

Opinion: Tamil Brahmin emigration was driven by opportunity, not socialism or identity politics

Tamil Nadu's social justice movement has yielded unparalleled and inclusive dividends, and this is not just backed by experiences, but also hard data.



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Sadanand Dhume's [article](#) (paywall) 'What Kamala Harris Isn't Saying About Her Mother's Background' on the Wall Street Journal is disappointing for its shallow and mistaken interpretation of complex issues.

When Dhume chose to address Harris's Indian lineage, his potential field of view was vast indeed, including such weighty issues as the evolution of caste and class over millennia of Tamil Culture, differing notions of social justice, the validity and effectiveness of equal opportunity programs, and comparing societal outcomes across regions and countries - as measured by standard social development indicators, or even simple economic statistics such as extent of paved roads, or per-capita GDP. Instead he has taken a tangential approach to reach an unsubstantiated conclusion of "the folly of pushing identity politics too far".

Dhume suggests that "more Americansdeserve to learn the lesson of the community into which Shyamala Gopalan was born" implying that a cautionary tale of excess will emerge from such study. On the contrary, a comprehensive study of Tamil politics over the past century will yield lessons for others to emulate.

To ensure a common starting point, and for those of you who may not be able to read the pay-walled article, here is my understanding of Dhume's logic and conclusions:

- The Tamil Brahmin community has suffered unfair marginalization in their home state of Tamil Nadu (known as Madras State between Independence and 1967, and a part of the Madras Presidency during British Colonial rule).
- This marginalization is evidenced by the emigration of Tamil Brahmins such as Shyamala Gopalan (in 1958, I add), former PepsiCo CEO Indira Nooyi (in 1978, I add) and current Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai (in 1993, I add) – these three examples being named among many unnamed others, including two Nobel Laureates.
- The emigration of these named and unnamed Tamil Brahmins who are significant achievers has been a significant loss to...presumably their state of origin, Tamil Nadu, and India.
- This marginalization-driven emigration is the result of a) Socialism (pan-India, post-Independence), and b) Identity Politics that has been a hallmark of Tamil politics since the early 20th century.

- Which leads to the policy lessons he implies: Socialism and Identity Politics are bad for a people/state/country – evidenced presumably by poor developmental outcomes for Tamil Nadu, though Dhume does not cite any statistics at all.

There are some factual errors in his article. For example, reservations (quotas) were first introduced in the 1920's by the Justice Party Government of Madras Presidency, formed by Indian Members of the Legislative Council elected under the Diarchy model implemented through the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. But I will focus on the profound flaws in logic and presumption, as well as internal contradictions leading up to these fallacious conclusions.

For the sake of both basis and full disclosure, I state that I am a fourth-generation member, and third-generation elected-representative of the Dravidian Movement, which was founded as a political force in 1916, and whose values are now espoused by the party I belong to – the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). I was born into an upper-caste (not Brahmin) family of ancestral landholders for centuries and am restricted to the same quota as Tamil Brahmins under the prevailing caste-based reservation system. I lived in the United States for 20 years (1987 to 2007), entering for the first of three eventual Graduate degrees, and then had careers in both Consulting and Investment Banking. More details, including my filings from when I ran for public office, are available in the public domain.

On this basis, let me consider the validity of each of these points, starting with the illusory examples of Shyamala Gopalan, Indra Nooyi and Sundar Pichai, who are imputed as great losses to Tamil Nadu (and India) because they migrated to the US, driven by unfair marginalization.

Opportunity drove Tamil Brahmins to the West

The alleged driver of their immigration is almost trivially simple to refute. Immigration to the US occurs from all over the world, and the common theme across all States of India, and all countries, is that the vast majority is driven by opportunity, not repression. The United States' Immigration Policies are explicitly designed to ensure this, by overwhelmingly skewing admission priorities toward high potential-contribution-value immigrants.

But beyond this general framework, the 3 named examples have something in common. They each entered the United States as Graduate Students – something that I have in common with them. The simple truth, sustained over decades, is that the United States today has the best (across scale and quality) Graduate Education system in the world, and therefore it is the biggest draw for aspiring students from every country in the world.

The pattern of the privileged in Tamil Nadu accessing the best-available international education dates to the 19th century at least. Many of the leaders of the Justice Party, who were largely the non-Brahmin elite, were educated at Oxbridge – then the epitome of Higher Education. My own grandfather, a stalwart of the party, was educated at The Leys School in Cambridge and Jesus College (Oxford), and was called to the Bar from the Inner Temple in London in 1917.

The privilege of Tamil Brahmins

Despite great improvements over the past seven decades since Independence, the Indian education ecosystem is simply not in the same league as the US system and cannot hope to accommodate more than a small fraction of the massive demand. Consequently, it is only the best and brightest of Indian aspirants who can make it to the US for Graduate school. So, the very fact that Gopalan, Nooyi, Pichai, and so many other Tamil Brahmins could access such a widely-held aspiration, which the vast majority simply cannot, puts paid to the fallacious theory that they have been unfairly marginalized.

The fallacy is further debunked because the three named Tamil Brahmins immigrated to the US over a period of 35 years – spanning 3 generations. If, as it is claimed, reservations (which started in the 1920s), and post-Independence (1947) socialism resulted in marginalization, surely it would have resulted, at least within a few decades, in denying Tamil Brahmins access to the requisite launchpad for immigrating to the United States for Graduate studies: a high quality school-education followed by outstanding under-graduate performance. It clearly has not. Further, if we take his (unsubstantiated, but true in my personal experience) claim of many more such high-achieving Tamil Brahmins in the US at face value, the fact that so very many from such a tiny community had such access further undermines his claim of marginalization.

Gain, not loss, for Tamil Nadu

As for the other contention, are these named three (and the unnamed others) really losses to Tamil Nadu? If so, it must be true that they would have achieved equivalently high-impact positions had they “stayed back” in Tamil Nadu, and EQUALLY, that they could/cannot be of similar value to Tamils in their current status in the US.

But...they simply could not have achieved anywhere near their current positions if they had stayed back in Tamil Nadu, irrespective of any potential marginalization. Why? Simply because the opportunity set here is but a small fraction of that available in the United States. There is no enterprise of the global scale of PepsiCo, let alone Alphabet, based here.

I have a personal example which clearly proves the scale-constraints of location. Driven by the untimely demise of my father, I returned to India, “retired” from banking at the age of 42 and based myself in Chennai to balance a few different responsibilities. However, I was offered a position as a Managing Director and Global Head of some financial market products for a large global bank operating across 70 countries. Since my role would require significant amounts of international travel irrespective of home-location, I asked to be Chennai-based. As an only child, I was reluctant to live away from my widowed mother, and she refused to consider living overseas under any circumstances. But though the bank’s leadership was sympathetic to my circumstances, post-GFC bank regulations required that my position be within the direct regulatory oversight of the banking regulator of a developed (OECD) country with a globally accessible financial market. I simply could NOT assume the role offered unless I relocated to an OECD country.

So I espouse a view directly opposed to these arguments, and say that Harris, Nooyi, Pichai, and indeed all the unnamed high-achieving emigrèes - have attained such great heights precisely because they emigrated to the largest and most unbiased talent-valuing market in the world. And having done so, they are extremely well-positioned to be of great service to their state and country of origin. Not only have we not lost such talent, we have gained well-wishers of almost unimaginable potential.

That leaves only two of his fallacies to deconstruct with hard data – that Tamil Brahmins are now disadvantaged, and that socialism and identity politics have stunted Tamil Nadu’s development.

Are Tamil Brahmins really marginalised?

The first claim is belied by the fact that Tamil Brahmins, who constitute less than 3% of the population by Dhume’s own admissions, are massively disproportionately represented in the Civil Service, the legal profession (including the Judiciary), Chartered Accountancy, and so many other high-end professional fields. **This is well-documented**, and true across all of India, not just Tamil Nadu. As one stark example, the overwhelming majority of India’s Supreme Court is constituted by Brahmin (~40% alone) and other Upper Castes.

As another example, one of the biggest and most-respected industrial conglomerates in India today (and one of the top 2 or 3 in our State), is the Tamil Nadu-based TVS group, started by TV Sundaram Iyengar four generations ago, and still run as a privately-held group by his many descendants (all Brahmins). To be fair, such disproportionate outcomes are also true for most upper-castes, despite a century of caste-based reservations, which have proven inadequate to completely erase the benefits of many centuries of hierarchical privilege (which included Brahmins’ EXCLUSIVE right to education for much of the time).

Tamil Nadu's superior developmental outcomes

The unkindest, and most inaccurate cut was the insinuation that Tamil Nadu has suffered sub-standard developmental outcomes because of identity politics run amok. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Dhume’s identity politics is our century-old Dravidian Movement, fuelled by the overarching goal of social justice. The South Indian Liberal Federation founded in 1916 transformed into a political party named after its magazine “Justice” during the 1920 elections to the Legislative Council of Madras Presidency. The legislations enacted by successive Justice Party Governments of 1920 – 1926 profoundly transformed the fabric of society through enhancing equal rights (women were entitled to vote and stand for office in Madras Presidency), Education for all

(compulsory elementary education for boys AND girls), nutrition for the poorest (free school meals for poor children in Madras Corporation), and equality of access for high-quality jobs (reservation of government jobs based on each caste's proportion of the population).

In the century since 1920, parties espousing the Dravidian philosophy have been elected to form the government for all but about 30 years. What is more, the policies of the Swatantra and Congress Parties which formed the governments (of Madras Presidency, Madras State and Tamil Nadu State) for the bulk of the balance of 30 years, hewed closer to the Dravidian philosophy than that of the Congress Party of other Presidencies and States (e.g. on universal rights for temple entry, enhancing access to education for all, expanding the free school meal scheme

across the state).

Socio-Economic Indicator (2019)	Tamil Nadu	All India	Gujarat	Uttar Pradesh	Bihar
Per Capita GSDP (Rs.)	193750	126406	197447	61351	43822
Per Capita Availability of Power (Kw-Hour)	1467.2	978.1	1821.2	592.8	256.3
Employment in Organised Sector (people)	2337000	29570000	2204000	2207000	426000
Employment in Organised Sector (% of Pop)	3.22%	2.23%	3.32%	0.91%	0.30%
Number of Factories	37220	234865	25966	15294	3531
% Below Poverty Line	11.28	21.92	16.63	29.43	33.74
% of Houses with LPG	86.7	61.4	66.7	50.2	49.4
Sex Ratio (Women per 1,000 Men)	996	943	919	912	918
Literacy %	80.1	73	78	67.7	61.8
GER (Higher Secondary)	83.69	55.4	43.17	58.96	28.8
GER (Higher Education)	49	26.3	20.4	25.8	13.6
People per Doctor	253	1445	N.A	3767	3207
Doctors in Primary Health Centres	2780	27567	1321	1344	1786
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000)	17	34	30	43	38
Maternal Mortality Rate (per 100,000)	63	122	87	216	165
Total Fertility Rate	1.6	2.3	2.2	3.1	3.3

Source – RBI, *Niti Aayog SDG 2019-20, National Health Report 2019*

The sustained adherence to such principles over the bulk of the century by successive Dravidian parties has resulted in such a singular outcome (relative to the rest of India) that it has come to be called the Dravidian (or Tamil Nadu) model. The statistics in the table above – in both absolute terms, and relative to other States and India - evidence Tamil Nadu's unique and equitable progress.

Perhaps the ultimate proof of our relative progress is in the **data I included** in my testimony on behalf of the DMK before India's 15th Finance Commission during its hearings in Chennai in 2018. Though the Constitution defines India as a Union of States, it operates on a uniquely centralized and anti-federal model, compared to even China. The Union Government in Delhi collects almost all Direct Taxes, and then apportions them to States following the recommendations, if it so chooses, of 5-yearly Finance Commissions. Tamil Nadu's share of India's GDP has been disproportionately high (far above its ~6% of the population) and mostly rising, over the past few decades, even as our allocations from the Central Tax Revenue Pool has dropped from over 7% down to ~4%. We have for decades continuously grown relatively richer and become larger NET Tax Donors.

I will go a step further. On some indicators, Tamil Nadu has neared OECD levels of progress.

Indicators for Global Comparison	Tamil Nadu	India	US	Germany	Sweden
Total Fertility Rate (Births/Woman)	1.6	2.3	1.8	1.46	1.8
Doctors per 1000 People	4	0.87	2.59	4.21	5.4
Gross Enrolment Ratio (Tertiary Education)	49	26.3	47	48	42
Internet Penetration (per 100 people)	70	54	87.27	89.74	92.14

Source: OECD Library, TRAI Performance Report June 2020, IndexMundi.com

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The same liberal democratic principles that have led to better and more equitable progress in Scandinavia relative to the rest of the world, or California and New York relative to many “Red States”, have resulted in similar outcomes for Tamil Nadu compared to other large states in India.

In the absence of any universally acknowledged perfect philosophy or model of governance, all existing models include imperfections of one kind or another. Even as a die-hard adherent, I accept that our Dravidian model has much room for improvement, in several dimensions. But the allegations of its shortcomings are not simply debunked by the data. In stark contrast to his assumptions, the data suggests the Dravidian Model has achieved unprecedented outcomes in both social justice and inclusive growth, at a scorching pace (within a century) in a land with millenia of systematic discrimination embedded in rock-solid hierarchical structures.

That is no mean achievement. Dhume would be well advised to study it in detail to extract the appropriate policy lessons.