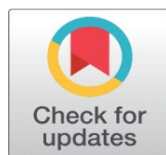
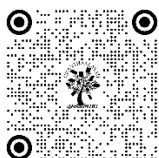


BREAKING BARRIERS: M.R. RADHA'S IMPACT ON TAMIL THEATRE AS AN ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the life and artistic achievements of M.R. Radha, a prominent figure in Indian cinema, through the framework of organic intellectual theory of Antonio Gramsci. The article examines Radha's filmography, his portrayal of various personalities, and his involvement in social issues, emphasizing his position as an organic intellectual in influencing cultural narratives and public discourse. The study relies on secondary data such as biographies, interviews, memoirs, monographs, and news articles, as well as primary data collected from interviews with experts to confirm the authenticity of other sources. The research concludes that M.R. Radha was an organic intellectual who used his creative abilities and social clout to challenge established ideas and fight for social change in Tamil theatre and film.

Keywords: Organic Intellectual, M. R. Radha, Antonio Gramsci, Tamil Films

1. INTRODUCTION

The world of cinema has always been a powerful medium for social change and cultural narratives. In India, cinema has played a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse. M.R. Radha, a prominent figure in Indian cinema, was one such artist who used his creative abilities and social clout to challenge established ideas and fight for social change. This study delves into the life and artistic achievements of M.R. Radha through the framework of organic intellectual theory of Antonio Gramsci. The article examines Radha's filmography, his portrayal of various personalities, and his involvement in social issues,

emphasizing his position as an organic intellectual in influencing cultural narratives and public discourse. The study relies on secondary data such as biographies, interviews, memoirs, monographs, and news articles, as well as primary data collected from interviews with experts to confirm the authenticity of other sources. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of M.R. Radha's contribution to Indian cinema and his impact on social change.

2. M.R. RADHA AN OVERVIEW

M. R. Radha was the stage name of Madras Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, an Indian actor who appeared in Tamil plays and films. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy bestowed upon him the title "Nadigavel" (Meaning: Spearhead of acting/frontrunner/torchbearer). He primarily portrayed villains, but he also appeared as a comedian in a number of films. Radha was a well-known theatre performer who appeared in more than 5000 stage productions. He began acting at the age of 10, first in minor roles, and over time developed to the point where drama scripts were specifically written for him.

Ratha Kanneer, Radha's theatre play, became quite successful. His performance in the play's 1954 film adaptation, which was directed by Krishnan-Panju, helped him gain broader recognition for his abilities and established him as a household figure in Tamil Nadu. Radha performed both humorous and villainous roles. He frequently played the villain opposite actors like M.G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan in the 1960s when roles were specifically scripted for him. Radha was a skilled performer who could take on a variety of parts. He was a master of both humour and tragedy, and he could give even the most outrageous performances a feeling of realism. He was a genuine legend in Tamil cinema, and his influence will endure for many years to come.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to prove M.R. Radha as an organic intellectual, sufficient data required for the study are collected and gathered from the archival sources. This study prominently relies on the secondary data like his biographies, interviews, memoirs, monographs and other news articles. The primary data collected for the study are the interviews from experts to clarify and confirm the authenticity of the other sources.

[Somasundharam. \(2021\)](#), M.R.Radha's personal assistant who travelled with Radha throughout his career compiles a complete biography of M.R.Radha. The notable work tend to be the authentic data on M.R.Radha's artistic and socio political journey. [Mughil. \(2021\)](#), brief biographical note on M.R. Radha adds an additional glimpse to the earlier one. Though both the texts seem to be similar the earlier one is more precise and unique.

[Manaa. \(2020\)](#) compilation of memoirs on M.R.Radha from the other veteran actors who travelled with him provides a broad insight and other expelled information from the biographical notes. [Joseph \(2015\)](#) selected compilations on M.R. Radha defends the pre-existing data on M.R.Radha with published news articles from various dailies, weeklies and monthlies of the time. [Dass \(2018\)](#) the pro-screen writer of the early Tamil cinema, who had contributed stories and screenplays for more than hundred films of wide range of actors like Sivaji Ganesan, M.G.R., Gemini Ganesan, etc. Which include M.R.Radha too, compiles his experiences and experiments with Tamil cinema delineating his personal space with M.R.Radha and the experiences with his films. The Judgement of the Madras High Court (1962),

discloses the proceedings of the trial on M.R.Radha regarding the socio political issues faced by his plays.

Gramsci (2005) notes on the Intellectuals from the "Selections from the prison notebooks" are taken into consideration to derive the parameters for the organic intellectuals. Gramsci classifies Intellectuals into two major categories Namely the Traditional and the organic intellectuals.

Thapar (2015) in her book on Indian Public intellectual nowhere denotes the references of Gramsci's Organic Intellectual but still frames a podium for the Public Intellectuals of India in a similar way. According to her, public intellectuals like Nikhil Chakravartty are accessible, welcoming, and helpful in discussing and debating ideas about public matters. They are well-read and respect intellectual and academic opinion about public matters, and they provide space for those whose concern is with the quality of the interdependence of many aspects of life. Public intellectuals are expected to ask questions of those taking decisions that impinge on civil society, and they are visible in asserting the rights of citizens in the life of a nation.

4. THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

The term "organic intellectual," initially used by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, describes people who come from certain social groups and use their intelligence to interact with and have an impact on their communities. Gramsci (1971) theorises the formation of Intellectuals which is extracted from the selections of his prison notebooks. He categorizes the intellectuals into two major categories namely the traditional and organic.

Traditional intellectuals are referred to as Intellectuals who belong to traditional institutions and support the ruling class. They frequently hold influential positions, such as those held by professors, professionals, legislators, and bureaucrats. The established social order is maintained by traditional intellectuals' propensity to preserve and advance the beliefs, values, and interests of the ruling class.

Organic intellectuals come from the lower classes of society and speak for the goals and interests of the marginalised or subaltern groups. They frequently participate in grassroots movements, labour unions, social organisations, or cultural groups but are not always connected to formal institutions. In order to bring about social change, organic thinkers articulate the concerns and aspirations of the downtrodden and attempt to challenge the established power structures. This research article is to discover M.R. Radha, the veteran actor of Tamil cinema as an organic intellectual.

5. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the Qualitative research approach. Expert interviews with Mr. Somasundharam, Personal Assistant of M.R.Radha and other experts oriented with Tamil theatre on all walks tend to be the primary data for the study. Secondary Data sources like biographies, interviews, memoirs, monographs and other news articles are studied and analysed to gather required data about M.R. Radha. Authentic archival sources regarding his artistic career, political career is studied for analysis. Strine (1991)

6. OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

6.1. REFORMING THE TAMIL THEATRE

The theatre in South India in particular the Tamil theatre was too Aryanisised over a period of time. Plays narrating the mythological stories wholly and partly were too common those days. Plays like *Ramayanam*, *Mahabharatham*, *Krishnaleela*, *Sathyavan Savithiri*, *Lava Kusa* etc., were repeatedly staged then. Muthuraman. Soon after as the nationalist movements provoke, very slowly plays promoting the nationalist ideologies started to emerge. It is very important to note that by 1876 the British Government enforced Theatrical acts to ban the plays on Nationalist ideologies. [Ramaswamy. \(2020\)](#).

As a part of the agitations against this the 1929 Self-Respect movement Conference, organised by Periyar's Self-Respect movement, was crucial in the development of Dravidian ideology in the film industry. The conference committee's observation of Resolution No. 26 in the list of 34 Resolutions provided the groundwork for the beginning of the Dravidian period in the fields of art and literature. The conference adopted a resolution that insisted authors, playwrights, actors, filmmakers, and owners of drama and cinema theatres who belong to the self-respect movement should not write, produce, or support plays with narratives, that express anti-rational or religious viewpoints or that undermine values of self-belief and self-respect. Soon the member of the self-respect movement who actively employed themselves into theatres encouraged themselves in making much intense plays with rationalist ideologies of the self-respect movement.

The most notable fact regarding this is M.R.Radha was not a part of the Self-Respect movement then. He was neither a part of it till his death. Prior to the resolution proposed by the Self-Respect movement conference, M.R. Radha had started the tradition of producing plays with rational diegesis.

[Somasundharam. \(2021\)](#) Biography on Radha reveals the fact that only by the time when M.R.Radha was staging his play named "*Izhandha Kadhal*" (Lost Love) He got oriented with Annadhurai – Former Chief minister of Tamil Nadu, one of prominent member of the self-respect movement. Somasundharam M.R.Radha's personal assistant records that Annadhurai once came to about his "*Izhandha Kadhal*" play being staged at Salem and he came all the way from Erode to witness it. Soon he wrote about Radha admiring his acting skills equalling it to the one of Paul Muni. The author further records that Annadhurai insisted Periyar (Founder of Self-Respect Movement) to witness the play. Annadhurai Highlighted that Radha is staging plays of diegesis on our ideologies. Accepting the call Periyar do witnessed and appreciated Radha's work and from then on Radha turned to be a sincere follower of *Thanthai* Periyar.

This incident from Radha's biography which is too authentic from his assistant reveals the truth that Radha was independent and autonomous in reconstructing the Tamil theatre sphere. Though the self-respect movement brought in a resolution in pioneering the Dravidian wave of arts and literature M.R.Radha was forerunning on the track without any prior exposure to the movement.

"Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" [Gramsci \(1971\)](#).

M.R. Radha fit into the frame of Gramsci's definition for Organic intellectuals. From the social group of Theatre artists, He tends to be an organic intellectual reconstructing the alternate narratives addressing the rational ideologies and other social issues. M.R. Radha's period was the time when all the other traditional intellectuals were busy with the institutional narratives on mythological stories and age old *puranaas*. Radha organically evolved himself to alter the space towards rational plots addressing the issues like widow remarriage, anti casteism, agitations against the egalitarian society and practices, etc.

Let us consider the play "*Izhandha Kaadhal*" from Radha's 'play'list. This sample here is shortlisted purposefully. The play "*Izhandha Kaadhal*" from Radha's repertoire holds historical significance as it was the first play Periyar was exposed to. It was scripted by the troupe before Radha's encounter with Periyar, when they were strangers. The essence of drama lies in portraying the societal norms of the Hindu community and its arrogance against uniting lovers. The essence of drama lies in portraying the male chauvinism against women, depicting the intricacies of masculinity. The play unveiled the sorrows of women struggles being suppressed by male in name of society, culture and tradition.

Periyar's work on women annihilation which was later compiled as "*Pen Yen Adimaiyanaal*" (Translated as Why women was enslaved) is considered to be a significant contributions of Feminist Manifesto from the Tamil languages which delineates all the possible ways by which women gets enslaved by men. Periyar further expresses his views for women to break the shackles. Periyar's approach towards feminism was too rational in history, for which his work "Why women were enslaved" stand as surviving evidence till date.

Despite the fact that other contributors of Dravidian theatre and cinema began to incorporate Periyar's feminist manifesto into their narratives after the resolution was passed in the 1929 Self-Respect Movement Conference, M.R. Radha, unaware of Periyar's ideologies and manifesto, staged plays that challenged the subjugation of women in the name of tradition, culture, and societal norms. The prime example of that could be the play "*Izhantha kadhal*". Apart from this there are other notable plays entitled "*Latchumi Kanthan*" (Lakshmikanthan), "*Porvaal*" (The war sword), "*Vimala Ennum Vidhavayin Kanneer*" (Tears of Widow Vimala), etc.

The question challenges the notion of framing Radha as an Organic Intellectual by stating, 'Radha is merely an actor; the essence of the play lies in the choice of the scriptwriter. How can Radha be held accountable for this?' ([Somasundharam, personal communication, 2003](#)), the primary source of information on Radha, provides two compelling defences. Firstly, Radha was inherently revolutionary, valuing and practicing rationality in all aspects of life. From a young age, he moved between drama troupes due to unequal treatment of members. Radha eventually settled in *Jaganath Iyer's* company, which upheld egalitarian principles. In this troupe, even the troupe head, *Jaganath*, sat with others for meals, a practice uncommon among Brahmins. Secondly though the scripts were penned by other members of the movement, Radha was the one who provoked the core concept of the issue to be discussed in it. He stayed to be the deciding authority to finalise the scripts and made spontaneous changes time and then.

Beyond ideologies M.R. Radha broke the traditional acting patterns followed in theatres. In the realm of Tamil theatre, M.R. Radha distinguished himself by deviating from established acting conventions. In an era dominated by a rigid "Stage Grammar" adhered to by veteran actors, Radha boldly challenged these norms. Unlike his contemporaries, he disregarded traditional taboos, notably by presenting his backside to the audience at the beginning of his play "*Izhandha Kadhal*". This

unconventional approach, coupled with his eloquent delivery, garnered significant acclaim. If there could be an actor in the history of Tamil theatre, who received a historic ovation just for his curly hair that could be Radha. He and his unique acting approach was the only reason the 100-day success for the play. Many other Veteran actors say Sivaji Ganesan, K.R.Ramasamy, T.S. Balaiyah, etc., played the role which was performed by Radha and none received such a unique reception received for Radha. His legacy is a trailblazer in Tamil theatre. [Karunanidhi \(1989\)](#)

7. THE OFFICIAL DRAVIDIAN THEATRE

M.R. Radha after orienting himself with Periyar and Self – Respect movement, he fuelled his contributions towards the Dravidian theatre. In a bold move that set him apart from his contemporaries, Radha decided to rename his drama troupe as the "Dravida Pudhumalarchi Naadaga Sabha," signifying the essence of Dravidian Renaissance Drama. Later, this name was modified to "Dravidia Marumalarchi Naadaga Sabha," underlining the troupe's commitment to the revival and propagation of Dravidian ideals. The troupe was previously known as the *Saraswathi Naadaga Sabha*, which was named after Radha's wife.

What made Radha's actions truly distinctive was his audacity in adopting the terms "Dravida" and "Dravidian" within the troupe's name. Remarkably, no other drama troupe associated with the Self-Respect movement, even those owned by official members, had ventured into such territory. Radha's decision highlighted his unwavering dedication to intensifying the dissemination of Dravidian ideologies within the self-respect movement ([Somasundharam, personal communication, 2003](#)).

Figure 1

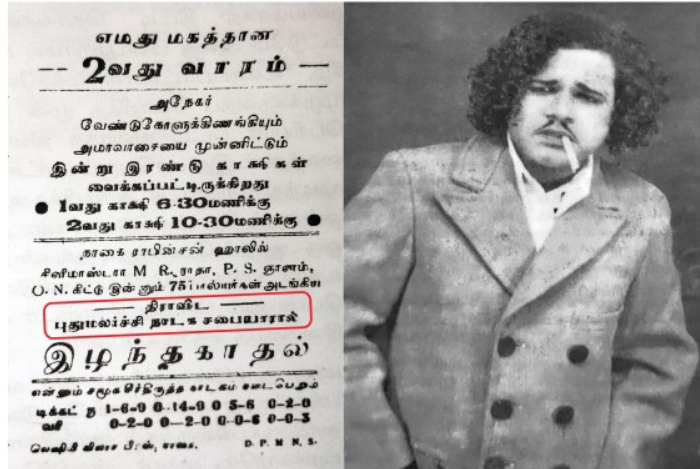


Figure 1 Surviving Poster for Radha's "Izhandha Kadhal" Play with the Name of his Troupe as 'Dravida Pudhumalarchi Nadaga Sabha'.

Source Somasundharam

Annadurai, the visionary founder of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, acknowledged Radha's unparalleled impact. During his early days working closely with Thanthai Periyar, Annadurai astutely remarked, "Our 100 political meetings are equal to a single play by Comrade Radha." This statement underscored the immense influence Radha wielded through his theatrical productions, effectively encapsulating the power of art in driving social and political change [Somasundharam. \(2021\)](#) and [Mughil. \(2021\)](#).

In the intricate tapestry of the Dravidian movement's history, M.R. Radha's contribution emerges as a beacon of creativity, daring, and ideological commitment, leaving an indelible mark on the trajectory of Dravidian theatre and the broader socio-political landscape.

A crucial aspect worth highlighting is that Radha, despite his profound influence on the Dravidian movements, was never an official member of any Dravidian organization. His role as a reformist was intrinsic, emerging organically from his deep-seated beliefs and passion for societal change. As an organic intellectual, Radha reshaped the narrative of theatre, transcending traditional boundaries and delving into socio-political dimensions through his art.

8. THE MADRAS DRAMATIC PERFORMANCES ACT

M.R. Radha was the one of the very few intellectuals from the Dravidian theatre to have caused a greater impact on the political sphere of Tamil Nadu. Though his co-runners like Annadurai, Kalaignar Karunanidhi and others, whose plays and narratives faced similar problems from then ruling government, M.R.Radha's presence was too impactful to induce the ruling sphere to impose a special act to screen the entire Tamil Theatre system.

The plots from the theatre of M.R. Radha was too challenging for the then hegemonic sphere to face. They voiced out the agony against the irrational ideologies, unjust social practices and political nepotisms of the Hegemonic sphere of the society. Promoting Self-Respect movement and its ideologies through theatre was yet another threat to them. Hence the government imposed severe crises and looked possibilities to bail out the plays of M.R.Radha in absence of Periyar's presence in the state.

[Ramaswamy. \(2020\)](#) analysis on The Dramatic performances act discloses that, Periyar was on his international political voyage for two months by the time the proceedings of the Dramatic Performances act was turned on. This could probably be the first circumstance faced by the members of the Dravidian movement in absentia of Periyar. The government of Rajagopalachari (hereafter referred as Rajaji) banned Radha's plays to be enacted, by imposing the Dramatic Performances act of 1876.

M.R. Radha officially claimed that the ban imposed on his plays was legally impossible as it was a law proposed by the early British Government to ban the plays of Nationalist Movement. He further stated that this act was invalid as per the Indian constitution as it had no provisions saying the Dramatic Performances act of 1876 continues to stay valid thereafter. At the same time the Article 19 of the Indian constitution provides all provisions for freedom of expression which turned to be a prominent tool to defend for M.R.Radha. This made the Madras Government to recall their Ban on M.R.Radha's play. Instead, the Rajaji's Government and then Law Minister C. Subramaniam revised the Dramatic Performances act of 1876 into Madras Dramatic Performances act and implemented it as a state rule to screen the plays.

Varied authentic sources including the Madras Legislative Assembly Proceedings on the Madras Dramatic Performances act convey that the proceedings of this act was induced by the revolutionary plays of M.R.Radha, like *Thoorkkumedai* (Gallows) , *Porvaal* (Sword) , *Ramayanam*, etc.

One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker

and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals. Gramsci (1971).

M.R. Radha's existence in theatre promoting the rational ideologies and political manifestations of the Dravidian Movement through his plays was merely a struggle which ideologically conquered the traditional intellectuals of the Tamil theatre sphere. Beyond that the assimilation was so fast to induce and elaborate the self-respect movement's own intellectuals to adopt the pattern. M.R.Radha's intellectuality was so chaotic to the institutional sphere to provoke them in retaliating back.

Figure 2

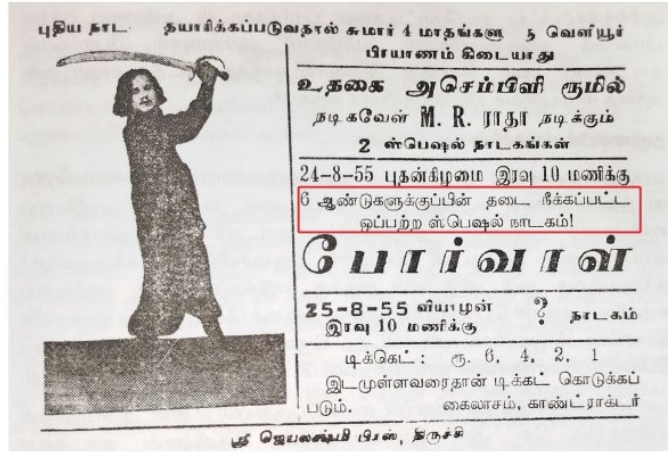


Figure 2 The Poster of Radha's 'Porvaal' Drama Which Says 'The Special Play After it's 6 Year Ban'. Source Somasundharam

9. POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialised” and does not become “directive”. Gramsci (1971).

M.R. Radha was politically conscious throughout his journey. Being an organic intellectual he never spent much of his time simply as an orator or he never stopped his manifestations only with his plays alone. The reflection of organic intellectuality was found significantly in his practical life. Two incidents recorded in his biographical memoirs defend this.

One is, being an atheist, and an artist manifesting the political ideologies of the self-respect movement (which is also known to be an atheist movement) M.R. Radha acted in the film *Dhasavatharam*. *Dhasavatharam* is a mythological script narrating the ten primary forms of Hindu god Vishnu. M.R. Radha played the role of *Iryanyakasibu*, an asura king of the *daityas* in the Hindu Puranic scriptures. Though the character is an atheist by script, almost all the people who disguised as *Iryanyakasibu* would wear holy marks of Hinduism on their forehead. This is common both in plays and films. But M.R.Radha was the first person to refuse wearing the holy marks on his forehead. He was politically and ideologically conscious in picking

up an atheist role of a mythological play, breaking the shackles of practice followed in the sphere to justify his atheist ideology. [Somasundharam. \(2021\)](#).

The next incident to justify is M.R.Radha's presence at N.S.Krishnan's Funeral. N.S.Krishnan was Radha's oppo in both theatre and cinema who was also a part of the self - Respect movement. Being referred as father of comedy in Tamil cinema N.S.Krishnan was known for his unique style of expressing rational thoughts through his comedy scenes. M.R.Radha and N.S. Krishnan worked together in the same drama troupe during their childhood. When N.S.Krishnan passed away his body was set ready for his funeral. As a part of the Hindu tradition his family members made the holy mark on his forehead with sacred ash (locally known as *Thiruneeru*). M.R.Radha insisted N.S.Krishnan's family members to remove that, moreover he himself took a wet cloth and wiped of the mark stating that was against N.S.Krishnan's ideology and the philosophy he followed. [Somasundharam. \(2021\)](#)

M.R.Radha was just not passionate towards the philosophies and ideologies he followed. He was a constructor, organiser and a permanent persuader of what he orated as an organic intellectual.

Soon after years when a group of members from the Self-Respect movement parted and started a political party named *Dravida Munnetrea Kazhagam* (D.M.K) to contest in state elections M.R.Radha never had a concern of being a part of it. He was neither a part of the earlier movement officially. Even when D.M.K won the elections and came into power M.R.Radha never wanted to be oriented with the ruling sphere. In his personal interviews with *Vindhana*, He would have mentioned that even when he was offered a chance to contest in the state body elections, he refused it. He always preferred to be a manifester through his plays. He was acting till his last day of life. He considered theatre to be his passion and profession and cinema as his retirement.

10. CONCLUSION

The laurels of M.R. Radha never shrink within a frame of a theatre artist. The theatrical sphere had a lot many traditional intellectuals following the ideologies of the dominant hegemonic sphere of the society. M.R. Radha organically evolved himself to alter the space towards rational plots addressing the issues like widow remarriage, anti casteism, agitations against the egalitarian society and practices, etc. Radha's legacy as a self-driven reformist reverberates through the annals of the Tamil Theatre, emphasizing the ability of individuals to shape movements and ideologies beyond the confines of formal memberships.

Through his plays, M.R. Radha promoted the Dravidian Movement's logical beliefs and political expressions; however, this was only a battle to ideologically overthrow the conventional Tamil theatre academics. Throughout his voyage, M.R. Radha was politically aware. Being an organic intellectual, he never devoted a significant amount of time to being an orator or to putting an end to his manifestations through plays alone. Significantly, his everyday existence reflected his innate intellectuality.

M.R. Radha's significance as an organic thinker is one of the most outstanding features of his legacy. Radha emerged from the grassroots in a society dominated by traditional intellectuals, using his artistic skills to challenge the prevailing quo. The rebranding of his theatre ensemble to "Dravidia Marumalarchi Naadaga Sabha" demonstrated his unabashed adherence to Dravidian ideas, which was both ambitious and unique at the time. His impact was so great that the government was

obligated to enact the Madras Dramatic Performances Act, which explicitly targeted the revolutionary narratives depicted in his plays.

One of the most notable aspects of M.R. Radha's legacy is his importance as an organic thinker. Radha rose from the ranks of a society dominated by orthodox thinkers, utilising his artistic abilities to question the status quo. The renaming of his theatre troupe "Dravida Marumalarchi Naadaga Sabha" indicated his unwavering commitment to Dravidian beliefs, which was both bold and unique at the time. His influence was so strong that the government was compelled to pass the Madras Dramatic Performances Act, which specifically targeted the revolutionary storylines depicted in his plays.

Fitting into the Parameters of Gramsci's Organic, M.R. Radha tends to be the organic intellectual being evolved from a social group and extending his contributions to socio-political spheres.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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