

Tamils celebrate Ravana as a hero and Rama as the villain

The Tamil Nadu countryside is exposed to folk forms that celebrate Ravana as a hero and Rama as the villain who treated women unfairly. Many Tamils who know the Ramayana know it through its Tamil version, the Kamba Ramayanam. In it, Ravana is highly venerated as a Vedic scholar, a connoisseur of music, a warrior—as an epitome of everything moral. In short, Ravana is a tragic hero, not a villain.

In the eyes of history, Rama remains a mythological figure because there are no coins, edicts or other evidence to prove that he existed. But he has been part of the collective consciousness of Hindus for a long time. However, for the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam—like its precursor Dravidar Kazhagam and its patriarch Periyar—Rama has never been a hero figure.

In fact, Rama is seen as an invader not above chicanery who vanquished the 'Dravidian' king Ravana who, when viewed through DMK bifocals, comes through as a more humane character. While Rama questioned Sita's chastity leading to her agnipariksha, Ravana is seen as the man who never violated her although he abducted her and took her away to his kingdom, Lanka. The Tamil Nadu countryside is exposed to folk forms that celebrate Ravana as a hero and Rama as the villain who treated women unfairly.

Not surprisingly, octogenarian DMK leader and Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi—always faithful to his atheist roots—has been known to make statements that would be considered blasphemous by Rama devotees. He did just that this week at the 99th birth anniversary of Periyar in Erode. "Some say there was a person over 17 lakh years ago—his name, Ram. And we shouldn't touch the bridge (Ram Setu) he built. Who is this Ram? From which engineering college did he graduate? Is there any proof of this?" He went a step further when he declared on September 20 that he stood by all that he had said and that "Ram is a big lie". Karunanidhi remains unrepentant even as alleged Sangh parivar members attacked his daughter Selvi's house in Bangalore.

Karunanidhi's statements don't come as a shock to V. Geetha, an academic and editor with Tara Publications who has co-authored a book on the Dravidian movement. Says she: "From the early days of the Dravidian movement, leaders, publicists and ideologues were opposed to the use of Ramayana iconography by Hindu nationalist leaders—within the Indian National Congress and out of it. They felt the Ramayan exemplified all the ills of what they considered northern—Brahminical Aryan culture. The beheading of Tadaka, the killing of Shambuka, the banishing of Sita etc were considered instances of Aryan racism and barbarity."

But Geetha says that what should be borne in mind is that Rama is not such an emotive issue in the south. For instance, Ramlalla, the deity of the child Ram, which was smuggled in and installed at the disputed site in Ayodhya, does not strike a chord in these parts. In a historical sense, Rama has not been as important as some other gods in the Hindu pantheon. He has, for example, never been a guardian deity of dynasties. There are much fewer Ram temples than Shiva temples in TN, and even in Kerala.

Rama's rather unhappy tale is one reason for this, points out Dr A.R. Venkatachalapathy of the Madras Institute of Development Studies. "The popular belief is that worshipping Rama will bring grief—he was banished, his wife was abducted, his children were born in the forest." In fact in Tamil Nadu, Diwali—or Deepavali—is celebrated in memory of Krishna's victory over Narakasura.

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So why did Karunanidhi choose to go strident on the Ram Setu issue? Social scientist M.S.S. Pandian, who is a visiting professor at Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, notes that Rama and Ramayana have been criticised in public even before. He points out that the non-Brahmin critique has three strands: Rama, a Kshatriya loyal to Brahminism, kills Shambuka, a Shudra, for doing penance; Rama is deceitful in killing the monkey king Bali; and the Ramayana is an allegorical story of the northern conquest of the south.

DMK spokesperson T.K.S. Elangovan does not want to go as far as the CM but stoutly defends the Sethusamudram project. As for the Ram issue creating a stir and being revived by parties like the bjp, he has this to offer: "The question

today isn't whether or not Rama existed. It is simply that the bridge is not a man-made and there is no archaeological evidence to support the contrary."

Ravi Kumar, an MLA of the Dalit Panthers of India, says the focus of the debate on Sethusamudram project should have been on whether it is environmentally safe and economically beneficial. He feels this has got sidetracked. "Tamil Nadu has no popular tradition of Ram worship. In villages, they worship local deities...only recently have Hanuman statues sprung up—along the highways. But they have no cultural roots," he says.

But why is Karunanidhi targeting Hindu gods, asks political analyst Cho Ramaswamy. "His remark is an exercise in perversion. Why doesn't he question the immaculate conception or some of the other beliefs in other religions? All religions should be respected."

Interestingly, the average Brahmin Outlook contacted is not as affronted by Karunanidhi's remarks as his brethren in the rest of the country. For him, his own ritualistic worship of Rama and the DMK's atheist approach have coexisted—for decades together.

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