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Muthuvel Karunanidhi:

The Passing of the People's Leader

Though the leader of a regional party, Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was a towering figure in national politics in India. His support for the poor and the disadvantaged classes, his ability to turn ideology into policy, and his capacity to make friends across parties were unparalleled. Karunanidhi will be sorely missed on India's regional and national scenes.

S Narayan¹

The President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, and the Vice-President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, visited him in hospital in his last days. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, as well as the leader of the oldest national party, the Congress, Rahul Gandhi, came for his funeral. Leaders of all regional political parties, each with a massive state following, were there at the hospital or at the final rites. The two houses of parliament, of which he was never a member during a political career that started at the age of 14, adjourned for a day in memory of Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. He had never been defeated in the state assembly elections and won his seat continuously from the time he stood for elections in 1957.

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All the big names of the Tamil movie industry were there – actors, directors and producers, script writers and lyricists. The visitors included all the leading names in Tamil literature, as well as key Tamil scholars and poets.

And then there were his followers. There were large crowds outside the hospital for the entire time Karunanidhi was there. When his cortege moved from the hospital to his house in Gopalapuram – a journey of 12 to 15 minutes – the crowds surrounding the ambulance slowed the movement and the travel time took two and a half hours. Many in the crowd were in their twenties – he was last Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu between 2006 and 2011 when these youngsters would have been in secondary school. He was the Chief Minister of the state for 16 years on five separate occasions. Even during a long period between 1976 and 1987 when he was in the opposition, Karunanidhi kept his cadre together. They loved him and his Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) followers stood by his party and him at every turn of politics in India.

The crowds at Karunanidhi's funeral were unprecedented. They were much larger than those for Jayalalithaa, his political adversary, who had passed away in 2016, and larger than any other that the Tamil Nadu state has seen in the last 50 years since the Dravidian parties have ruled the state.

This was a person whose humble beginnings in a small village in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu would have normally assigned him to the family's traditional occupation of playing the pipes at temple festivals. Karunanidhi's ideas and ideology pulled him out of this and on to the national stage in politics and the academic stage in literature and writings.

There was a fire in Karunanidhi even at the age of 10 that rebelled against the inequities of the caste-based systems that prevailed around him. He was frustrated that the Brahmins, who formed only a small minority of the population, had a status and influence in public affairs that was far in excess of their numbers. Karunanidhi was drawn early to the Self Respect Movement of E V Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar) whose demand for social justice included opportunities for all communities in education, employment and in government.

Karunanidhi's mentor, C N Annadurai, and he broke away from Periyar to form their political party, the DMK (organisation for the development of the Dravidians). When the

party swept the polls for the first time in 1967, Annadurai and, after him, Karunanidhi, set out to implement the ideological goals they had set for themselves. During his first tenure as Chief Minister between 1967 and 1976, changes in institutions and administration ensured that opportunities were created for the poor and the backward. The social welfare schemes Karunanidhi initiated reached out to the poor, the disadvantaged, the elderly and the handicapped. Most of these programmes are still effectively in place even today. Most importantly, he provided social mobility for the poor through opportunities in education and employment in the government. A large percentage of today's youth in Tamil Nadu are first generation graduates and their climb up into the middle class status owes in no small measure to the opportunities provided by Karunanidhi during his stewardship of the state. He provided for reservations in education and employment far in excess of those available in other states and, thus, helped the backward classes with opportunities they could not have dreamt of. He did not neglect industry and technology and was among the first to recognise opportunities created by information technology (IT), laying the foundation for Chennai and Tamil Nadu to become one of the key IT hubs in the country.

Karunanidhi was passionate about Tamil. He wrote every morning in the party daily, *Murasoli*, to his followers on issues of politics and Tamil literature. Though his formal education was limited to 10 years of schooling, he was an authority on Tamil history, literature and poetry and used to love dialogues with experts in the field. He scripted a large number of screenplays for movies, some of which became huge box office hits. The state had been neglected from a lack of central programmes and assistance, and he restored the pride of the state in development and, most importantly, created an identity for being a Tamil. Karunanidhi's cadres loved him.

In politics, Karunanidhi was a pragmatist. He realised that, as a regional party, his relevance would be in making alliances with national and regional parties. He isolated the Congress in Tamil Nadu and made that party irrelevant there. A strong believer in liberal democracy, he opposed then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's emergency of 1975 and paid the price of having his government dismissed. He aligned with the opposition and the Congress alike, and saw to it that his party and he were always relevant on the national scene. The regional leaders, who were younger than him, looked to him for advice. He could foresee the interclass conflicts that could arise in other states like Uttar Pradesh and the Hindi belt, and welcomed the Mandal commission recommendations in the 1990s that would open up

opportunities for the backward classes. He foresaw class conflicts and managed them, and was unhappy that the other regional leaders could not do the same. The Patel, the Jat and the Maratha agitations pained him, for he had found solutions for similar conflicts in his own state and did not understand why others could not. The regional leaders held him in awe and respect.

Karunanidhi had his faults as well as his detractors. His support for the Sri Lankan Tamil cause arose out of his love for a Tamil identity, and he did not foresee the war and suffering that would follow. As an overly-fond parent, Karunanidhi allowed his extended family a role in decision making, to much public criticism and complaints.

There are some causes that will miss his leadership. In Tamil Nadu, it is unlikely that a leader of his stature will emerge in the near future. Tamil Nadu has been used to iconic leaders as its chief ministers and the future of Tamil Nadu politics is uncertain. At the national level, Karunanidhi's statesmanship and his ability to forge alliances will be sorely missed at a crucial time when all opposition parties are gearing up to take on the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2019 national elections in India. He would have provided the rudder to steer the opposition ship to harbour. The DMK itself is in the hands of his son Stalin, and while the cadres are with him, his ability to win elections will have to be tested. There are also concerns about the role his elder brother, Alagiri, and step-sister, Kanimozhi, will play in the DMK and state politics. While the DMK-Congress alliance is likely to continue in 2019, the ability of DMK, under Stalin, to pull in votes would be a concern for the Congress.

The backward class causes will miss Karunanidhi. For him, equal opportunities for all was deeply ingrained, and he saw every action from the point of view of the oppressed. It was not just an ideology or a political gimmick – he deeply believed in it and translated his ideology into practice. The other regional leaders – Mayawati Das, Akhilesh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav, as well as Uddhav Thackeray and Nitish Kumar – appear to be much less ideologically committed to this cause. Their approach is selective, focusing on a few communities, whereas Karunanidhi was inclusive. The caste and communal agitations that are emerging in India will lack the sure hand of a leader like Karunanidhi to tackle. One can foresee a fragmentation of the polity in several states.

Karunanidhi will be missed in Tamil Nadu as well as at the national level.

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