as a secular, rationalist party with the blatantly communal Bharatiya Janata Party, even after the Godhra carnage, was criticised. His support for Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government seems however to have been a simple trade-off — offering support at the Centre to protect his government and later, survival of his politics in the state. He told his biographer: "There are moments when you need to wield the sword and there are moments when you need to defend yourself with the shield. I have done both and don't see any contradiction here. You need to be alive to wage the war for social justice." Later, perhaps by the same logic, Karunanidhi supported the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) put together by Sonia Gandhi in 2004 and two years later successfully swept the state assembly election in an alliance with the Congress. He seemed to be following the long-term dictum of the party: "Collective rule at the Centre and self-rule in the state."

On the Tamil question in Sri Lanka, Panneerselvan has an interesting explanation for Karunanidhi's position that is criticised by friends and foes alike. To Karunanidhi, the armed rebellion of Sri Lankan Tamils and demand for Eelam or separate state was a maximalist position: "He did not see the maximalist position as the destination, but as a hard bargaining tool, to ensure that there was no erosion in areas that fell under the minimum common position, and this included language rights, land rights and reasonable autonomy."

Panneerselvan recalls Karunanidhi reflecting at the denouement of the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka and telling him:

Sri Lankan Tamils have paid a huge price. It disturbs me both emotionally and intellectually when I read Jaffna scholar, AJ Canagaratna's observation: 'The sad fate that the search for a homeland has rendered many of my people homeless is more poignant than any torture and killing.' My concern is to address this question.

Panneerselvan does not shy away from analysing the blemishes that came to mark Karunanidhi's sunset years. He points out how nepotism, the over-ambitiousness and the non-performance of his ministers and also his kin in Parliament led to the erosion of his reputation. Indeed, these developments coupled with the corruption charges against DMK ministers in the Manmohan Singh government and their eventual imprisonment, heaped ignominy on him and took a huge toll on his public standing. Panneerselvan has aptly titled the chapter discussing these developments of Karunanidhi's latter years "From Henry V to King Lear".

In the end, this is not a "straight-forward story", as the author modestly claims, but a complex, multi-faceted and scholarly historical study of an unusual statesman who both shaped and was shaped by tumultuous developments in Tamil Nadu and India. ■