

Karunanidhi: A life by A.S. Panneerselvan

A discussion on the book Karunanidhi: A life by A.S. Panneerselvan was organised by Dravidian Professional Forum where A.S. Panneerselvan had joined to explain the purpose and intricacies of the book. Sunder Ganesan was the moderator.

Sunder Ganesan asked A.S. Panneerselvan that in the book he has mutually covered and incorporated Karunanidhi's biography, history of DMK and the Dravidian Movement beautifully. So how was he able to blend all that simultaneously into one book and what prompted him to this idea?

A.S. Panneerselvan said he had no instinct to write about the Dravidian Movement but to understand Karunanidhi's life it was very important to understand the movement which was for self-respect and dignity. He also explained the condition of India when the market had become the arbitrary controller of the economy after the collapse of the soviet in 1991. He emphasised that he had no political point of view in the book and Karunanidhi is the natural metaphor for the movement. He also told some of the challenges which he confronted while writing the biography which included interpreting 3,00,000 pages and 215 journals and telling and simplifying the movement for the people who are non-Tamils and do not know the movement but are excited to know the same.

Through this effort, he also tried to answer the trajectory of the state during Karunanidhi's rule and his leadership qualities in negotiating the political compulsions. The author stated that the minister had a clear distinction between compromise and conciliation while taking any decisions or actions.

Sunder asked what were the factors which inspired the author to write this book with the blend of movement and why did he use General Martin's and Markus Wiener's Biography in certain instances.

A.S. Panneerselvan said Markus depicted the politics of Latin America and it was easy for him to follow him. Markus said there are three lives; Public, Private and secret life but for a political leader there are four; Public, Private, secret and Life wished to live which in some way had concurrence with the man's opinion. He also mentioned the biggest challenge was to capture the nuances of the ideas, literature and polity topics written by Kalaingnar. Stating this he gave an example of translating just two lines of his letter which almost took him two weeks to understand and interpret.

Sunder asked about the Agham Puram aspects of Karunanidhi's life.

A.S. Panneerselvan said agham means no name of the person and using he/she to call people to respect privacy and a way to negotiate humiliation, pain and loss. Puram means when there are no facilities but the person has power through popularity and he said Kalaingnar had agham but not Puram and this is how he had the motivation to address the policies and work for the welfare of the people. Karunanidhi's pain becomes an idea or the push to address and find solutions through policies like the innovative Public Distribution system to address the woes of the poor showing empathy.

Sunder asked him that indeed the biography is extensive and how Kalaingar used his creativity in the political arena and as a tool in the Dravidian movement.

A.S. Pannerselvna said that in the book there is no proper evaluation of creativity and if we look at his acts considerably we can see that he used creative tools in a hybrid form where he picked up something in population imagination and included that in the Dravidian's movement. He clearly stated it is not adaptation they used to take one element and implement it as a key element in their literary approach.

Sunder asked what were the ideas used by the leader from the films and consciously avoided to strengthen the idea of the Dravidian movement.

A.S. explained about the methodology which had a clear idea by the 1940s and after critically reviewing Ramnakavya he recognised that he didn't believe in converting epics into history and followed the same methodological work every time. He also spoke about the idea of taking Buddhism and Jainism texts which were deliberately done to confront orthodoxy from Hindutva. Even NSK was the guiding principle for Karunanidhi where he realised that everyone talks about the tragedies which just inform while comedy helps to inform and transform at the same time. He also mentioned Kinden's idea of becoming liberated which is becoming a student where he said knowledge is the final destination.

Sunder also asked about the author's perspective towards the Tamil conference in Coimbatore.

A.S. said luckily there was no politics in 1968 and major development period but by 2011 the International Tamil conference was into politics and there was unnecessary politicisation and public participation while we need far better resonance and not politicisation.

Ganesan also asked Karunanidhi was able to keep the party intact for so long and the legacy continues even today but how did he manage the four splits within the party were challenging.

A.S. said that everyone was vocal in their position and documented their viewpoints and he also said to understand the situation it was important to see the difference while looking at the split parts and recognising the faultlines and leaders play an important role as they bring finer questions which help to understand the faultlines.

Sunder also asked in one of the splits why did it keep DMK out of office for several years.

A.S. said the 1972 split helped the party to retain political centre within the state and the 1978 effort by Biju Patnaik to split which was a failure turned out to be a blessing for the state. He also said that most of the parties separated from the core one have lifted portions from DMK's manifesto. The period between 1977-87jk could have been a substantive year for development but it did not identify even a single defining programme during that period. But despite that substantive loss the state gained and progress during Karunanidhi's regime is complementary and appreciable at the same time.

Sunder said that the author has constantly talked about conciliation and not compromise. So how did he reconcile with the Vyko after the split?

Author said Vyko is a specific case. He told about the 1989 case wherein Kasi was allotted the seat but he was defeated and the 1992 split had no major challenge because of the split as he had the space for conciliation which is central to his politics directly indicated in the 2020 election.

Sunder also asked about how other leaders look at the idea of the Dravidian movement and his ideas.

A.S. answered him by describing the political ideology of the leader which are of two types coming together and holding together. Coming together has two factors within it of centre-state relationship and fiscal arrangement to be encapsulated which people in Delhi had not understood. Karunanidhi followed the classical political thought of coming together and he identified people with whom he could discuss the ideas and could be backed by them and gave examples of Indira Gandhi's cabinet and his critical role there. He also amplified his idea as B.P. Singh a Punjab Politician and many other left leaders realised his ideas and some of the elements of his ideas. In some way he articulated the coming together classical ideology.

Sunder asked him about the formation of the National front because the coalition parties worked well for regional areas but why did people have different perceptions about the position of DMK and Karunanidhi.

A.S. said that Karunanidhi was against the sole representation of Tamils and 100% result. He was always moved by the plight of the people and hence worked for the welfare of the people. He didn't endorse sole representation at any point as it denied democratic space for every person. He was always of the opinion to have legitimate right to be representative and was always against the singular position and needed democratic space.

Sunder asked him about his meticulous use of the metaphor Karuppa and Moruppa in the book and elaborate a little about it.

A.S. explained the two terms fondly stating they were used in the Tamil Nadu High court for the very first time. Karuppa by saints means songs of grace, vulnerability, no space and compromise. It also has the trajectory of a scholar of being at a position of light while Moruppa means song of ignorance with exacting standards, no vulnerability, space, compromise and conciliation. Moruppa is doctrinal and Karuppa is humanitarian.

Sunder also asked an interesting question as his book reflects the idea of bipolar politics and what kind of negotiation took place while electoral politics under his rule.

A.S. described an interesting negotiation of 1967 where DMK could negotiate with partners with negotiation ideas. In an instance Rajaji was of the view of less government and more governance, CPM of no centralisation and more state-run enterprises and DMK had to negotiate with them and endorsed the idea of good government and said National Front was

neither left nor right but was at the front. So this clearly depicts his negotiation skills as a leader.

Sunder asked through the book we can see that Karunanidhi was a man of conciliation but what were the things that he could not conciliate.

A.S. replied that a non-DMK rule for 10 years was a major setback. From 1991 to 2001 the growth trajectory would have been an exponential curve but it rather declined. Kalangiar had also contributed to bringing stability to the union government and he also talked about state rights so he adopted a balanced path and had a stable matrix. He used it as a template for robust survival and hence used an interesting combination of politics.

Sunder asked the author there is no single book for the Dravidian movement, the history of DMK and its contribution. So what were the factors which motivated him to write this book and is he satisfied with this work.

A.s. said he wrote very little about the movement but it would have been unfair on the part of the founding leaders to initiate the movement. He said he didn't want to write a book to become a part of a thesis in the PhD as there are already. He wrote the book as if anyone wanted to know about Tamil Nadu and its history they could read this to understand. He also told that if someone wants to know about Tamil Nadu they should read in Tamil as there is one problem as certain things get lost in translation and superimposing English has become a problem.

Sunder also asked that people call him an unfortunate politician as even after doing so much for the people then also why did people have misunderstood him due to narratives.

A.S. interjected him and called Karunanidhi the luckiest politician who liked him and followed him for decades the number of people following him is constantly increasing but some of the people have deliberately misinterpreted him.

Q and A

Q) Kalaingar had a major role in convincing in the national politics but the deliberate blackout to a certain extent and sensationalisation by north Indian media had deteriorated his image to a large extent how did he take when he wasn't given the position in the centre.

A.S. said in the late 90s if he wanted he could become the Prime Minister as he had outstanding negotiation skills which he depicted in Bihar and Andhra Bhawan but he wasn't interested to become the PM and his statement was distorted by many politicians. Kalangiar was also offered the Presidential candidate before V.V. Giri but he refused and was considered for an important position as he wanted to make transformation at the grassroots level at the state level.

