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Chief Justice MM Ismail of Nagore: A Great Indian, the Pride of Tamil Nadu and a Perfect Muslim

Vikas Kumar

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In 21st Century India to be recognized as secular one has to be explicitly anti-Hindu and to burnish one's nationalist credentials one has to be explicitly anti-Muslim. There is no space for secular-nationalism, the loadstar of our founding fathers. The tribe of secular-nationalists is dwindling very rapidly - age is taking its toll. The present generation is left with no choice. There is hardly any "media-worthy" public figure who can serve as an example of the principles that steered our founding fathers during their long struggle for independence. Should we then abandon their path and make the hard choice between 'secularism' and 'nationalism'? Before we make a choice we would be well advised to explore the recent past to look around for people who may serve as proxies for living role models.

In the present communication I would like to share my scant knowledge about one such individual MM Ismail, former Chief Justice of Madras High Court, who was an embodiment of the age-old syncretic traditions of India. He died in Madras on January 17 2005 after a prolonged illness. But for small news items his death went largely unnoticed in the "mainstream" media. I must admit at the outset that I have never met him and with my fledgling Tamil I cannot read his books written primarily in Tamil, at least in the near future. So, frankly speaking I am not competent enough to write about him. However, this should not deter me, for that matter any one of us, from exploring his life and times.

Formative Years

Justice Ismail was born on February 08 1921 in the quiet seaside town of Nagore in Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu. Nagore is famous for the *dargah* of the 16th Century *sufi* saint Hazrath Shahul Hamid, who traveled all the way from Manikpur near Ayodhya to settle at

this place. The dargah, which draws Hindus and Muslims from across the sub-continent, was made with generous contributions from the Hindus, including Telugu and Maratha rulers of Thanjavur. In his school days his mentors included Santhanam Ayyangar, a student of the great scholar of Sangam literature U. Ve. Swaminatha Aiyar, and Dawoodsha Sahib, also known as *Ramayana Sahib* for his deep knowledge of *Kamba Ramayanam*. He graduated from the Madras Presidency College and later studied law at the Madras Law College.

The Jurist

He was appointed Additional Judge of the Delhi High Court in 1967. He served as the Chief Justice of Madras High Court from 1979 to 1981. He resigned in 1981 when he was transferred to Kerala High Court as its Chief Justice. Decades ago at elementary school one day, while looking at the cavalcade of the British Governor of Madras Presidency, his teacher Krishnamurthy Aiyar said: **“Our Ismail will one day become a governor like this and become famous.”** It might have appeared to be wishful thinking at that time but the student did not disappoint his teacher. On October 27 1980 he was appointed as the Acting Governor of Tamil Nadu! In a report on the conditions in the Madras Central Prison (1992) he recommended that the jail be upgraded and provided with adequately qualified staff. He also suggested education and rehabilitation schemes for the inmates. He wrote a book on the constitutional powers of President and Governors.

The Tamil Scholar

More than a jurist he will be remembered as an internationally acclaimed scholar of Tamil literature particularly the ancient Tamil poet Kampan's *Iramavataram* (The Descent of Rama), popularly known as *Kamba Ramayanam*. He was the President of Kampan Kazhgam. He wrote and lectured extensively on various aspects of *Kamba Ramayanam*. He helped locating *Kamba Ramayanam* in the wide array of Tamil literature by comparing it with other Tamil Classics like *Kuruntokai*, *Periya Puranam* and *Cira Puranam*. He took great care while populating his broad

Ramayanic canvas. Even minor characters have received great attention from Justice Ismail. He wrote authoritative works on Ramayanic characters like Vali, Guha, Shatrughana, Tara, Trijata, Suparnakha and Shabari. His work *Munru Vinakkal* (Three Questions) on the much-debated Vali episode earned him praise from the Sankaracarya Candrasekharendra Saraswati of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham. In this book he dissected the entire episode with great care and established that despite the slaying of Vali Rama remains flawless. The Sankaracarya remarked: **“You are the Chief Justice. You have rendered justice to Rama.”** Justice Ismail hailed the Sankaracarya as Jagadguru. Jagadguru according to Justice Ismail is the one who always dreams of a world bound by moral law. The Kanchi seer was not the only one who showered praise on him. For his seminal work on *Kamba Ramayanam* the people of Tamil Nadu gave him numerous honours and titles like *Rama Ratnam*, *The Beacon Light of Kamba Ramayana* etc. He also wrote a book on names of God in Islam.

The liminal being and role model for all times

*had had jaye har koi, anhad jaye na ko/had anhad ke beech mein raha kabeeraa soy -
kabir*

(The world lives bound by limits, which none dares to transgress/Kabir is at ease at the confluence between the bounded and the unbound.)

When people around him were joining Muslim League he joined Indian National Congress (INC) and participated in the freedom struggle. In the early 1940s the Muslim League had around 10000 members in his native district! By early 1940s it had become clear that the INC's efforts for a United India were unlikely to succeed. A large number of Muslims, especially educated, decided to follow Muhammad Ali Jinnah rather than Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. While others around him were running after Jinnah he was writing the first biography of Maulana Abdul Kalam in Tamil, which was published in 1945.

Justice Ismail's deep love for his own language never descended into the realms of chauvinism. To the contrary his enlightened love for Tamil raised him to a level from where he could approach the treasure troves of other languages with supreme confidence. When self-appointed guardians of Tamil were busy banishing other languages from Tamil Nadu, by all means possible, mostly physical, he was absorbed in comparative studies: comparing and contrasting *Kamba Ramayanam* with *Tulsi Ramacharitamans* and *Valmiki Ramayana*!

His deep faith in Islam did not prevent him from seeking the wisdom of other religions. He was not a Hindu but had a decades-long friendship with the Shankaracharya of Kanchi and was a prolific commentator and interpreter of *Ramayana*!

Like Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Justice Ismail dwelled in the gray area between different religions and cultures. And like them he belonged to all of them at the same time! In his life and works the great syncretic traditions of the sub-continent found their fullest expression. He was a great Indian and a perfect Muslim (according to Prophet Mohammad a perfect Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands mankind is safe). He died at a very poignant moment when his native district Nagapattinam was devastated by the deadly Tsunami. And the self-appointed guardians of Tamil language are busy preparing plans to preserve and promote Tamil, which do not preclude violence, this time against Tamils!

Justice Ismail once said that every generation had at least one Muslim scholar who is an authority on *Kamba Ramayanam*. The earliest well-known scholar in this tradition was Umaru Pulavar (1665-1773), who wrote *Cira Puranam*, a work on Prophet's life fashioned after *Kamba Ramayanam*. I sincerely hope that Justice Ismail will not be remembered as the last in this long and glorious line of Tamil scholars.

(Facts related to Justice MM Ismail's life and Nagore have been collected from a large number of sources, formal and informal. Prime among the sources is Vasudha Naraynan's 'The Ramayana and its Muslim Interpreters' in Paula Richman ed. 'Questioning Ramayanas'. Other sources include Mushirul Hasan's 'Legacy of a Divided Nation', the website of Kanchi Math, Sheikh Hasan Sahib Qadhiri's 'The Divine Light of Nagore', news items, book reviews, etc published in The Hindu, The Times of India, The Indian Express, Hindustan Times, and last but certainly not the least my Tamil Hindu friends.)