

# Political Legitimacy



And how is it mobilised in contemporary India

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Legitimacy is the right and acceptance of an authority to exercise power. In politics, this legitimacy is the **acceptance of the authority** of the governing regime by the public. It is considered legitimate because the authority is accepted through mutual consent and not through coercion. But how exactly is this political legitimacy mobilised in India? We answer this interesting question by looking at the so called “MGR phenomenon”.

M.G. Ramachandran, or MGR as he was so very fondly called, served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for eleven years. Prior to his career in politics, he was a very popular actor in the Tamil film industry and enjoyed immense popularity among the people of Tamil Nadu, especially the subaltern classes.

Pandian, who writes about the MGR phenomenon, studies those eleven years of authority under MGR. He says that during this time, there was no particular change in the economy to benefit the subaltern classes. Their material condition actually worsened during this period. Moreover, MGR’s government ruthlessly used state machinery to put down any protests made by the peasants and workers. Based on these facts, it’s pretty evident that the people belonging to the subaltern classes would not be in immense favour of his rule.

On the contrary, **he was a hero among the subalterns!** He won the elections three times in a row. His popularity certainly did not deteriorate.

The people of Tamil Nadu and especially the subaltern classes had a **personal and emotion bond with him**. They loved him and looked upto him, and when he died in 1987, Pandian called his funeral an ‘unprecedented spectacle of grief’. Many of his followers even committed suicide, proving how emotionally invested his followers were in him. This clearly shows, as Weber would say, that MGR exercised **charismatic authority**. His followers were drawn to his personal qualities and saw him as their ‘hero’. MGR was able to produce consent among the people through his charisma.

But, as Pandian points out, he never really did anything substantially beneficial for the subalterns. Then how was he able to get so popular among them? This is precisely what Pandian tries to comprehend in his article.

In the entirety of MGR’s film career, his screen roles comprised of several stereotyped characters, which Pandian says, constituted ‘MGR’. (The quotes

represent MGR's image in the films). His characteristic role was that of a working class man trying to combat the social and cultural oppression of everyday life. All his movies depicted him as a subaltern MGR, where he acted as a farmer, taxi driver, rickshaw puller etc. Thus, **the people belonging to the subaltern classes were able to easily identify themselves with MGR** - the hero of the subaltern masses, because that's how he is portrayed. All of his films were based on one theme: the conflict between the oppressors and MGR as a subaltern.

But what is most significant, as Pandian notes, is **the show of authority by subaltern MGR against these oppressors**, and he cites many examples from his films that portray this. He fights oppression and in doing so, overcomes all the obstacles in his way. Pandian notes that subaltern MGR appropriates himself the **right to dispense justice and employ physical violence** to fight the oppression - both of which are monopolies of the elite.

His other show of authority to fight oppression is through education and literacy, which is a privilege of the elite. In another film, he starts off as a poor man and ends up marrying an upper caste woman and defies the norms, thereby asserting the valour of the subaltern men.

Hence, we see how MGR appropriates different signs of authority in all his movies to fight oppression. It is this screen image that makes him wildly popular among the subalterns. **It is this screen image of MGR that the people of the subaltern classes fall in love with.** It is 'MGR' whom the subalterns look up to, not MGR himself!

It was Antonio Gramsci who developed the category of 'common sense', which according to him, is the ensemble of cultural presuppositions through which the subalterns make sense of the world. But this definition by itself is rudimentary and inchoate. As Gramsci himself puts it, this consciousness is dominated by the ideologies of the elite. The subalterns adopt a conception that is not their own, but borrowed (from the elite). Pandian says that **this 'common sense' has a certain plasticity as it can be reconstituted by different political forces.** And this is precisely what MGR does! A specific image of MGR is

presented on the screen and **this image gets inserted into the pre existing common sense of the subaltern classes**. They see 'MGR' as their hero and symbol of oppression against the elites.

Pandian then begins to cite some popular ballads about the folk heroes of the Tamil countryside. For instance, he talks about an untouchable worker who becomes the commander of the king's army due to his valour. But the upper-castes murder him. All of these folk heroes bear a striking resemblance to 'MGR', as they are all low-caste men who defy norms and fight against the oppressors. However, there is an important distinction in the ideological content of the MGR films and the folk ballads. He says that the heroic ballads have a 'progressive' element, because the heroes in these ballads use their free will to get justice. However, the MGR films are devoid of this 'progressive' content.

All of MGR's films do offer a solution for the injustice, but that **solution is offered within the moral economy of the system itself**. All the exploiters transform by the end of the film. The cruel landlords become 'good' landlords and the pirate king realises all his mistakes. But he remains the king! **Justice is being granted within the system, thereby reaffirming that system itself!** Yes, he is able to marry the woman belonging to the upper caste, but he is not really working towards finishing the cultural hegemony of the upper castes. The system itself remains.

Thus, Pandian concludes that the glory in all these films is to these oppressors because they transformed into 'good' people. Whereas in the ballads, the glory was to the oppressed, who fought against the injustice and tried to bring about a reform in the system. That is the key distinction between the ballads and the MGR films. All of these MGR films end up reaffirming the system itself and act as a method through which the elites define a common sense for the subalterns, thereby betraying them.

MGR is not just exercising charismatic authority; it is rather an odd mixture of both, **charismatic and traditional authority**. According to Weber, the power of traditional authority is accepted because that has traditionally been the case. Its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time. In the MGR films, the system itself never changes, only the actors and exploiters

undergo a 'change of heart'. Hence, the tradition continues. This can be seen as an example of MGR trying to use traditional authority to produce consent among the people of the state, who would not like to see the customs and traditions broken.

Traditional Authority is also brought about by Christophe Jaffrelot in his article 'Hindu Rashtra - de facto'. There have been a lot of cow-related lynching cases in India, because killing cows is against the religion of Hinduism. A lot of people take part in these lynching cases, and it's mostly the Muslims that are apprehended for it. The Gau Raksha Dal (GRD) is a very recognisable Hindu nationalist organisation that has a huge network of informants and if they notice anything fishy, report it immediately to the local police. The police cooperates with GRD, because the latter has more resources and network. Hence, GRD ends up acting as the community cultural police. In other states where beef consumption is criminalised, the government has appointed other task forces, that work in conjunction with the police to implement such laws. There is barely any distinction between non-state actors and the government.

Due to such developments, Berman and Lonsdale attempt to study the new dynamics of such a state. Certain private sectors like the Hindu vigilante groups are able to enforce their rules. **The majoritarian non-state actors impose a social and cultural order.** And what makes this model put forth by Berman and Lonsdale even more interesting is that in India, these non state actors actually enjoy state protection. This is evident from the example in Haryana, where such vigilante organisations become the para-state force, working together with the government. Even though the authority of such organisations is illegal, it is considered legitimate by the state because **it pertains to the values and interests of the dominant community.** These non-state actors are more of India's 'deep state' rather than a parallel government.

So even though it may seem that the government exercises a legal-rational authority, where the authority resides in the office and not the person, **it also exercises a certain traditional authority by promoting Hindu ideologies and traditions.** Majority of the people in India are Hindus and by promoting Hindu principles, the government is able to produce consent

among the Hindus which is more than 70% of the total population. Jaffrelot calls this a shift from a neutral state to an 'ideological Hindu Rashtra', a theocracy in the name of the Hindu religion.

Even though the state appears to be legal-rational on paper, it clearly isn't. The majority Hindu community enforces their ideologies on the minorities, thereby forming a 'de facto Hindu Rashtra'. The icing on the cake is that it has all the support from the official state.

Coming back to the MGR phenomenon, how was MGR able to emerge as the hero, while the ballad heroes were not. Pandian says that unlike the folk heroes, MGR had access to cinema, which immensely helped him to portray his subaltern image. Cinema as a medium was accessible to everyone, regardless of caste or religion. The tickets were cheap and the seating in a cinema hall was not based on one's social status. There was no discrimination as opposed to other shows of performing arts, where seating was hierarchical. This made cinema a very popular entertainment medium for the subalterns. Thus, films were able to project MGR's image to the entire community.

And finally, Pandian wonders why the subalterns could not differentiate between MGR and his image. One reason could be because MGR's personal life itself was full of misery as he grew up in acute poverty. He himself, was a victim of oppression. His constructed image was also very well portrayed through media and television, such that if one were to think of MGR, the first thing that would come to mind would be the subaltern MGR. He himself says, 'you must create an image that you are a good man'.

Looking at both the articles, we see that they're both dealing with the notion of legitimacy, the assumption being that **modernity would bring an instrumental - rational form of authority**, where the power would be vested in a system. But clearly, this is not the case. MGR exercises an odd mixture of charismatic and traditional authority. The Indian state, according to Jaffrelot, is only legal-rational on paper. But one may very well call it a 'Hindu Rashtra', because it exercises traditional authority to promote Hindu morals and ideals.