

PONGU THAMIZH: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ANTECEDENTS

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The phrase *Pongu Thamizh*, while not a new addition to the Tamil political lexicon, has been receiving considerable prominence in the current debate over the ceasefire agreement. Translated as 'Tamil upsurge' or 'Tamil awakening', the recurring *Pongu Thamizh* rallies in the Northern and Eastern (NE) Provinces have been described as a new mode of political mobilization of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Commentaries and interpretations have varied from fascination to condemnation, depending, of course, on the eye of the beholder. Seymour Martin Lipset, the political sociologist, once commented that a high degree of involvement and participation in elections is a sign of political instability, a sign of disagreement over current and/or fundamental political issues. One might extend this to include political mobilization, protests, and rallies. 'Official' and organized political rallies have long been obsessive rituals in South Asian and Sri Lankan politics. Rallies have a life of their own, and political organizations invest a great deal of resources in ensuring their success. In years past, the lengths of May Day processions in Colombo were used as indicators of the strengths of political parties. Even in Jaffna town, in the 1980s, when there were more militant groups than working class organizations, May Day processions and rallies were staged by the different militant groups with the competitive edge of an inter-school sports meet. But the fun disappeared when guns got in the way.

The *Pongu Thamizh* (PT) rallies, on the other hand, are emerging when the guns are purportedly on the way out. Opinions differ, however, as to whether these rallies are in keeping with the spirit of the current Ceasefire Agreement, or a violation of it. Nonetheless, despite a handful of contrarians and relatively minor hiccups so far, the ceasefire is holding steady. As well, 'surging' political rallies are a small price to pay to keep Sri Lanka from the deep hole that the state of Israel has fallen into, dragged down by the moronic militarism of its Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon.

That said, even those who support the peace process were concerned about the potential backlash that the PT rallies in the NE Provinces might cause among the Sinhalese in the South and the consequences for the peace process. The worriers were naturally reminded of the collapse of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957, which was partly precipitated by the then Transport Minister's unilateral decision to send to Jaffna buses bearing Sinhala 'Sri' license plate numbers, the Tamil protest against these buses in the North and the backlash in the South. A beleaguered Bandaranaike declared that "the pact stands abrogated". Over the next few years, the 'Sri' issue disappeared without a trace, but the damage was done. Forty-

five years later the Sinhalese appear to have gained political maturity in ignoring the calls for counter rallies in the South to *pongu Thamizh* in the North, the East and even in Nuwara Eliya. The question has been raised whether the Tamils are showing new signs of immaturity and intolerance.

A favourable view of the PT rallies is that they are not provocations against the Sinhalese but occasions for the Tamils of the NE Provinces to release their pent up frustrations and energies after twenty-five years of political dormancy, twenty-five years since the last time decent elections were held in the NE Provinces. The rallies are also seen as transformative steps for the LTTE as it adjusts to the new requirements of an open political life from the old imperatives of a military cloister. For those who oppose the peace process and demonize the LTTE as being democratically irredeemable, the *pongu Thamizh* rallies represent separatist triumphalism and LTTE's fascism, even comparable to Hitler's Nazism.

Without being overly judgemental, it is possible to see the PT rallies and slogans about self-determination and Eelam as statements about everything traumatic that the people in the NE Provinces have gone through in the last twenty years and about the huge uncertainties that still hang in front of them. The Tamil people are not an army of fascists in brown or black uniform, backed up by an industrial-military complex at home and colonial markets abroad, and mobilized to conquer the world in the name of a superior race. That was Hitler's Germany, the centre of the Axis, flanked by Italy and Japan. The comparison to Hitler and Nazism is unfair and insensitive, even as it is anachronistic, betraying deliberate or real ignorance. If sociological comparisons are needed, one might turn to cultural and political antecedents across the Palk-Straits and not across the oceans. Comparisons closer home will also show how a 'separatist' movement that surfaced among the Tamils in South India was successfully internalized within the still surviving Indian federation.

Symbolic and Poetic Roots

What does *pongu Thamizh* culturally and politically signify? 'Pongu' in Tamil has several meanings—to rise or surge like rice or milk while cooking, like floods, rivers and the rough seas, or like fermenting toddy. *Thai pongal* is an auspicious harvest festival. *Pal ponguthal*, or the rising of milk while boiling, is auspicious, while the rising of fermenting toddy is inauspicious. "*Poorana kudathu neer naravil pongumal*" (the water in the

auspicious fulsome pot will rise like toddy to warn of impending danger) is a line from Kampan, the early medieval Tamil poet and considered to be the king of Tamil poetry, where the term *pongumal* is used to describe the auspicious pot (*nirai kudam*) turning into an inauspicious omen.

The best-known and politically evocative use of the term *pongu* appears in the mid-20th century South Indian Tamil poet Bharati Dasan's roaring poem, written in the heyday of Tamil cultural nationalism in Tamil Nadu. It is a poem of four powerful stanzas and the late V.R. Nedunchezian, DMK's (Dravida Munnetra Kazhaham) and ADMK's (Anna DMK) long-time General Secretary, Finance Minister and the greatest literary orator ever in Tamil politics, was known to conclude his speeches with a stirring rendition of the entire poem to leave a lasting effect on his audiences.

The term *pongu* is in the third stanza of the poem, as *pongu Thamizhar*, which can be translated as 'surging' or 'aroused' Tamils. Interestingly, the poem refers to Sri Lankan Tamils as the brave 'southern kin' in the land of the Sinhalese. In an earlier and better known poem celebrating South Asian Regionalism, the poet Bharati, the first Tamil poet of note in the modern period and Bharati Dasan's mentor and predecessor, had alluded to a cultural bridge from South India to the 'Sinhalese isle'. Classicists will recall Milton's description of Ceylon (then Taprobane) as 'India's utmost isle'.

The *pongu* poem is full of sound and fury, with images of battlefields and enemies borrowed from the 'heroic genre' of Tamil classical poetry. The poem mirrors the cultural and political context in which it was written, especially the mid-20th-century euphoria created by the print-popularization of ancient Tamil classical texts (the so-called *sangam* literature) that had been 'rediscovered' during the seventy five years between 1850 and 1925. In particular, the few *sangam* poems of the pre and early Christian period that depicted 'war' and violence (mostly involving tribal fights among kindred Tamil groups over cattle raids and grain robbery) became convenient motifs for populist political rhetoric among 20th-century Tamils infected by modern nationalism. The *pongu* poem is a good or bad example of this genre. The poet's purpose was to employ images of war, heroism and enemies to rally support for Tamil cultural nationalism. The enemies were not external or outsiders, but South Indian Tamil Brahmins, the Tamil upper classes who detested DMK's populism, and the Congress Party whom the Brahmins and the majority of the Tamils then supported. But neither the poet nor the DMK ever intended or committed violence against anybody. There have been, of course, violent clashes between South Indian political party supporters as everywhere else in South Asia, but they have more to do with alcohol and thuggery than the DMK's cultural nationalist rhetoric.

Allegorical Assessment

I have taken the liberty, I believe justifiably, of using *pongu Thamizh* as an allegory to describe a strand of South Indian Tamil nationalism that was anticipated by the formation of the Justice Party in 1916, asserted itself in 1944 with the transformation of the Justice Party into the mass based Dravida Kazhaham (Dravidian Organization), and became the dominant strand when a powerful section of the Dravida Kazhaham (DK) broke away to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhaham (DMK, Dravidian Progressive Organization) in 1949. From thereon it was an upward climb for the DMK, as the only significant regional challenge anywhere in India to the All India Congress Party, and it achieved political power in 1967 to form the first non-Congress government in Madras State (now Tamil Nadu). All of this was achieved under the remarkable leadership of C.N. Annadurai, the foremost Tamil political and cultural leader of the 20th century, whose speeches and writings virtually revolutionized the Tamil intelligentsia and culturally energized every Tamil anywhere in the world who spoke and read Tamil. I would suggest that the *pongu Thamizh* ascent stopped with Annadurai's death in 1969. His successors in the DMK and its splinter ADMK have barely stayed the course on the plateau to which their great 'Anna' had brought them. But the two parties have managed to alternate as governing parties in Tamil Nadu, despite their notoriety for corruption, banal excesses, family bandyism and obsessive feuds. Annadurai's alliterative motto for the movement: *kadamai, kanniyam, kattupadu* (duty, honesty and discipline), its rhetorical effervescence, literary lustre, agenda of far-reaching social reforms and emancipatory populism that marked the *pongu Thamizh* era under Annadurai are long gone.

A few commonplaces are necessary to summarize the meaning and achievements of the DMK's *pongu Thamizh* era. The nationalist infection of the Indian subcontinent manifested itself in multiple ways. The dominant nationalist currents were the pan-Indian secular nationalism spearheaded by the Congress Party and the anti-Hindu Muslim nationalism of the Muslim League. Regionally isolated Hindu nationalist forces, although contained at the Centre by the Congress until the 1980s, always lurked beneath the surface with not infrequent outbursts in the form of anti-Muslim riots and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Beneath these dominant themes emerged both secular and religious regional variations, overarchingly based on language (or religion, as in the case of the Sikhs in Punjab) and territory but internally driven by caste and overlapping class contradictions. There are several aspects to the nationalist infection of the South Indian Tamils in the Madras Presidency. The first nationalist expression in Madras, though it came later than in Calcutta or Bombay, was the Home Rule movement, dominated by the Brahmins, that soon merged with the independence movement of the Congress Party. The formation of the Justice Party and its subsequent transformation first into the Dravida Kazhaham (DK) and later the Dravida Munnetra Kazhaham (DMK), provided a counter expression of nationalism among the Tamils.

The Justice Party's origins were the grievances of non-Brahmin Tamil upper castes triggered by the Brahmin dominance of urban South India in the early part of the 20th century. It found a convenient ideological vehicle in the Dravidian-Aryan dichotomy that was first formulated by European Tamil scholars to make a purely linguistic distinction between Tamil (Southern, Dravidian) and Sanskrit (Northern, Aryan), and to emphasize the incongruence between the Vedic (Northern) theory of the four-fold *varna* caste system and the multiple caste structure of the Tamils (this incongruence is not limited to the Tamils, but is common throughout India). The British administrators (and not European Christian Missionaries) used this dichotomy to instigate the non-Brahmin Tamil upper castes of Madras against the Brahmin Tamils. The Dravidian movement politicized this dichotomy and used the Dravidian ideology and the concomitant demand for a Dravidian state to build a mass movement on an ambitious and eclectic agenda of aggressive social reforms, anti-clerical rationalism, radical socialism, the liberation of women, and the emancipation of the *pahtali* (the common man)—a rubric for the vast, illiterate mass of Tamil society's subaltern castes and social margins.

The eminent Indian sociologist, M. N. Srinivas, introduced the concept of Sanskritization to describe the historical process of inter-caste mobility, a process by which lower castes in improving economic and political circumstances resort to coopting the orthopractices of the higher castes and the Brahmins. Sanskritization was coined to explain the assumed osmosis of the so-called Great (Sanskrit) Tradition into India's multiple Little (local) Traditions. The essence of DMK's achievement in Tamil Nadu was its attempt to turn Sanskritization on its head. The DMK used the power of the spoken and written word and every available form of art and communication to challenge the orthodoxy and the orthopraxis of the Tamil society in every aspect of culture and social structure—values and beliefs, customs and rituals, art and literature, women's status, and caste-based social hierarchy.

Democratic Culture and Indian Federalism

My argument is that *pongu Thamizh* under Annadurai's leadership effectively became the metaphor for a progressive agenda of social and cultural reforms. There were other aspects to Annadurai's leadership and the *pongu Thamizh* ethos. When the Congress legislators and state governments resigned as part of Gandhi's Quit India ultimatum to the British, the British administrators in Madras invited the Justice Party to step in and fill the void. Annadurai, then a member of the Justice Party under Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy, protested and convinced the Party and its leader that there should be no collaboration with the British colonial rulers regardless of the Party's differences with the Madras Brahmins. The anti-colonial position of Periyar and Annadurai is remarkable in that only a short time earlier both of them had vehemently opposed Rajaji's (then Congress Chief Minister in the Madras Presidency) ill-advised move to introduce compulsory teaching of Hindi in Madras schools. Both Periyar and Annadurai

were radical socialists at that time, but they did not follow the inexplicable (Indian) Communist Party line, under dictates from Moscow, to oppose Gandhi's Quit India call and support the British war effort. A nostalgic footnote to the South Indian history of this period is that the Lankan Sama Samajists, Bernard Soysa, S.C.C. Antonypillai, Hector Abhayavardhana, V. Karalasingham and others, who were then in exile in India, worked with Annadurai and other progressives in common anti-colonial protests in Madras.

As I have alluded to before, DMK's Tamil nationalism was the dominant strand among the nationalist currents in Madras, but it was not the only strand. The euphoria over the rediscovery of the Tamil classical texts and the literary revivalism that ensued touched all sections of the Tamil literati, and they included the Brahmins. In fact, it was the tireless search of the veteran Brahmin Tamil scholar, Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, that brought to light the hitherto lost *ola* manuscripts of the *sangam* literature. Annadurai and the DMK never tried to suppress the different currents of Tamil nationalism. Instead, they challenged their opponents by invoking the legacy of the rediscovered Tamil classics over the established orthodoxy of the Brahmins and the conservative dominant castes. Annadurai was a genuine democrat who believed in the plurality of the political process. A great polemicist and debater, he encouraged the clash of ideas, and hugely enjoyed debating his opponents especially those belonging to religious traditions and orthodox schools. He is the only one I know who tried to foster a 'democratic culture' in Tamil politics through his writings in Tamil.

His profession of a separate Dravidian state had more to do with its attractiveness as a concept and a metaphor than any compelling material circumstances. Redeemingly, DMK's separatist ideology was not narrowly based on Tamil ethnology or blood brotherhood, but encompassed the Telugus, the Malayalees and the Kannadas. But the Dravidian state was a non-starter because the appeal for Dravidian solidarity never found any resonance among other non-Tamil Dravidian people of South India, namely the Malayalees of Kerala, the Telugus of Andhra Pradesh and the Kannadas of Karnataka. In fact, a part of the inspiration for pan-Dravidian separatism might have arisen from the geographical boundaries of the Madras Presidency under colonial rule, that included vast tracts of the present day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The DMK hardly developed a programme for separation either through constitutional means or armed insurrection.

The truth of the matter is that the DMK never had to develop such a programme thanks to the remarkable working of Indian federalism in southern India despite the northern location of central power. The Indian state is not unknown for brutal oppression but there has hardly been—with the exception of the mildly offensive but unsuccessful attempts to impose Hindi—any instance of nationalist oppression of the South Indian Tamils by Delhi. On the contrary, every cabinet of the Central government since independence has had prominent Tamils in powerful portfolios, often based on individual merit and not regional cooption. India has had quite a few Tamils and other South Indians as Presidents and Vice-

Presidents, starting with the redoubtable C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) as independent India's first Governor General. The Indian Civil Service, Judiciary and the Armed Forces have also had a good record of openness to recruitment and promotion of South Indians, often to the highest positions in these branches of the Central government. The most important aspect of Indian federalism, however, has been its provision of space and authority for regional autonomy. In a sense, Annadurai and the DMK were able to focus almost exclusively on their cultural and social reformist agenda until they formed the State government in 1967, because of the competent economic management by successive Congress State governments in Madras.

The DMK and Annadurai were relieved of their separatist burden in 1963, with the passage of the 16th Amendment to the Indian Constitution to ban secessionist political parties. The Amendment was brought in the wake of India's border dispute with China and

in a rising mood of bellicose Indian nationalism. The DMK officially dropped its separatist demand from the Party programme, but Annadurai's speech opposing the Amendment during the debate in the Rajya Sabha in Delhi, has been described by an American scholar as one of his "most professional performances". Annadurai based his opposition not on narrow chauvinism, but on the higher principles of liberal constitutionalism, challenging Nehru to leave the constitutional authority with the people – that is, leave it to the people to democratically decide whether his plea for separation was acceptable or not, and not to let a Parliamentary majority deny him his right to advocate separation. After 1963, Annadurai or the DMK did not have any cause to revisit the issue of separatism. When Annadurai became Chief Minister in 1967, he caused the name of the southern Tamilian state to be changed from Madras to Tamil Nadu – a symbolic consummation of *pongu Thamizh* that overlies the reality of Tamil national autonomy within the Indian federation. ■

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SRI LANKA'S BUDGET 2002: TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

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Introduction

The new United National Front (UNF) government of Sri Lanka, which came to power in December 2001, inherited an economy that has recorded negative growth (-1.3%) for the first time in the post-independence period. The Sri Lankan economy today faces two fundamental problems; one is the structural and institutional weakness in the macro-economy and the other is the civil war-induced economic woe of the country.

The much-awaited first budget of the new government presented belatedly on March 22nd has failed to adequately address both of these fundamental problems in the economy. Firstly, the Budget 2002 has proposed very little structural and institutional reform of the economy, which are long overdue. Secondly, the government has not taken advantage of the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE by infusing public investment in infrastructure like roads, power, and telecommunications in the war-torn areas that could have boosted the overall economic growth.

This paper is organised as follows; Firstly, we critically look at the proposed public expenditure of the government. Secondly, we discuss the potential 'peace dividend' and impediments to realisation of the same. Thirdly, we look back at the fiscal profligacy during the closing months of the last government and make some suggestions to prevent a reoccurrence of such a predicament. Fourthly, we evaluate the fiscal measures enunciated in the budget. Fifthly, we outline some of the structural and institutional reforms

that need to be undertaken in order to attain a sustainable high growth rate.

Public Expenditure

The total public expenditure for 2002 (January 01 to December 31) is proposed to be almost LKR 346 billion, out of which LKR 220 billion is recurrent expenditure and LKR 126 billion is capital expenditure (Table 2). That is, out of the total public expenditure proposed 64% is recurrent expenditure and 36% is capital expenditure. Table 1 catalogues the Ministries (and combination thereof) that receive more than 1% of the total public expenditure in a descending order.

Accordingly, the Defence expenditure (including Defence and Interior Ministries) is once again the single largest public expenditure consuming almost 20% of the total public expenditure. The Finance Ministry consumes the second largest with 18%. The Ministry of Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Government (12%), and the Ministry of Public Administration, Management and Reforms (8%) incur third and fourth largest public expenditures respectively. The Health and Education expenditures, with around 7% of the total public expenditure each, consume fifth and sixth largest public expenditures respectively. The public expenditures on defence, health and education as proportions of total public expenditure in 2002 are greater than in 2001. In sum, 15 Ministries (and combination thereof) as catalogued in Table 1 receive 92% of the total public expenditures earmarked for 2002.