



2001

No. 01-15

POPULISM, TAMIL STYLE. IS IT REALLY A SUCCESS?

Prof. John Harriss

Published: November 2001

Development Studies Institute

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street

London

WC2A 2AE UK

Tel: +44 (020) 7955-6252

Fax: +44 (020) 7955-6844

Email: s.redgrave@lse.ac.uk

Web site: www.lse.ac.uk/depts/destin

POPULISM, TAMIL STYLE. IS IT REALLY A SUCCESS?

John Harriss
Development Studies Institute
London School of Economics

“The history of the Dravidian parties ... reveals the most systematic and durable populist features to be seen in the semi-industrialised world” (Subramanian 1999: 15)

“Populism (can) attain sustained success in semi-industrialised societies and aid the representation of emergent social groups” (Subramanian 1999: 13, 310)

“In sharp contrast to the claims of most critics, Tamil Nadu’s record on the dimensions of economic performance ... is remarkably good (and) in its performance on social indicators (the) MGR government really shines” (Swamy 1999: 144)

This paper is mainly concerned to offer a more extended review of Narendra Subramanian’s book *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: political parties, citizens and democracy in South India* (OUP 1999) than the one which I wrote earlier for *Frontline* (17 March 2000); but in discussing Subramanian’s arguments I shall refer as well to the work of Arun Swamy, another Tamilian of the same generation, whose Berkeley PhD thesis *The Nation, the People and the Poor: sandwich tactics in party competition and policy formation, India 1931-96* (1996) deals quite substantially with the politics of Tamil Nadu¹, and develops a theme which overlaps with Subramanian’s. I think this is a worthwhile task not only because Subramanian’s book is the most substantial study of Tamil politics, in English at least, to have appeared for a quarter of a century (since Marguerite Ross Barnett’s book *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* was published in 1976) but also because I find the work both of Swamy and of Subramanian of much wider significance in view of what they have to say about the nature of populism in politics and policy. More generally their works are of interest as studies of ‘an actually existing political system’, when these rarely fit into the neat conceptual boxes of political science – hence, in part, the problem of the way in which ‘populism’ is regarded; and because of the centrality of political parties in their analyses. Political parties have not been so much the object of study in the more recent past, while they seem to be regarded in some of the more programmatic literature on ‘governance’ as being rather a problem, presumably because they cannot be relied upon as instruments of rational policy-making and implementation. This may be part of the reason for the

¹ Chapter 4 of the thesis, which deals with Tamil politics, has been published with relatively minor modifications as the paper “Parties, Political Identities and the Absence of Mass Political Violence in South India”, in a book edited by Atul Kohli and Amrita Basu (OUP, Delhi 1998).

current enthusiasm for ‘building organisations in civil society’ which are (supposedly, at least) outside the political arena. The work of these two scholars is interesting, too, because of the approach to political analysis which it reflects. Both are equally impatient with the reductionism of rational choice analyses, and with economic reductionism, and are influenced by culturalist approaches without being bowled over by them. Swamy argues against what he calls ‘building block’ models of politics which take it that demands and interests exist prior to and independently of politics, and social groups as existing prior to political mobilisation. Subramanian, somewhat similarly, wants to analyse what he refers to as ‘the social matrix of contention’, or the interactions of social structure (in the sense of ‘stratum’), prior solidarities and ongoing competition among competing political forces. Both, therefore, seek to take account of interests and of ideas and values and of their interplay.

‘Populism’ is one of those terms which is widely but loosely used and perhaps little understood, so that some scholars have been led to question its value altogether for political analysis. It is rather confusing when the same term is applied to a farmers’ movement in the US in the late nineteenth century, to a movement which was in opposition to the Bolsheviks in Russia at around the same time, to a regime like that of Peron in Argentina, which involved a form of corporatism, and to a political leader such as MGR. ‘Populism’, indeed, is not an established political philosophy like socialism or liberalism or even fascism, associated with particular programmatic texts (in spite of the efforts perhaps especially of the Russian Narodniks to supply a distinct philosophy); and it can, quite reasonably, be seen as an aspect of what are in other ways contrasted political philosophies or movements. There was a sense, for example, in which it made good sense to think of there being a strong streak of populism in Margaret Thatcher’s conservatism, as much as in the socialism of her opponent as the Leader of the GLC – and now the new Mayor of London – ‘Red Ken’ Livingstone. ‘Populism’ is properly used, Subramanian suggests, “to characterise movements, parties and regimes [I would add ‘policies’, too] which articulate notions of a ‘people’ defined by special norms rooted in its history “(1999: 8)². In Thatcher’s case it was ‘the British people’, in Livingstone’s it was an appeal to ‘Londoners’. But put in this way it is perhaps not sufficiently distinguished from nationalist thinking, and it is important to add – as Subramanian does in his text – the adjective ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’ or ‘simple’ to the word ‘people’. Populism also invokes an idea of the mass of ‘the common people’ who are either excluded from or only have limited access to privilege, and who are thus

² Cf also Wiles, quoted by Swamy: “any movement or doctrine that rests on the premiss that virtue resides in the simple people who are the overwhelming majority and in their collective traditions”

distinguished from the elite, which does have access to privilege and embodies alternative cultural traditions (at the very least, Glyndebourne versus The Sex Pistols, or the refinements of The Music Academy versus Bollywood film music). What populist politics proposes is to secure access to spheres of privilege for the ordinary people, but without necessarily changing the system which generates differentiation in the first place. In rather the same way populist economics seems to propose that it is possible to have the benefits of a market economy without the downsides of competition (which mean that not all are going to be equally successful). Arun Swamy captures all of this quite well when he proposes as a definition that: “Populism is a doctrine that holds that ordinary people have been robbed of their due owing to no fault of their own. Undifferentiated populism charges the elite with both preventing just avenues for advancement and forgetting their moral obligation to protect the poor” (1996: 72). This definition has the merit, too, of showing up why it is that ‘populism’ has had such a bad press amongst social scientists and political commentators – because it hides significant differences between groups of people in terms of capabilities and access to resources (all ‘farmers’, for example, or all ‘Londoners’ are held to be in some way the same), and because populist reasoning obscures the social processes which create the differentiation which it seeks to address. Add to these points the fact that there was a strong element of populism in Nazism, for example, (substitute into Swamy’s definition as follows: “Nazism is a doctrine that holds that ordinary German people have been robbed of their due owing to no fault of their own but because of the machinations of the international Jewish conspiracy”); and the common observation that the pursuit of ‘populist policies’ is detrimental to sound economic management – and there appears to be a strong case indeed for treating the adjective ‘populist’ as a term of abuse. Yet both Subramanian and Swamy argue that in many ways ‘Dravidian populism’ has served the people of Tamil Nadu pretty well. I shall scrutinise their claims later in this paper.

The distinctive contribution that these two writers make, however, is not just that they in some way clarify the meaning of ‘populism’ and show how it explains the nature and the outcomes of Tamil politics, but rather that they distinguish forms of populist political mobilisation. Swamy claims the credit for having made a distinction between two forms of populism in the first place, and implies that Subramanian may have followed him without express acknowledgement. Indeed, the distinctions they draw are similar, though there are perhaps subtle differences between them. But let us start with Arun Swamy. He distinguishes between *empowerment populism* and *protection populism*, implying thereby a connection with the broad difference in patterns of

welfare policy, between those which focus on access to means of production, as opposed to those which aim to guarantee means of consumption. He defines his terms like this:

Empowerment populism holds that the people have been robbed by an alien and privileged elite, and the leading segments of 'the people' will redress these grievances by attacking the sources of disprivilege

Protection populism holds that the people have been robbed by selfish special interests and it is the role of the elite or of the government, to keep those interests in check and to protect and to provide for the poor (i.e it identifies leading elements of 'the people' as the problem rather than the elite) (1996: 72)

The latter depends upon the possibilities for the deployment of what are called 'sandwich tactics' in which as Swamy sums it up "have-a-lots succeed in allying with have-nothings against the have-a-littles". The sandwich means the outflanking of 'middle-level' interests by an alliance between those at the apex of a pyramid of power with those at the bottom. Sandwich tactics are manifested in policies which seek to limit redistributive concessions to those held to be the most unfortunate; and they can result in an institutionalised pattern of party competition around a centrist populist axis rather than a contest between left and right. Specifically he argues in his thesis that what has been described by so many political commentators as fragmented and inchoate, personalised party politics in India, can in fact be understood in terms of the contention between the two kinds of populism. The Congress has historically, both in the pre-Independence period and subsequently, pursued sandwich tactics, while its challengers have emphasised policies favouring middle groups. The two 'forms' are rhetorics of mobilisation, and imply different patterns of alliances. 'Empowerment populism', indeed, seems on the face of it to be not very clearly differentiated from the political mobilisation of class - but the language is crucially different. This may be why empowerment populism is ultimately weak - because the differences of interest and the different social solidarities amongst 'the people' can be opened up by the political elite (as has happened several times in the history of Dravidianism). On the whole, Swamy argues, in relation to Tamil Nadu specifically, and to Indian politics in general, the sandwich tactics of 'protection populism' have been more successful than 'empowerment populism'.

With regard to Tamil politics Swamy argues that “The Dravidian Movement provides an excellent example of empowerment populism’s ability to combine several sources of grievance into a single identity, and to shift meanings among diverse elements as political circumstances change” (1996: 148). He refers here to the different issues which were taken up by the Justice Party, the Self Respect Movement, the DK and the DMK, at different times, all of them reflecting in some way an attack on privilege, and to the shifts which took place from anti-Brahmanism to ‘Tamilism’, from notions about an identity based on race to one around language, and from secessionism to cultural nationalism. But the history of Dravidianism also shows the vulnerability of empowerment populism to a politics of protection for the weak. Swamy argues that it was really only when the Congress appeared to falter over food supply in the mid-60s, at a time when the language issue, too, became particularly acute for Tamil speakers, that its claims to represent Tamilians and the poor were undermined. ‘Empowerment populism’ was always vulnerable to conflicts within its constituencies, between the ‘more’ and the ‘less’ backward (with which the Justice Party had to contend in the first place), and between agrarian classes. MGR, Swamy and Subramanian both suggest, proved himself to be adept early in his period of office in opening up these conflicts (as in the way in which he succeeded in breaking the Farmers’ Movement in the state). The DMK, Swamy argues, apparently had difficulty in holding on to lower caste groups and the very poor from the beginning (and he refers here, amongst other evidence, to the muted response of the DMK government to the notorious Kilvenmani incident in 1969). These conflicts made the DMK, which pursued principally the rhetoric and the practice of empowerment populism vulnerable to sandwich tactics on its own issues and to the substitution of welfare policies. The emergence of the ADMK “replicates a critical feature of similar splits in the history of the movement since 1916: attempts to unite the majority of Tamils against a common enemy by addressing them as a single category, repeatedly failed because, first, some newly mobilized groups viewed themselves as relatively more disprivileged. And second, because the poorest voters responded to other parties’ promises to address their basic needs” (1999: 147). This, at bottom, is what the ADMK did with great success from the mid-1970s, and which accounts for its having succeeded in holding onto power for the greater part of twenty years, retaining particularly strong support, as the MCC opinion surveys showed, amongst the poorer, less educated people, and amongst women. It seems that MGR was successful, through the noon meals scheme, in retaining his image as the protector of the poor and of women in particular, in spite of the lifting of prohibition; and there is some evidence which suggests that the very poorest did derive real benefits from these measures (notably in the evidence which Swamy quotes on the decline in the incidence of severe malnutrition in the state). Swamy makes a strong point, too,

when he suggests that it is not the 'peculiarities' of Tamil society and the popularity of particular film stars which accounts for the effectiveness of protection populism in the state. There is a significant material base for it: given that the Tamil Nadu economy is characterised by monetisation and by wage labour to a greater extent than most other Indian states, and that it has a particularly high rate of participation of women in the wage labour force, it seems reasonable to suppose that social insurance and welfare programmes are especially salient in Tamil Nadu and for Tamil women.

The argument is persuasive enough to lend support to Swamy's general conclusion which is that stable party competition should be viewed "as arising not from parties grounded in identifiable social groups or ideologies, but through the competition between broad rhetorical strategies, flexible enough to be elaborated in terms of different substantive policy positions. Necessarily populist in character, these do not so much aggregate interests as attract diverse voters, experiencing analogous concerns, to familiar themes that resonate with their condition" (1996: 474). And as he argues in the paper "Parties, Political Identities and the Absence of Mass Political Violence in South India" (1999) it is perhaps the nature of the party system in Tamil Nadu – "the ways in which parties define the ideological space of a polity and incorporate the electorate" (1999: 108) – which accounts in good measure for that absence. There is little documentation in his account of the Tamil case, however, of the support bases of the DMK and the ADMK, of how these may have shifted over time, or of the character of the political elite. And his arguments about the 'success' of protection populism in the 1980s are superficial. He takes no account at all of the demonstration by Guhan, and following him by Pandian, of the way in which the operation of the fiscal system in the state at this time worked in the interests of the richer members of the society, and actually taxed the poor, so that the benefits which the latter derived from, for example, the noon meals scheme, were to a significant extent paid for by the poor themselves through tax revenue. The schemes of the ADMK "had very little consequence (therefore) in terms of a redistribution of income and wealth from the rich to the very poor" (Pandian 1992: 24), great vote catchers though they were.

Narendra Subramanian offers a very similar but much more richly documented history of Tamil politics, which supplies some of the deficiencies of Swamy's more schematic account. He draws not only on the same, more or less standard English language sources as Swamy, but also the Tamil language literature and the Tamil press, and on the results of interviews with several hundreds of political activists, particularly in the five state legislative assembly constituencies

that he selected for special study. It seems a shame, however, that those he interviewed are rarely allowed, in the text, to speak with their own voice. Points are documented with reference to the testimony of ‘x’ and ‘y’, but only very rarely do we actually hear what ‘x’ or ‘y’ actually said . Still, one of the strengths of Subramanian’s book is its analysis of the ideology of Dravidianism.

Dravidianism grew out of anti-brahmanism (directed – it has usually been held³ - by upwardly mobile and more powerful members of intermediate castes against brahman dominance in the institutions of colonial rule). In the hands of E.V.Ramswami (‘Periyar’) in the 1930s and 1940s it was associated with a vision of Dravidian and shudra primacy against ‘Aryan’ brahminism. It articulated, therefore, precisely that sense of ‘ordinary people having been robbed of their due’ which is at the core of the kind of thinking which can sensibly be described as ‘populist’. Periyar’s rationalist assertions and his anti-brahminism led him to make sometimes dramatic attacks on Hinduism (rather than on religion in general), inverting orthodoxy, in what Subramanian calls ‘the politics of heresy’. But these, in Subramanian’s view, were politics of protest rather than of social change (Geetha and Rajadurai regard the Self Respect Movement differently, holding that it articulated a distinct social vision : 1998), and the development of an inclusive Tamil nationalism – associating the Dravidian community with the non-Sanskritic Tamil language and cultural tradition, and with its territory, rather than with the shudra category – and then the projection of this into active electoral politics, was the achievement of C N Annadurai and his followers. After 1949, when they split away from Periyar to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Annadurai and those who followed him brought about an important shift “from politics of heresy to the politics of community”. Subramanian does not concede that this shift obscured the material and ideological bases of oppression and subordination and might be considered to have been a regression (see below). The thrust of it was anti-elite rather than anti-alien (brahmans were treated increasingly as Tamils of a different stripe), emphasising a non-Sanskritic identity, Tamil as opposed to English speakers, and opposing the political elites governing India who wished to introduce Hindi as the sole national language. In contrast to what happened elsewhere, Subramanian points out, the DMK incorporated caste categories *within* a vision of popular community, in which what counted was ‘doing Tamil’ (culturally, linguistically) rather than an idea of Tamil racial substance

³ V Geetha and S V Rajadurai (1998) have recently qualified this conventional account, showing “the various trajectories of non-brahmin assertion beginning with the articulation of dalit voices as these emerged from about the last decades of the nineteenth century” (p xv)

It rapidly became much more a populist than an ethnic discourse – of a plebeian stamp, emphasising the notion of the common (Tamil) man - and the genius of Annadurai and others in the DMK was in their ability to create and to communicate a mytho-history which had meaning for ordinary people in a way that the 'scientific', developmental project of the Nehruvian state did not. A telling point is actually made in a footnote: “The DMK protested against Nehru’s visit to Madras in 1953 to inaugurate a science exhibition, demanding that an exhibition also be conducted on Tamil history, and criticizing the neglect of South Indian history in textbooks. The posture of the parties to this confrontation – Nehru inaugurating a science exhibition, and the DMK demanding attention to Dravidian cultural history – reflect their contrasting approaches to the formation of the citizen. To Nehru, who placed the spirit of science and rationality at the core of nation-building, the DMK’s demands could only appear nonsensical” (1999: 157, fn 90). Not only Nehru, but the communists too, lost out: “For instance [a DMK leader and a communist] debated each other ... on what is most indispensable to man, food (the supposed communist view) or *maanam* (dignity – the putative Dravidianist view). The terms of the debate clearly gave the DMK the high moral ground” (note 83, p155). Instinctively, it seems, the DMK leaders recognised what many intellectuals, here and elsewhere, have only come to acknowledge much more recently. Sudipta Kaviraj has written eloquently about the ‘neighbourly incommunication’ between the modernising national political elite, and the ‘vernacular’ masses. The emerging Tamil political elite, however, was extraordinarily adept in building precisely that “common thinker we-ness ... and a single political language” which, according to Kaviraj (1991), the elite of the Nehruvian state neglected. No matter what its policy achievements, or its success in maintaining support amongst the ‘big men’ of the Tamil country, Congress gradually lost out through the 1950s and 1960s, to the world of meaning - precisely a ‘common thinker we-ness’ - created by the DMK, as well as to its increasing organizational strength. Subsequently, the fact that the DMK held on to a widespread base of support even through the long years in which it was out of office – and so was denied the possibility of maintaining support through the extension of state patronage (in what Subramanian aptly describes as ‘populist clientelism’) - shows how effectively the party has built ideological support. Nowhere else in the country, it seems to me, save perhaps in the states in which the CPM has consistently won support, has a political party been so successful in creating a body of shared meanings – though this success has closed off certain political possibilities, notably those of working class political mobilisation.

It is this culturally-rooted and engineered meaning system that Subramanian opposes to the ‘vacuous brand of secularism’ of his parents’ generation, and which he wishes to oppose also to

the homogenizing intentions of Hindu nationalism. Unfortunately the construction of such an ideology is not a 'policy choice'. Neither is it clear, in the 1990s, which Subramanian does not discuss, that the flexibility of Dravidianism that both the writers whose work is discussed here rather celebrate, is not actually compatible with the ideology of Hindu nationalism. Neither Subramanian nor Arun Swamy seems to have recognised the strength of popular support for hindutva in Tamil society, though this is attested in relation specifically to Dalits, in work published by Anandhi and M S S Pandian already in 1994 (see references in Anandhi 1995, chapter 3), which aims to explain "the increasing participation of Dalits in Hindu communal programmes like the Vinayaka processions [on the occasion of Vinayaka Chaturthi, which is now being celebrated in Tamil Nadu as never before⁴] and in communal riots" (Anandhi 1995: 29). These writers regret what they think of as having been the 'ideological regression' of the Dravidian Movement, when with the formation of the DMK, language identity was privileged over the rest which "left Hindu identity as well as other identities unproblematised" and ended up by sanitising Hinduism "of how it constituted relations of power through its interactions with other identities like caste and gender" (Anandhi 1995: 28). This has allowed Hindu communal organisations to colonise parts of civil society in Tamil Nadu. Though Subramanian – in my view - does a brilliant job in explaining the ideological success of Dravidianism, and implicitly of explaining why Tamil Nadu is in important respects politically exceptional, he also brushes over the extent to which this ideology is not so much opposed to that of Hindu nationalism as open to it.

But to return to another of the strengths of the book: this is in the way in which it documents, partly though an interesting account of the social geography of electoral competition, the shifting bases of support of political parties (what is presumed but never demonstrated by Swamy). The analysis draws largely on Subramanian's detailed studies of five assembly constituencies: Royapuram in northern Madras city, and Tiruvannamalai on the northern plains of Tamil Nadu; Mannargudi in the Kaveri valley; Dindigul on the southern plains; and Sermadevi in the Tamirapani Valley in the 'Deep South'. They were selected both to represent different regions with their varying social structures and different phases in the history of Dravidianism. The basic argument is that "Dravidian populism successfully addressed the intermediate and lower strata" (1999: 47) which were marginal to the strategies of the Congress, mobilising support rather through local elites, or of the communists who identified primarily with the property-less. By the

⁴ The Vinayaka Chaturthi processions are currently being researched by C J Fuller of the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics.

term 'intermediate strata' Subramanian refers to those of both middle caste and middle class position, meaning white collar workers and small to middling property holders, and by 'lower strata' he refers to those from lower castes, especially Dalits/Scheduled Castes with little or no property. The DMK, however, came to be rooted primarily amongst people "with some social capability but limited political influence" (1999: 48), people from intermediate castes with small property, like small shopkeepers and small peasants, and including many of the Muslims of the state. "Groups which were socially capable but culturally distinct from the gentry were the mainstay of early Dravidianist social coalitions, and were best able to appropriate party appeals for their ends" (1999: 45). In office, from the outset the DMK "benefited primarily rising groups and especially party supporters", while under Karunandhi a tilt towards "emergent Backward Classes" became stronger, further alienating both the upper and the lower strata. The ADMK, after its formation, garnered much more support amongst Scheduled Castes, those with little or no property, and amongst women (MGR's appeal to whom is well discussed by Pandian, 1992), and it created more space both for upper castes (MGR repudiated anti-Brahmanism) and (in the 1980s, at least) for non-Hindus, whilst still accommodating some demands of the intermediate strata. These arguments are derived partly from interviews with party activists and partly from study of electoral geography. The latter, however, brings out the ways in which these social structural relationships have been modified by particular histories of party organisation and competition, and by the influence of caste solidarities. The DMK grew rapidly through the later 1950s and early 1960s amongst the numerous 'intermediate' groups of the northern plains, but the party never had quite the same success in the, in many ways comparable, social contexts of the southern and western plains, partly because of the strength of Congress organisation there, partly because of the difficulties the party had with such caste solidarities as those of Vanniars and Mukkulathurs. The ADMK has always performed better in the south and in the Tamirapani valley. There are interesting questions about the geography of electoral support, such as the basis for the strength of Swatantra in Tamirapani and the 'Deep South', which emerge from the analysis which are not addressed (understandably so in view of the main focus of the book).

Conceptually the historical narrative depends upon the posing of two distinct categories: 'assertive populism' and 'paternalist populism'. The analysis shows how these modes of political action have intertwined in the history of Tamil politics, and how its phases reflect that interplay and its outcomes. The meaning of 'paternalist populism' is more or less self-evident (and it is what is often identified as 'populism' in general): a benevolent leader - and MGR, the founding genius of the ADMK was the very archetype of such a figure - or a party or state, promises to provide

for 'the people', through subsidised wage goods and protection from repressive elites. In the period of ADMK rule in the 1980s paternalism was to the fore, The content of the idea of 'assertive populism' is perhaps less immediately apparent, but it is also the key to Subramaniam's analysis of what has been distinctive about the Dravidian parties in Tamilnadu. Under assertive populism excluded groups are urged to assert themselves against the discrimination which they have faced (partly focussed in Tamilnadu by agitations over the language issue), and to secure entitlements (to education, jobs, loans, subsidised producer goods and sometimes small pieces of property). Demands are presented as being made on behalf of the 'popular community'. This mode of populism strikes more, therefore, against social deference than does paternalist populism; but its forms of action also mean that the groups most involved are likely (as we have seen. In the case of the key supporters of the DMK) to be ones with some 'social capability'. Paternalist populism appeals more strongly to the 'lower strata' (including , perhaps mainly, the dalits) and women, who are often unable to assert their demands independently. (The chapter on the ADMK contains an interesting analysis of MGR's appeal to women, and of gender constructions in Dravidian politics). It is the strand of assertive populism, combined with the existence of vigorous competition between the Dravidian parties, with their somewhat different constituencies, which accounts for the sustained electoral success of populism in Tamilnadu, underlain by the embracing, and multi-layered character of the ideology of Dravidianism.

The close similarity between Subramanian's concepts and those of Arun Swamy is apparent, though the former emphasises more the style of political action, and the latter the different alliances of classes which are involved. Their arguments complement each other, and the distinction which they make, seems both valid (certainly in regard to Tamil politics) and insightful. Subramanian's analysis of the interplay of the two forms of populism in the history of Tamil politics from the later 1940s to the beginning of the 1990s, though much richer in detail, does not differ very significantly in terms of its purport, from Swamy's. His account, however, brings out more clearly the ways in which assertive/empowerment populism brought about the political mobilisation of hitherto excluded groups; and, as he says "The assertive populist outlook regards the activist's self-willed activity as the basis of movement and the social changes it introduces" (1999: 74). This is a possible aspect of populist political ideology and organisation which has not generally been recognised, I believe.

Nonetheless Subramanian is led to portray 'Dravidian populism', as it has been articulated by the DMK and ADMK, in an oddly rosy-tinted manner. While I, as a reader, find the analysis of Dravidianism in the book, and the account of the interplay of the two faces of populism within it, compelling, the constructions which Subramanian himself builds upon these arguments appear tortuous and in the end, even perverse. His central concern is with the fact that, though Tamilnadu has had a powerful political movement, and political parties deriving from it, which have projected a strong ethnic identity – initially that of 'the Dravidian' and later of 'the Tamilian' - the politics of the state have not succumbed to ethnically defined exclusivism, in spite of pressures towards it at different times. Rather have the politics of Dravidianism had the effect of fostering social pluralism and a pluralist democracy. Given the pervasiveness of ethnic conflict in the contemporary world, and the common failure of states in managing such conflict, and in the context, too, of the strength of an exclusivist Hindu nationalism in Indian politics, Subramanian suggests that the Tamil case is of particular comparative interest. The core of his argument in response to the questions he poses is that in the politics of Dravidianism, though ethnic appeal has supplied cohesion, the dominant motif and mechanism has rather been populist. The populist features of Dravidian ideology rather rapidly became more significant than its ethnic features in generating support – as is shown, for instance, by the greater success of the ADMK than of the DMK after 1977, in spite of the fact that it adopted less militant postures, and had enormously popular leaders in MGR and then Jayalalitha, who were not actually native Tamils. Populism has here moderated the potential of ethnicity to generate disintegrative social conflict, and had "sustained success (in aiding) the representation of emergent social groups" (1999: 13, 310). Given that populism has often lapsed into authoritarianism, centred on a 'great leader', and sometimes been allied with fascism this conclusion concerning the 'success' of populist politics in the case of Tamilnadu itself calls for explanation.

The one which is offered is that Dravidianism has encouraged "organizational pluralism within influential political organizations", and that this "*alone explains the emergence and maintenance of social pluralism*" (emphasis in the original, p. 38). By 'social pluralism', which he takes to be a condition of pluralist democracy, Subramanian means: "the existence of many active associations significantly autonomous of the state and of one another – it does not exclusively denote ethnic diversity although social pluralism would enable citizens to affirm ethnic difference" (1999: 3) ; while 'organizational pluralism': "denotes the extent of autonomy and flexibility characterizing both relations within an organization (a movement or party) and transactions between the organization and society" (1999:37). The components of the

'organizational pluralism' of Dravidianism are said to be 'leadership flexibility', referring to the fact that its leaders have pursued a long run strategy and goals which they have been ready, nonetheless, to adjust in the light of the outlooks and interests of support groups and non-support groups; and – relatedly - the autonomy both of party cadres and of supporters. The historical narrative of the book dwells at some length on the transactions of the both the DMK and the ADMK regimes with organised groups – especially caste associations, farmers' association and industrial and agricultural trade unions – showing how both parties have deployed accommodation and repression (especially in regard to unions) in managing them, but have been ready to shift their positions as they have done so. A contrast is drawn at several points, and finally in the conclusion, with Hindu nationalism, which has neither shown the same flexibility, nor allowed such autonomy amongst cadres and supporters. But then, of course, as Subramaniam at last concedes, the core leadership of Hindu nationalism – in the RSS – has sought quite specifically to oppose moves in the direction of such 'flexibility'. The whole comparison would be a hare, but for the fact that the BJP, in its pursuit of office, has in fact shown the sort of flexibility which Subramaniam describes in the case of Dravidianism. In the last few years the BJP has displayed what has seemed often to be a cynical ruthlessness in the way in which it has trimmed and 'adjusted' to win the support of different coalition partners in different parts of the country, and to extend its support base (not very successfully, so far) beyond the middle classes and upper castes.

Part of the problem, as I have pointed out elsewhere (*Frontline* 17 March 2000), is that flatly contradictory statements are made about the relationships of 'social pluralism' and 'organizational pluralism' at different points in the text. The latter, as we saw in the quotation given in the preceding paragraph, is said alone to explain "the emergence and maintenance of social pluralism". Later it is suggested that "high levels of mobilisation outside the party system [and what is this if not a reference to the existence of 'active associations'?] before the Dravidian mobilisation" (1999: 319) aided the emergence of those features which are described as being those of 'organizational pluralism'. So at the last the argument is confused, though it seems possible that what Subramaniam intends is to say that organizational pluralism and social pluralism are inter-related, and mutually supportive, but that the nature of political organizations supplies an essential context for thriving 'social pluralism'. The implications which are drawn as 'Guidelines for Citizencraft', such as the idea that "citizens committed to tolerance must mobilize autonomously of states and parties, even while engaging with these institutions" (1999:

326) would be platitudinous, but for the popularity amongst a good many intellectuals and activists of the mistaken notion that voluntary associations in civil society can somehow stand in the place of political parties, or even (in extreme forms of the argument) of the state itself.

But the confusion in the text surrounding the relations of the Dravidian political parties and 'social pluralism' and pluralist democracy seems even perverse, in the sense that the arguments brush over the strongly repressive aspects of the rule of both the DMK and the ADMK. These are actually referred to, for example, in the passages on the attacks of the ADMK regime on trade unions in which it is noted that "The police were particularly violent in suppressing strikes in bicycle, automobile and textile factories, and in the Madras harbour" (1999: 296, and ff), and the subsequent short discussion of 'social control', in which it is concluded that "Although the inclinations of paternalist populism towards social control were tempered *by the prior strength of social pluralism* (my emphasis: JH), civil rights were abridged when MGR's government faced radical challenges and when Jayalalitha's felt beleaguered". These observations – and similar ones made about the DMK regime in the 1970s, when it is said that "Local DMK leaders and party activists resorted increasingly to violence to enforce their will (and) gangs of toughs became part of the party's repertoire everywhere" (1999: 236) - are hard to reconcile with the idea that there is something special about the Dravidian parties which encourages 'social pluralism'. Add to this problematical neglect in Subramanian's overall assessment the strong possibility, noted by Anandhi and Pandian (see above), that Tamil cultural nationalism leaves open spaces in civil society for the mobilisation of Hindu nationalism, and the increasing evidence of the renewal of caste conflict in the state⁵, and it is rather hard to accept the notion that Dravidian populism has been such a great 'success' except in so far as it has indeed made for remarkably durable regimes. It is perhaps hardly surprising that the state has not exactly been in the forefront in the promotion of democratic decentralisation; or that an analysis of the fertility transition in Tamil Nadu, by comparison with that of Kerala, should have shown that it reflects a 'coercive' rather than a 'cooperative' process (Nagaraj, nd). Generally, it is widely felt, the rule of the Dravidian parties has become increasingly authoritarian, and focussed on the leader at the centre – and that these tendencies have become increasingly apparent in the 1990s, while developments in the economy may have enhanced social exclusion. The strand of assertive populism has worn thin.

⁵ In addition to the violence between Thevars and Dalits in southern districts in the recent past, there are observations from field researchers of reversion in some villages either to excluding Dalits altogether from village teashops or to making them drink from a separate vessel.

The work of the historian David Washbrook on contemporary Tamil politics gets fairly short shrift from both the authors whose work is discussed here. Washbrook may have gone awry, as Arun Swamy suggests, in so far as he failed to distinguish between the rhetorics and the modes of mobilisation of the DMK and the ADMK; and his argument is objectionable for the way in which it disparages popular common-sense and understanding. But there seems still to be some substance in his view that: “the AIADMK regime [specifically the ADMK regime and not the DMK, I think: JH] was one of bread (or rice) and circuses (or movies) and in broad political terms, might be conceived as *a form of Bonapartist or Caesarian democracy* (my emphasis, JH – as opposed to ‘pluralist democracy’). Classically, the bourgeoisie, or the elite of wealth, withdrew from a formal position of control over the state apparatus and the constitutional political process. Not only was their direct control no longer necessary for the purposes of capital accumulation but their attempt to exercise it ... provoked resistance and instability. Formal control was transferred to a cadre of professional political managers who on the basis of a populist ideology, mollified resistance by turning what was left of the state into a welfare agency and by stirring up feelings of patriotism and atavism” (1989: 258). The ADMK and the DMK have both supplied regimes which have succeeded to a greater extent, no doubt, than regimes in some (perhaps most) other Indian states, in relation both to economic growth (particularly latterly, with the flows of FDI into the state and the growth of the software industry) and ‘human development’ – though some analyses suggest that the ‘initial conditions’ of circa 1960 were relatively favourable to progress in the latter. But the extent to which these ‘achievements’ have come with a high price attached in relation to civil rights, popular liberty and something like substantive democracy is unmistakable.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank participants in a seminar presented at the Madras Institute of Development Studies for a lively discussion which led me to reconsider some of my views; Vasanthi Devi and K S Subramanian for their courteous patience with me; and Andrew Wyatt (of the University of Bristol) and K Nagaraj and M S S Pandian (of MIDS) for their encouragement - though I must add that these last two friends in particular are entirely exonerated from any responsibility for the arguments which appear in this article.

References

Anandhi, S (1995) *Contending Identities: Dalits and Secular Politics in Madras Slums*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute (Sponsored Publication No.51/95)

Basu, A and Kohli, A (eds) (1998) *Community Conflicts and the State in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press

Geetha, V and Rajadurai, S V (1998) *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: from Iyothee Thass to Periyar*. Calcutta: Samya

Kaviraj, S (1991) 'On state, society and discourse in India', in J Manor (ed) *Rethinking Third World Politics*. London: Longman

Nagaraj, K nd *Fertility Decline in Tamil Nadu*. Mss, Madras Institute of Development Studies

Pandian, M S S (1992) *The Image Trap: M G Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications

Subramanian, N (1999) *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: political parties, citizens and democracy in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press

Swamy, A (1996) *The Nation, the People and the Poor – sandwich tactics in party competition and policy formation, India 1931-1996*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Washbrook, D A (1989) 'Caste Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non-Brahminism, Dravidianism and Tamil Nationalism', in F Frankel and M S A Rao (eds) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press