

The debut of ‘Periyar’, through a story

The moniker was first used for the reformer, whose birth anniversary is being observed today, in 1934



A.R. VENKATACHALAPATHY

The earliest reference in Tamil literature to E.V. Ramasamy as ‘Periyar’ was in Pudumaippithan’s short story, ‘Puthiya Nandan’ (‘The New Nandan’), which appeared in the weekly *Manikodi* on July 22, 1934. To think of it, it is least surprising that Pudumaippithan was the first writer to refer to the leader as ‘Periyar’, for he was a pioneer modernist, and that the story was carried in *Manikodi*, the pre-eminent literary journal of the times that provided space for new writing.

‘Puthiya Nandan’ is narrated as a sequel to the well-known story of Nandanar. In the standard version handed down from Sekkizhar’s *Periya Puranam* (12th century) and fleshed out in Gopalakrishna Bharati’s *Nandanar Charithira Keerthanai* (mid-19th century), Nandan is a Dalit serf bound to a Brahmin landlord. His devotion for Siva impels him to seek *darshan* in the Chidambaram temple, out of bounds for him due to his caste position. After many travails and a final ordeal by fire, he becomes one with the lord, and is deified as Thirunalaiappovar Nayanar.

Serfdom despite salvation

Pudumaippithan begins his story, set in the same Adhanur village, centuries later: “A long time had passed since Nanda Samban had passed through the cleansing fire to become Nanda Nayanar.” The entire story is narrated in such sentences, brimming with irony and sarcasm. The narrative is fast-paced, reaching its denouement in barely six pages. And as the various allusions make it clear, an understanding and enjoyment of the story is predicated on a knowledge of Sekkizhar and Gopalakrishna Bharati. Pudumaippithan creates new characters, among whom Pavada is central.

Adhanur is now a sleepy place, blissfully unaware of even the advent of British rule. Nandan’s canonisation notwithstanding, the Dalit quarters, the *cheri*, have still not attained salvation. Brahmins continue to



A portrait of ‘Periyar’ E.V. Ramasamy at the T.N. Assembly. •DIPR, TAMIL NADU

lease out their lands to the Dalits, as before. The inhabitants remain bound to not only the Brahmin landlords but the absentee British sahibs as well.

A descendant of the Brahmin of *Periya Puranam* times, the landlord Viswanatha Shrauti is also a pensioned sub-registrar, his loyalties torn between the British empire and the eternal *sanatana dharma*. His only son, Ramanathan, an MA, captivated by Gandhian ideals, has courted arrest during the civil disobedience movement.

In the *cheri* lives Karuppan, a blind old man. In his youth, he unknowingly stepped into the pond in the *agraharam*, and gulped some water. Hell broke loose and Viswanatha Shrauti, then a young man, gave Karuppan such a thrashing that he lost his eyesight. But to make amends, he appointed Karuppan to watch his garden, let him build a hut and arranged his marriage. Karuppan’s firstborn Pavada is of the same age as the landlord’s son and also his boyhood friend.

One day, Rev. John Iyer, a Vellalar Christian pastor, visits the Adhanur *cheri* to spread the word of god. Impressed by Pavada’s intellect, he offers incentives for his conversion. Karuppan has always wished for his son to have English education, and therefore, agrees. Pavada gets enrolled in school by John Iyer and turns out to be a brilliant student, clearing his school final. More success seems to be in store. But the good father in heaven apparently has other ideas.

John Iyer has a daughter, whose

friendship with Pavada turns into romance. Believing in John Iyer’s preaching about Christianity not entertaining the inequities of the Hindu religion, Pavada, who now goes by the name of Daniel John, proposes marriage. In response, John Iyer, deploying the choicest casteist slurs, throws him out of his house.

A heartbroken Daniel now turns to Catholicism, and spends some years in a seminary. But ‘the unnatural desires’ of the priests and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the church leave him disillusioned.

Joining hands with Periyar

He then quits the church and joins Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement. Now adopting the name of Comrade Narasingam, he becomes its staunch campaigner.

On returning to Adhanur, Narasingam is overwhelmed by the thought of emancipating his village. Meanwhile, Ramanathan, the Brahmin landlord’s son, too has returned home. Much to his father’s chagrin, he is now involved in ‘Harijan uplift’.

On one moonlit night, Ramanathan hears a splash in the well, and jumps in; it is Karuppan’s daughter. Natural instincts take over, and a remorseful Ramanathan later promises to marry her. However, both the girl and her father dismiss the idea as outlandish.

At this time, Gandhi is on his ‘Harijan tour’ with a planned five-minute stopover in Adhanur. Viswanatha Shrauti is ready to refute Gandhi’s thesis that untouchability has no scriptural sanction. His objective is

twofold: to defeat Gandhi’s ideas, and to demonstrate the glories of *sanatana dharma* to his son.

Comrade Narasingam too wants to confront Gandhi, for not going far enough on the ‘untouchability question’. Now in the know of his sister’s affair, he tries to persuade his father to marry her to Ramanathan but is unable to convince him. A furious Narasingam swears to expose the Brahmin’s deviousness.

A huge crowd mills around the stage. The blind Karuppan stumbles on the path, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Mahatma. Ramanathan, who has made the arrangements for Gandhi’s stopover, and Comrade Narasingam also hurry to the event. At that moment, as the Madras Mail speeds past, the two notice that the old man is on its track. As they attempt to save Karuppan, all three are run over, their blood mixed together. Pudumaippithan concludes by asking: Among the three, who is the ‘New Nandan’?

After the Poona Pact

Periyar’s movement at that time was relatively new, and he had only recently returned from a transformative tour of the Soviet Union and Europe. By this time, he had become a strident critic of Gandhi. The Poona Pact was less than two years old, and had accentuated the differences between Periyar, who backed B.R. Ambedkar, and Gandhi, who in response to Ambedkar’s challenge, had started the Harijan campaign. This set the context for ‘Puthiya Nandan’.

While Pudumaippithan’s sympathies are clear – he can only be on the side of the oppressed – he doesn’t take sides in the story and keeps a critical distance while representing all ideological strands fairly. He refers to E.V. Ramasami as ‘Periyar Ramasami’ – a title few at that time granted to the radical. In November 1932, Periyar had given a call to people to drop honorifics and urged the use of ‘Thozhar’ (Comrade), the appellation by which Pudumaippithan refers to the Narasingam in his story. No wonder C. Rajagopalachari, on reading one of Pudumaippithan’s stories, wondered if the author was not a ‘suna-mana’ or ‘a self-respector’!

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Protect the messenger

The regional press in India is especially vulnerable to administrative excesses, political pressure and corruption



OMAR RASHID

On September 2, Krishna Kumar Singh landed up at the post-mortem facility in Chunar, Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, for a routine assignment. There he noticed the family of a woman, who had allegedly hanged herself, misbehaving with the doctors. As the scuffle grew, the staff called for additional security. The gathering slowly turned into a mob.

Given his 18 years of experience as a tehsil correspondent for a Hindi daily, Singh’s instinct was to record the scene on camera. His action promptly angered the mob. Unlike Pawan Jaiswal, the journalist who had been charged the same day with criminal conspiracy for reporting that a primary school in the State was serving rotis and salt in its mid-day meal to children, Singh was physically assaulted in front of helpless policemen. He was whisked away to safety only after much humiliation. Though the U.P. police lodged an FIR against the assaulters, which Singh claims included supporters of a State BJP Minister, no arrests have been made yet.

This is not new to Singh. Over the years, his reports on corruption, including on a cartridges scam and illegal land allocation, have sent officials to prison. When the Samajwadi Party government was in power, Singh recalls being thrashed in a police station by the land mafia. But the latest assault has especially shaken him. Even his organisation does not support him now, he says.

Threats, abuse and intimidation

There are many regional journalists like Singh in India who work at the district and tehsil levels in the Hindi hinterland without proper security. In exchange for doing their job, they face intimidation, threats, abuse, coercion and false police cases. A year ago, when Jaiswal reported on illegal mining, the land mafia apparently warned him that “even the brakes of trucks can fail”. Such journalists often have little organisational backing or hope that their grievances will be redressed. Unlike journalists in the English language media, they are more vulnerable as regional bureaus are known to often turn the other way if they land in a controversy.

For a large and politically significant State like U.P., stringers and credible reporters at the lowest administrative levels are extremely important for State- or national-level news organisations. Away from the safety net that

is Lucknow, it is these reporters who handle all the risks that come with reporting on contentious issues which go on to occupy the national spotlight. Despite this, they are poorly paid, have few rights or statutory entitlements, are randomly sacked, and sometimes not even issued proper identity cards. This leaves them vulnerable to administrative excesses, political pressure and corruption.

“Earlier, mainstream media houses recruited professionals like lawyers and teachers to report at the district level for a nominal wage,” says Nagendra Pratap, former Editor of a Hindi daily in Varanasi and Gorakhpur. “But over time, newspapers and TV channels have started roping in contributors who are often poorly trained and lack other sources of income, without upgrading their pay structure.” This pushes some journalists to seek official and political patronage for survival. Hemant Tiwari, Uttar Pradesh Accredited Correspondents Committee president, admits that at the district level even the staff reporters of well-known Hindi dailies are asked to bring in advertisement revenue, while stringers work for commissions.

The Jaiswal episode brought a lot of condemnation for the U.P. government and police, but it has not been a deterrent. A few days later, the Azamgarh police arrested a stringer working with a Hindi daily after he clicked photographs of children mopping the floor of their school. The police alleged that the scribe was engaging in extortion, but his colleagues contended that he was falsely implicated due to a grudge nursed against him by the local station house officer. On September 7, five journalists in Bijnor were booked for ‘promoting enmity’ after they reported that a Dalit family had put its ‘house on sale’ after being denied water from a village hand pump. The police alleged that the reporters had concocted the story to show the administration in poor light.

Showing solidarity

In all these cases, journalists staged protests, but little has been achieved. The daily nature of news, conflicting business interests, toothless journalist organisations, and a disconnect between the mainstream English language press and the regional press hinders any united and sustained call for action. According to the 2019 World Press Freedom Index, India ranks 140 out of 180 countries. At such a bleak time, it is crucial for the media to rise above these factors, show solidarity towards its own, and constantly question the excesses of state power, while improving working conditions for those on the margins. After all, what is at stake is truth itself.

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The preventable Bengal famine

The British-Indian administration made efforts to create records rather than take resolute action

UDAY BALAKRISHNAN

As the first half of the 20th century fades from public memory, countries devastated by the Germans in the Second World War, like Poland and Greece, are becoming more strident in their demands for massive compensation from Germany.

Behind the ongoing spat between the Koreans and the Japanese is Japan’s refusal to atone for the humiliations it inflicted on the Korean people through the first half of the 20th century.

In sharp contrast, there is hardly a voice, let alone a movement, in India to hold the British accountable for the greatest tragedy that befell the country in the 20th century under their watch – the Bengal famine, which was at its worst through 1943.

The famine took half as many lives as the Holocaust did. Sadly, it continues to be perceived as a tragic occurrence and not an atrocity. Unlike Jallianwala Bagh, it doesn’t have a remembrance day or a noteworthy memorial.

Foodgrain was available

The Bengal famine was gruesome. Everyday thousands of emaciated dead had to be removed from the streets of Calcutta by police and government-funded corpse disposal organisations. As more of the starving poured into the city from the devastated countryside, the best the Chief Minister of Bengal, Khawaja Nazimuddin, could come up with was to write to the Governor that he proposed to have them removed from the city by force.

It is good copy to hold the U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill solely responsible for the occurrence of the famine while ignoring the fact that enough food was available within India to have prevented its occurrence. As the Earl of Huntington observed, in a parliamentary debate in the House of Lords on October 20, 1943, while loss of the Burma rice and the cyclone of 1942 were strong “contributory factors” to the famine, the fact remained that “these losses were largely made good by the exceptional crop in Northern India in the spring of 1943”.

Voluminous official records from

that period available in the India Office Records section of the British Library also establish that the famine was not the outcome of a lack of foodgrain. Rather, political machinations, greed, hoarding and bureaucratic bungling on a massive scale stymied efforts to procure and transport grain from where it was available – Punjab and the United Provinces – to starving Bengal in quick time.

Even the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, acknowledged this in his letter of September 27, 1943 to the prevaricating Governor of Punjab Sir Bertrand Glancy. He demanded that Glancy act decisively to procure and move grain, charging “that the Punjab ministers and the Punjab cultivators are engaged in blackmailing the starving peasants of Bengal so as to make inordinate profits at a time when they have already made very substantial profits indeed”.

Even as the famine began to abate in 1944, the Intelligence Bureau was alerting government of the possibility of its recurrence, if adequate measures were not taken “to prevent hoarding, enforce the orders relating to the maximum prices of foodstuffs and introduce rationing in the larger towns”.

Keeping the files healthy

A careful reading of official papers establishes that at all levels of British-Indian administration the effort was more to create records and “keep the files healthy”, to save ‘official’ skin at some future enquiry, rather than to get to grips with the problem through resolute action.

This was confirmed by Lord Strabolgi’s spot-on observation in the House of Lords that nothing contributed more to the occurrence of the disaster than “the greatest, the most hidebound, indeed ironbound bureaucracy in the world, that of the Government of India, suffering that fatal disease of bureaucracy, procrastination. They consider too long, they set up too many Committees, they talk too long about what they are going to do, and in the meanwhile this terrible famine was galloping towards them.”

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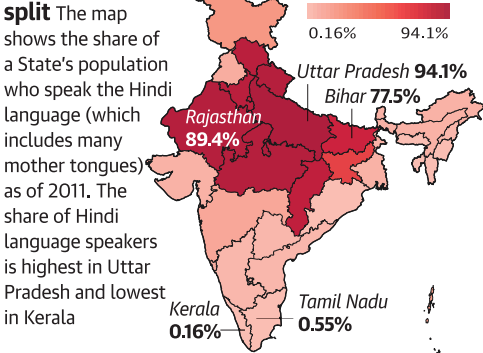


DATA POINT

One language, many tongues

A language is an umbrella term which contains many mother tongues. Forty-three % Indians speak the Hindi language, which includes many mother tongues such as Bhojpuri, Rajasthani & Hindi. Close to 40% of the Hindi language speakers speak mother tongues other than Hindi. By Sumant Sen

1. State-wise split



2. Many tongues

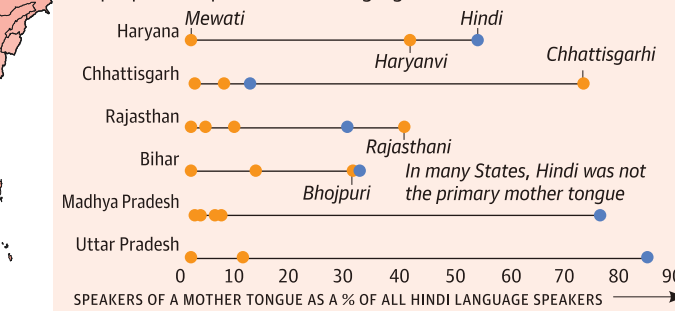
The Hindi language has 56 mother tongues listed under it. The table lists 10 of those mother tongues which are widely spoken. Each mother tongue’s share in the Hindi language is also listed

Mother tongues within the Hindi language	Share of speakers (%)
Hindi	60.99
Bhojpuri	9.57
Rajasthani	4.88
Chhattisgarhi	3.07
Magadhi/Magahi	2.41
Haryanvi	1.86
Khortha/Khotta	1.52
Marwari	1.48
Bundeli/Bundel khandi	1.06
Others	3.65

Source: Census 2011

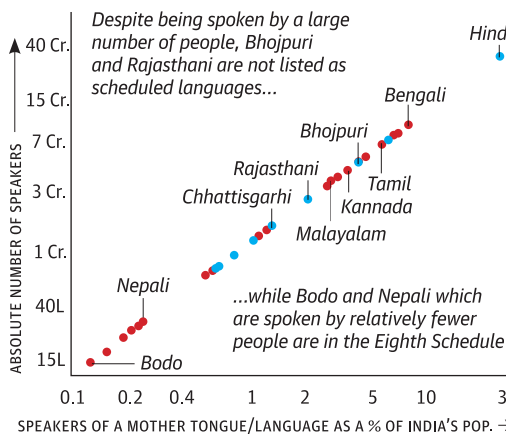
3. Preferred lingo

The chart shows the % of people who speak various mother tongues under the Hindi language. For instance, in Haryana, Haryanvi was the mother tongue of 42% of people who spoke the Hindi language and Hindi was the mother tongue of 54.5% of people who spoke the Hindi language



Listed versus the rest

The chart shows the % of Indians who speak different mother tongues under the ‘Hindi’ language and the % whose mother tongues are listed under the 22 scheduled languages (included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution)



The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 17, 1969

U.S. to withdraw more troops

President Nixon announced to-day [Sept 16] that the United States will withdraw an additional 35,000 troops from South Viet Nam. The new withdrawal will be made before December 15 and will bring down U.S. troop strength in South Viet Nam to 484,000 men. With this the United States will have withdrawn a total 65,000 troops. The U.S. decision comes after weeks of debate within the Administration, some of it conducted in public to the embarrassment of Mr. Nixon, over whether or not the U.S. should continue to withdraw troops unilaterally. The confusion had reached a peak during the last three weeks when widely differing interpretations were put on Mr. Nixon’s decision, first to postpone further withdrawals and second, to halt heavy bomber raids on Viet Cong positions in South Viet Nam last week for 36 hours and then resuming them again, without explaining what the gesture was intended to achieve. There had also been reports of serious differences between Washington and Saigon over whether or not to respond to Hanoi’s call for a cease-fire during Ho Chi Minh’s funeral. The Generals in the Pentagon, meanwhile, are now said to favour a policy of fighting it out while the civilians in the State Department have stood out for a negotiated compromise political settlement.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 17, 1919.

Gorgeous Oriental Costumes.

The “Daily Chronicle” in its issue of the 8th August wrote as follows: – Gorgeous Oriental costumes blazed in the rich and sombre corridors of the India Office yesterday. The occasion was an unprecedented one (writes a “Daily Chronicle” representative), and was really a direct appeal by distinguished Indian ladies who are permanent residents in this country for the enfranchisement of Indian women. A long line of motor-cars drew up at the office of the Secretary of State for India during the afternoon, and from them descended in native costumes a notable assembly of Indian ladies, whose work in art, literature, politics, and finance is well-known in both hemispheres. Some of the ladies wore a number of beautifully jewelled Indian ornaments. The deputation, headed by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the famous Indian poetess, was shown into one of the handsomely appointed committee rooms, where they were received by Mr. Montagu, the Secretary of State, and Sir Thomas Holden, the Under Secretary for India.