

M. Karunanidhi, 94

His passing marks the end of an era in Tamil Nadu's politics, and leaves a political void

The life story of Muthuvel Karunanidhi is also a history of Tamil Nadu politics. A five-time Chief Minister, and the longest serving legislator, winning 13 terms in the Assembly and not losing even once, Karunanidhi was the engineer of many of the progressive measures adopted by the State since Independence. As the leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, an offshoot of the rationalist social reform movement, the Dravidar Kazhagam, he was an influential figure at both State and national levels, whether in or out of power. He excelled as both administrator and organiser, adopting different styles, but always displaying a clinical efficiency while interacting with bureaucrats and party workers. Although his administrative acumen was often contrasted with the welfarism of his political rival, M.G. Ramachandran, Karunanidhi was not beyond the draw of populism. Extending the Public Distribution System and increasing food subsidies were coupled with efforts at generating employment and encouraging industrial investment. Towards the latter part of his political career, he emulated his political opponents, MGR and Jayalalithaa, in handing out freebies indiscriminately to every household, rich or poor. He was a crusader for federalism, often standing up to the Centre for the State's rights. He was one of the foremost opponents of the Emergency. In 1976 and 1991, his governments were dismissed by the Centre, the first time citing corruption charges, and the second time citing support to the terror outfit, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

In his home State, he ran the DMK with an iron hand; at the same time, he provided some space for the second rung, even indulging the odd dissenter now and then, as long as there was no threat to his leadership. District secretaries and ministers had a long reign under him. His longevity permitted him the leeway to promote his immediate family members to positions of power within the party and the government. His designated successor, his younger son M.K. Stalin, had to work his way up the party ladder - from ordinary worker and youth wing leader before being accommodated in the top rungs of the party and government. But elder son M.K. Alagiri and grand-nephew Dayanidhi Maran were rewarded with Cabinet berths in their very first terms in the Lok Sabha. Karunanidhi will be remembered for being an astute politician, one with a quick wit and ready repartee; an able administrator with an uncanny eye for detail and a keen sense of the occasion; and as an elder statesman who could take the long-term view of events and issues. He straddled different generations and contrasting worlds with a reflexive ease. With his passing, less than two years after his rival Jayalalithaa succumbed to illness, Tamil Nadu is staring at a huge political void, one that that will be very hard to fill.

Pause, refresh

The GST Council does well to focus on the concerns of small firms

The Goods and Services Tax Council met last Saturday for the second time within a fortnight. However, this time it refrained from further rate rejigs. While the new indirect tax regime has expanded India's tax base and brought more firms into the formal economy, revenues have slipped somewhat after peaking at ₹1.03 lakh crore in April (for taxes accrued in March) this year. The first three months of this financial year have yielded ₹94,016 crore, ₹95,610 crore and ₹96,483 crore, respectively – this is well short of the ₹1.lakh crore revenue target a month for 2018-19. The steep rate cuts effected on several items in the last Council meeting were to kick in from July 27, so their full impact on revenue collections may take more time to unfold. Moody's Investors Service reckons that the revenue loss from the most recent tax cuts may be 0.04-0.08% of GDP annually. This is marginal at best, and could be offset by stronger consumption-led growth and better tax compliance. But it is in this context of revenue concerns that the Council's dedicated focus at its latest meeting on issues facing micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) is a creditable move.

Setting up a ministerial group to look into the problems faced by MSMEs since India moved to the GST regime last July is a signal that the government is not brushing aside the implementation issues that still trouble smaller players. Firms with an annual turnover of less than ₹5 crore constitute 93% of the registered taxpayers under the GST. At its previous meeting, the Council had decided that such businesses need no longer file cumbersome returns every month, but only on a quarterly basis. There may be more room for the ministerial panel to recommend further easing of compliance for micro firms with turnover far below ₹5 crore and enhancing the ₹50,000 threshold for mandatory use of e-way bills to track movement of taxable goods. A deeper dive to understand why 1.7 million taxpayers had registered under the GST by December 2017 although their operations were below the taxable limit could also yield some pointers. The Council meeting has also, wisely, returned to a consensual approach on decisions. While a few States had reservations about the rate cuts at the last meeting, this time their concerns on a proposal to push digital payments by offering a cash-back to consumers using RuPay cards or the UPI platform have been incorporated. Now, States will volunteer to run a pilot on these lines and a final decision will be taken after a detailed system-wide evaluation of such incentives. This indicates the Centre's keenness to retain a cooperative approach with States that has generally marked the Council's functioning.

End of an epoch

M. Karunanidhi will be remembered for his passion for Tamil and uncompromising secularism



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

akkirathaiya irunga," he said in Tamil, over which his command was legendary. "Take care" is how the phrase would translate. But in the way he said it, laying stress on the double 'kk', I could see he meant to say, "Take every care." This was on August 13, 2000. I was on my way to Colombo to join duty as High Commissioner.

A federal mind

Calling on Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi would have been on the wish list and task list of any Indian envoy on her or his way to Sri Lanka. But, for me, this was not just about protocol. Nor was it about politics, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) then being a crucial presence in the National Democratic Alliance government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was about plain common sense, sheer self-interest. There was no way I would present letters of credence in Colombo without finding out what Tamil Nadu's senior-most and completely wide-awake leader thought about the island nation's travails, the present and future state of its Tamil population and that of the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam's supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran. To go to Colombo without the 'input' - to use a crassly opportunistic expression of a veteran of Tamil Nadu's political chemistry would be absurd. What I needed and was to get from him was the insight, as knowledgeable as it was detached, of 'one

foreign policy is ground knowledge of the roots of that policy in the soil of its origin.

It was not easy, even for one on 'relevant' official duty, to get an appointment with the Chief Minister. He had his hands more than full with the complexities of Tamil Nadu's polity, where facing the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and its charismatic leader J. Jayalalithaa meant being alert 24x7; where running a government of which he was the alpha and the omega meant working harder than the mind and body could take. And where, to make matters more complex for him, explaining to the people of Tamil Nadu how and why India-Sri Lankan relations were a foreign policy matter and foreign policy was the prerogative of the Union government was just about impossible. He was on the cusp of India's federal dilemmas.

A lesser politician could have played politics on that fluid crest, just to remain 'on top'. But, as the direct successor-in-office to C.N. Annadurai (CNA) who had given up secession as the DMK's policy goal, he was going to do nothing of the kind.

The Chief Minister was seated in the sitting room on the first floor of his Gopalapuram residence in Chennai. He half-rose to greet me, a gesture that neither his age – he was 76 at the time – nor his high office necessitated. "Sir... sir... Please do not get up," I protested. Sitting back, he commenced what was for me a lesson on the limitations of diplomacy and of politics. He said I was going to a highly troubled land at a highly incendiary time. "Ranil Wickremesinghe [now Prime Minister of Sri Lanka] met me the other day," he said, "and we spoke for more than an hour. He is a visionary... He wants



to build a physical bridge from Rameswaram to Talai Mannar... I welcomed the idea and told him that our own Bharathiar [Subramania Bharati] had envisioned the very thing...palamaippom... But today who is going to be crossing that bridge and in which direction?" Then followed an analysis of the ethnic problem on the island which for its crisp pragmatism could not have been equalled, let alone bettered

"Nobody knows Prabhakaran's mind," he said. "Nobody from our side is in touch with him... Nobody can be... We used to know his deputies... Amirthalingam... Now they are all dead... assassinated. But militancy is no solution... Secession will never be countenanced by Sri Lanka... And it will never be given up by Prabhakaran... We grope in the dark." And then doing a fast-forward: "Yet, we have to keep trying for our Tamil kin's urimai (rights) there." The insights continued for some 10 more minutes and then he rose to conclude the call, saying, as if in a summing-up: "Prabhakaran will never have a change of heart." As I thanked him and prepared to leave, he gave the advice I started this tribute with, very softly, "Jak-

I had received briefings, each very helpful, very skilled, from officials, ministers, politicians, military leaders, strategists. But the one I got at Gopalapuram that afternoon covered every facet of the Sri Lankan scene in brief sentences, replete with historical, geopolitical and diplomatic nuances, topped with an intuitive sense of urimai being the long-shot aim and jakkirithai an immediate con-

Another meeting

Seventeen years later, last year, I was to see him again, in the same room. He was seated on a wheelchair. And this time he did not could not – get up. His son, M.K. Stalin, and his daughter, Kanimozhi, who were beside him, gave him the caller's name. The 93-year-old looked long and steadily at me. No sign of recognition appeared on his face. There was no immediate response, but a few seconds later, when everyone present was waiting for a response, a wisp of a halfsmile played across his face for but a fleeting moment. I will not presume to imagine he recognised me. But that was not really necessary.

Kalaignar Karunanidhi was now a legend, an icon of the old mould, but without the patina of obsolescence on its form or features. He was a living legend, an icon of the here and now as a symbol of aspirational politics negotiating electoral quicksands. In his case the aspirational politics was Dravida self-esteem combined with social radicalism, derived from Periyar and C.N. Annadurai (CNA). And the quicksands were Tamil Nadu's political uncertainties, with his mentors having become history and rivals from a different 'stage' scripting a very new, very glitzy theatre. Here was an idealism being taunted by reality to be pragmatic, a pragmatism being haunted by history to be idealistic. Some predicaments are cruel.

And yet, he emerged from it, un-bowed, the see-saw of electoral results being another matter.

He will be long remembered for three outstanding accomplishments - his passion for Tamil as a language and a metaphor for the dignity of its users; his refusal to be bullied by political hubris during the national emergency; and his uncompromising secularism.

Such a long journey

CNA was in office for far too little for the dust of any controversy to settle on him. The Kalaignar was in office for far too long for that dust to stay away. Did he shake it off?

Did the flatterer and the talecarrier manage to reach ear-distance? Was the sponger spurned, the money-spinner, the corrupter, family-splitter, the party-breaker turned away? Was the fear-instiller, the superstition-planter, the suspicion-sower shown the door? Equally, was the caring critic, the daring dissenter, the worried warner given welcome? Was the frank friend, the bold biographer shown in, given time, consideration?

Only his family would know. On it – all generations of it falls the privilege and the challenge now to stay and work together, to take the legacy of this extraordinary statesman further afield and make it a force for Tamil Nadu's redemption from localism. myopia and the power of floating cash. And beyond that, a force for India's federal intelligence, her plural wisdom and, above all, her Constitution-enshrined mandate for justice – social, economic and

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Confrontation in Dhaka

The Bangladesh government clamps down on dissent and democratic challenges



VIJAY PRASHAD

tudents in Dhaka, Bangladesh, have long worried about their journey to school. Dangerous driving cost the lives of two students in the last week of July – they were run over by a bus – which triggered mass rallies of students across the centre of the capital. The students wanted the government to act - finally - to protect them. This was an opportunity for the government to do something following a simple plea by the students. But it did not.

Documenting violence

Instead, ruffians went along the avenues, threatening and beating protesting students. Photographs of the violence were quick to reach social media. The award-winning Bangladeshi photographer and activist, Shahidul Alam, documented the protests and also the violence with his camera. On social media. he published his pictures of what appeared to be the organisers of

the violence meeting with ruffians, who were then set out to attack the students. This did not go down well with the establishment.

Mr. Alam had received a request from the media outlet, Al-Jazeera, to appear on the channel and talk about the protests. He went on air and pointed out that the protests, while about traffic safety, also indicated a far wider set of concerns -'the looting of banks, the gagging of the media, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, bribery, corruption'. What he narrated was of little surprise to the people of Bangladesh. Protests are a constant feature of life, both in the past and in the present, in the country – over electricity supply in Kansat; over open-pit coal mining in Phulbari; against a coal plant at the rim of the Sundarbans; against stock market scandals that defrauded millions of small investors; and against quotas in government jobs for the descendants of 'freedom fighters' in the 1971 war.

Mr. Alam, who had been following the protests and the crackdown, also reported on social media: "Today, the police specifically asked for help from armed goons to combat unarmed students demanding safe roads." This struck him as an important departure for



the government which had now publicly gone after the students. "The government has miscalculated. It thought that fear and repression would be enough, but you cannot tame an entire nation in this manner," he added.

On August 5, a group of men arrived at Mr. Alam's home in Dhaka's Dhanmondi area and took him into custody. It is said that the men taped over CCTV cameras in the area and forbade taking any photographs of his arrest. Rahnuma Ahmed, a journalist and Mr. Alam's partner, said she rushed to the local police station but it turned out that Mr. Alam had been taken away by the Detective Branch. A police officer later said, "We are interrogating him for giving false information to different media and for provocative comments." Mr. Alam's lawyer has said that the police only registered the called him and kept up the pressure on them. There was no appetite in the Bureau to follow common procedure.

first information report after she

Action and reaction Mr. Alam was arrested after being

charged under Section 57(2) of the Information and Communication Technology Act for "spreading imaginary propaganda against the government." The Act is often used as a broad-brush tool to muzzle journalists. As he was taken from the court, Mr. Alam said, "I was hit (in custody). They washed my blood-stained Punjabi [kurta] and then made me wear it again." Mr. Alam, a recipient of the Shilpakala Padak, one of Bangladesh's prestigious awards, was now on a seven-day remand. . On Tuesday, the High Court ordered that the remand be suspended and that Mr. Alam be transferred to the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University for care. Whether the case against him will be pursued and whether this will send a message against such abductions in the future is to be seen.

The United Nations has said that it is "deeply concerned about the reports of violence" during the protests for road safety in Bangla-

desh and has appealed for calm. Dhaka's streets remain tense. Some students have braved the crackdown, but the mood is sombre. It appears that the government is unwilling to negotiate with the students. Mr. Alam's experience suggests that it is even unwilling to accept that there is a problem here – one that is bigger than road safety. Human rights groups and PEN International (a worldwide association of writers) have condemned his arrest.

This is an election year for Bangladesh. The crackdown on the students sends a very strong message – that the government will tolerate neither dissent nor democratic challenges.

It is fitting to recall that in the mass protests in Bangladesh in 1990, the longest running military junta led by General Ershad was affected after an army truck ran over a group of protesting students. When he came to power in 1982, there had been a conflagration over buses and students. It is no wonder then that the government is so sensitive to protests around the traffic.

Vijay Prashad is the Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

M. Karunanidhi

The DMK patriarch, 'Kalaignar' M. Karunanidhi, was a mass leader who held sway over Tamil Nadu with his magnetic personality for decades. As a protégé of Periyar and Anna, he came to symbolise the Dravidian movement and stood for self-respect, social justice and women's emancipation. As a rationalist and an iconoclast, he did ruffle a few feathers. As a political leader, he was in a league of his own. The scripts he penned with felicity sowed the seeds of social change. He was a fine political orator who held audiences spellbound. His speeches were spiced with witticisms and semantically-related words. It is no wonder that people flocked to hear him speak. His advocacy of 'State autonomy' reflected his concern about safeguarding regional interests. He was also a rare political leader who accepted his party's election defeats with equanimity. Nevertheless,

outpourings of praise for

the great leader should not hold us back from conceding some of the spots that took a bit of the shine off his long, illustrious career. G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

■ The passing of DMK patriarch M. Karunanidhi marks the end of an era. The beacon for the poor and the downtrodden has put down his sails and oars. It is a great loss not only for Tamil Nadu but also for the rest of India. THARCIUS S. FERNANDO,

■ The passing of the DMK leader has created another political vacuum in Tamil Nadu that will be difficult to fill. From free electricity to farmers to reservation for women in government services, he led the way. His electoral success was remarkable. The multifaceted leader's contribution in the fields of politics, literature and theatre will

always shine.

Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

J. Bharath,

■ Tamil Nadu, and India in general, has lost a towering political icon. Tamil Nadu and Dravidian politics without M. Karunanidhi and J. Javalalithaa will not be the same again. N. Nagarajan,

■ M. Karunanidhi was a

outstanding intellectual – as

orator, author, script and

dialogue writer and

leader of the masses, a seasoned politician and a statesman. He will be remembered as the architect of a number of welfare schemes. He will be noted as a multifaceted personality, an orator par excellence, a great playwright and a poet K. PRADEEP, of all times. He was a leader who was committed to the uplift of the poor and the downtrodden.

A.J. RANGARAJAN, remembered for his social ■ In the passing of M. of the last links to the Karunanidhi, one of the greatest chapters in Indian ushered in the rise of the politics has come to an end. backward classes. As a key player in State ALBERT DEVAKARAM, politics, he was noted for his political acumen. He was an

humorist. He used his wit and charm to make an impact in politics and cinema. His sharing of political space with several politicians is unparalleled. He managed to emerge phoenix-like in many a political conflict. R. SIVAKUMAR,

■ Tamil Nadu has lost a titanic leader. His achievements in the fields of cinema, literature and politics cannot be matched. He leaves behind big shoes that cannot be filled easily.

■ The DMK leader's demise is a huge loss for Indian politics. He will be reforms. He was perhaps one Dravidian movement which

■ The passing of the veteran politician, statesman and reformer has left a void in

the national polity. Not only did he dedicate his life to the uplift of Tamil Nadu but his determination also led to many firsts in Indian politics. One hopes that his party, the DMK, is able to carry forward his ideals. SANJIB KUMAR DAS,

Cuttack, Odisha

■ M. Karunanidhi was a politician who changed political trends. He has left an indelible mark on politics in the State. His era will be noted for his drive to alleviate the sufferings of the poor. There is a lot to learn from his ideology. M. AMEER BASHA, Anantapuramu, Andhra Pradesh

ITI woes

As a teacher in a polytechnic, I am in complete agreement about the problems that ITIs in India face (Editorial page, "Rebooting the system for a skills upgrade", August 7).

These institutions are the backbone of a skilled India and can contribute to the spirit of 'Make In India'. It is the lack of an institutional framework and an outdated syllabus that has led to the descent. RAJESH LOHANI,

Nainital, Uttarakhand

Infection worry

India cannot afford to lapse to a situation where the gains in fighting the spread of HIV are lost ("Three northeastern States emerge as new HIV hotspots", August 7). The health departments should hold health camps at regular intervals. Awareness camps for young people on the dangers of unprotected intimacy and unsafe drug use practices can have a significant impact. VIMAL VASUDEVAN,

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

Alathur, Palakkad, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The first paragraph of a report, "Hearing likely today in Alchemist case" (August 7, 2018) erroneously expanded SEBI as the Securities and Exchanged Board of India. It is the Securities and Exchange Board of India.

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