



**NEW CROSSROADS:
REINVENTING DRAVIDIAN POLITICS
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

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ISAS Special Report

New Crossroads: Reinventing Dravidian Politics for the 21st Century

Authored by Narayan Lakshman

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New Crossroads: Reinventing Dravidian Politics for the 21st Century

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Executive Summary

Close to a century after the Dravidian movement kicked off in Tamil Nadu as an ideology built around the notion of progressive social transformation, its contours have shifted dramatically in response to profound changes in the political landscape and the imperatives faced by political parties and their constituents. The two major Dravidian parties that hold sway over state politics today face considerable challenges internally and externally and have had to redefine some of their core tenets to remain politically relevant amidst the flux.

This Special Report examines the nature of these tectonic shifts in Dravidian politics and outlines their ramifications for the future of politics and policy in Tamil Nadu and India.

Introduction: A Short History of the Dravidian Movement

It is instructive to begin exploring the transformation of the major Dravidian parties in the present context by examining their ideological origins and moorings. In this introductory section, we start by looking at the core values of Dravidianism as they existed in the early 20th century, and trace their evolution over the decades to follow, which culminated in the hegemonic control of state politics by Dravidian parties for well over half a century.

The historical roots of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu go back in time at least until 1916, the year during which the South India Liberal Federation (SILF) arose, later to be rechristened the Justice Party. The SILF was founded by the three prominent leaders of an erstwhile fledgling non-Brahmin movement – C Natesa Mudaliar, T M Nair and Pitty Theagaraya Chetti.¹

Backlash to Social Inequities

Their actions were fuelled by palpable anger at social inequities that were rife at the time, including, at a macro-level, disproportionate representation of Brahmin (upper caste) individuals in the higher echelons of bureaucratic administration and, at a micro-level, ‘Brahmins Only’ restaurants and lodges across the state.²

These were the early days of protest against what was perceived to be a deeply institutionalised prejudice that favoured upper castes in Tamil Nadu. The Justice Party remained at the helm of the fledgling movement, and it acquired a powerful proponent of social justice values – Periyar E V Ramasamy – who became its head in 1939. Periyar, as he was commonly known, renamed the organisation Dravidar

It is instructive to begin exploring the transformation of the major Dravidian parties in the present context by examining their ideological origins and moorings.

1 B Kolappan, ‘Justice Party, pioneer of reforms, turns 100’, *The Hindu*, 26 November 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Justice-Party-pioneer-of-reforms-turns-100/article16696644.ece>.

2 V Ramakrishnan, ‘Those Were The Days: Charting the history of Justice Party in Tamil Nadu’, *DT Next*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.dtnext.in/News/TamilNadu/2019/02/10052512/1106210/Those-Were-The-Days-Charting-the-history-of-Justice-.vp>.

Kazhagam (DK) [Party of the Dravidians]; and under him, it emerged as the ideological chassis for the broader social movement to come.³

A key philosophical rallying point for their cause at this time was the clarion call of 'self respect', which was premised on eschewing caste, Hinduism and its strictures for deciding whom to marry, rituals to be performed throughout life and a power structure for administering the same that saw Brahmins placed at the very pinnacle.

The focus of Periyar's political campaign included, at a broad level, the battle against informal casteism within official institutions and policy, particularly those that led to Brahmins acquiring disproportionate access to government resources. Yet, he equally imbued the DK with a strong focus on social reform, including fighting for the rights of socially and economically marginalised widows, for example.⁴

It is not as if the non-Brahmin movement, which is what it quintessentially was at the time, precluded all Dalit political interests or was hostile to their collective ambitions.

Some scholars have argued that a missing constituent among the rainbow coalition of lower caste groups brought under the DK's umbrella were Dalits or *Adi Dravidars*, as they are known in South India, who are now largely grouped under the Scheduled Castes for the purpose of reservations of jobs and university admissions. It is not as if the non-Brahmin movement, which is what it quintessentially was at the time, precluded all Dalit political interests or was hostile to their collective ambitions. Indeed, its very basic tenet of opposing upper-caste hegemony implied commitment to the ultimate upliftment of all lower castes. Yet, there has been a vigorous debate over the years, especially against the backdrop of periodic, brutal violence between Dalits and members of the *Mukkulathor* or *Thevar* communities, as to whether genuine political advancement of the former was enabled under the aegis of the Dravidian movement.

3 Kavitha Muralidharan, '100 years of Justice Party, a movement which defined Tamil Nadu politics', *The News Minute*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/100-years-justice-party-movement-which-defined-tamil-nadu-politics-53163>; and S K S Nathan, 'The DMK and the Politics of Tamilnad', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 2, No. 48, 9 December 1967, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24478287>.

4 Dennis S Jesudasan, '75 years of carrying the legacy of Periyar', *The Hindu*, 26 August 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/75-years-of-carrying-the-legacy-of-periyar/article29255010.ece>.

Entering the Political Arena

In 1949, the DK suffered an internal split. A protégé of Periyar, C N Annadurai, or “Anna” (older brother), as he popularly came to be known, broke off from the main party and formed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) [Party for the Advancement of Dravidianism]. In part, the split was driven by disagreements over who would take over the organisation after Periyar’s time, and more substantially, over accepting the ruling Congress Party’s role at the helm of affairs after India won independence from British colonial rule.⁵ Ultimately, Periyar’s relatively radical view on rejecting engagement with any political party controlled by what he considered to be Brahmin or North Indian interests was anathema within the broader political matrix. However, Annadurai navigated the complex game of give-and-take within India’s federal-state structure with greater nuance, and understood that engaging with New Delhi would be the only way forward for Tamil Nadu.

In this context, Annadurai’s broader vision for engaging with the central government of a new, free India would pay rich dividends. In the 1967 State Assembly Election, following years of relentless campaigning that put issues such as Hindi imposition front and centre of agitational politics, the DMK succeeded in ousting the Congress from power – a tipping of the scales that would set the scene for Dravidian party dominance in the coming 50 years and more.

The deeper context of this tectonic shift in Tamil Nadu politics bears further examination. On the one hand, there was a sense of disappointment and resentment regarding the performance of the Congress Party in the state. After years at the helm, K Kamaraj, a Congress leader with national stature, stepped down from the Chief Minister’s post in October 1963 to turn his attention towards the party’s leadership in New Delhi. He was succeeded in that capacity by M Bhaktavatsalam, during whose tenure two significant crises

The deeper context of this tectonic shift in Tamil Nadu politics bears further examination.

⁵ R Rangaraj, ‘The September which split Dravidians: Periyar weds Maniyammai, DMK is born’, *The News Minute*, 14 September 2016, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/september-which-split-dravidians-periyar-weds-maniyammai-dmk-born-49850>.

struck the state and debilitated the Congress Party – Hindi imposition in 1965 and the famine in 1965-66. Under the new paradigm of federal rule, the central government sought to make Hindi the official language of the country. Tamil Nadu was engulfed by massive protests over what was seen as the imposition of Hindi in a non-Hindi speaking state. During this time, at least 15 people committed suicide and there were several incidents of police firing at protestors. This was followed by a severe famine, which left thousands struggling for basic access to food. The failure of the Bhaktavatsalam administration to resolve both issues sparked not only broad-based anger at their performance but also tipped the scales decisively toward the DMK.⁶

In part, the DMK's deft response to changing ground realities, including the consolidation of power with the central government, made it politically nimble.

The other side of the coin was the mobilisational power of the DMK, which had entered the political fray during the 1957 General Election. While it started small, with no more than 15 seats in the Assembly, its tally rose to 50 seats less than half a decade on, giving it the status of the main opposition party. In part, the DMK's deft response to changing ground realities, including the consolidation of power with the central government, made it politically nimble. Specifically, Annadurai realised in the wake of the India-China conflict in 1962 – and the anti-secession legislation that followed immediately after that – that his party's core demand for *Dravida Nadu* (Nation of the South) and its implied secession of four southern states from the rest of India, had to be jettisoned, and a model of cooperation with the central government forged.⁷ This made the DMK innately more politically attractive to a broader swathe of the Tamil society – those who believed that their fortunes depended on being tethered to the Indian nation and not in forging a divergent path.

As important as the message of a unique Tamil identity was to this early phase of Dravidianist political mobilisation, the medium mattered equally. Especially under the mantle of the next great

6 S Kumaresan, '1967: Rise of Dravidian movement and the dramatic fall of Congress', *The New Indian Express*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2019/mar/01/1967-rise-of-dravidian-movement-and-the-dramatic-fall-of-congress-1945098.html>.

7 T Ramakrishnan, 'Annadurai's historic rise to fame', *The Hindu*, 15 September 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Annaduraisquos-historic-rise-to-fame/article16881449.ece>.

Dravidian leader, M Karunanidhi, theatre, cinema and the Tamil press became the preeminent means to reach the youth, and the colourful use of language, including poetry, became the instrument to ignite the imagination of the common Tamil man and woman.

From Radical Reform to Inclusive Populism

The tale of the modern-day sagas of Tamil Nadu politics is quintessentially the story of the rivalry between the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). The DMK was led for the best part of half a century by Karunanidhi, formerly a screenwriter for the Tamil film industry, who took over as Chief Minister following the demise of Annadurai in 1969. Of the symbiotic relationship that Karunanidhi shared with the DMK, Nambath wrote:

“The DK, and later the DMK, were instrumental in the making of Mr Karunanidhi, first as a writer and later as a politician. Newspapers, public meetings and theatre and cinema were the means of mass communication for the Dravidian movement. And the young Dravidian activist needed to excel in each medium to work his way up the organisational ladder. His silver tongue and pointed pen came to his aid in building a rapport with party workers and leaders alike.”⁸

The tale of the modern-day sagas of Tamil Nadu politics is quintessentially the story of the rivalry between the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

Yet, as quickly as he ascended to the throne, Karunanidhi discovered the complex, often contradictory realities of governing a political party and a state. On the one hand, the imperatives of the federal-state structure implied by the Indian Constitution required an element of cooperation from state governments with an all-powerful Centre. Karunanidhi was quick to recognise the heft of the Congress Party in this regard and joined alliances with the Indira Gandhi faction in 1971 and 1980. This was coterminous with a philosophical transformation

8 Suresh Nambath, ‘Karunanidhi and the shaping of the Dravidian movement’, *The Hindu*, 7 August 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/karunanidhi-and-the-shaping-of-the-dravidian-movement/article24547395.ece>.

within the DMK, which saw the sharp edge of “assertive populism”⁹ (which involved the mobilisation of small property owners, traders and the like from the broad swathe of lower caste groups around anti-Hindi imposition and anti-Brahmin issues) cede space to an accommodationist and conciliatory approach to party politics.

The genius of this broad-based approach to caste accommodationism was that it recognised that the wide and thin dispersal of many caste groups and sub-groups across Tamil Nadu would blunt the edge of any political strategy focusing on only a few elite caste groups.

The genius of this broad-based approach to caste accommodationism was that it recognised that the wide and thin dispersal of many caste groups and sub-groups across Tamil Nadu would blunt the edge of any political strategy focusing on only a few elite caste groups. This distribution is illustrated in Map 1.

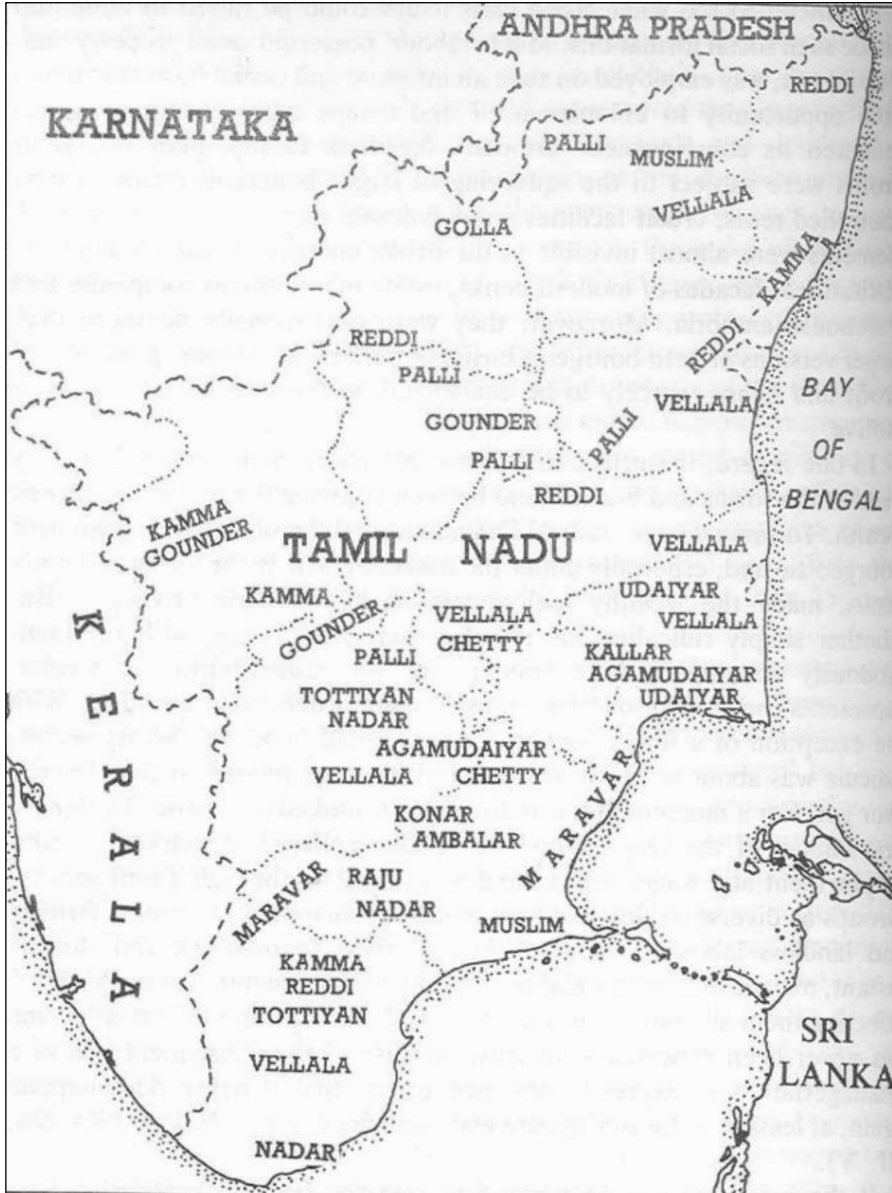
Indeed, an even more radical departure of the DMK from its core ideological moorings, based on its atheist, rationalist and anti-caste Hinduism roots, came in the form of its alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party that now governs India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As Nambath points out, this demonstrated, more than anything, that Karunanidhi “could take his party along with him no matter what he decided, and he was ready for any ideological compromise for the sake of power.”¹⁰

It was clear that Karunanidhi accepted his fate to engage in a lifelong balancing act on the thin line between cooperating with New Delhi and resisting its ham-handed approach on issues that impacted state autonomy. No clearer example of this exists than his opposition to the Emergency imposed by Indira in 1975 – a decision for which he paid the price of having his government dismissed in 1976 on corruption allegations.

9 Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

10 Suresh Nambath, ‘Karunanidhi and the shaping of the Dravidian movement’, op. cit.

Map 1: Geographic Spread of Caste in Tamil Nadu



Source: Washbrook, 1989

However, a far greater and more permanent challenge that he faced came not from beyond Tamil Nadu's borders, but within, in the form of M G Ramachandran (MGR), a former protégé of Karunanidhi and mega-star of the Tamil film industry, who broke away and formed a rival party, AIADMK, in 1972. MGR, who was formerly a member of the Congress Party, joined the DMK when he was drawn to the politics of Annadurai. He became a member of the state Legislative Council in 1962 and succeeded in getting elected to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly in 1967. When Annadurai passed away, MGR became the treasurer of DMK. However, the peace between him and Karunanidhi was increasingly threatened as it became apparent that both men had leadership ambitions that could not be accommodated by the other. In the end, MGR was expelled from the party after he alleged that the DMK had become corrupt since Annadurai's time.

New Dawn for Mass Welfare Policies

In 1977, MGR and the AIADMK went on to score an electoral victory, winning 34 out of the 39 seats in the Lok Sabha polls of March that year in an alliance with the Congress and Left parties. Demonstrating his political savvy – some would call it ruthlessness – early on, MGR abandoned the Congress alliance nearly three months later for the State Assembly Election after the former’s popularity waned following the end of the Emergency. Holding firm to the broad electoral plank of anti-corruption, and targetting the DMK directly after its dismissal from power by Indira on the same charges, the AIADMK under MGR won a whopping 130 out of 234 seats in that year’s assembly election. It went on to remain in power for a decade, riding a massive popularity wave around the cinematic and charismatic leadership persona of MGR, who, in his films, projected himself as a man of the people – the Tamil everyman who at times acquired a Robin Hood-like air as he fought for the downtrodden.

Unsurprisingly, this led to a second tectonic shift in the philosophical base of the Dravidian movement which pushed the ruling parties further toward mass welfare schemes under the broad rubric of “paternalist populism”.¹¹ This frame of reference for agenda setting and policy implementation implied that mass welfare goods, such as subsidised food grains – and in later decades, household items like washing machines and colour televisions – would be provided by the state to lower caste and lower-class groups.

There are two sides to the coin with regard to competitive paternalist populism of this sort. On the one hand, it is well documented that Tamil Nadu, especially under MGR and in the years after him, was a pioneer in effectively implementing broad-based welfare policies such as the Noon Meal Scheme (NMS), leading to better nutritional, educational and inter-caste harmony outcomes across the state. The state’s consistent commitment to nutrition expenditure is evident from the data in Table 1 and Figure 1 from the early 2000s.

There are two sides to the coin with regard to competitive paternalist populism of this sort.

¹¹ Ibid.

Table 1: Nutrition Expenditure – Tamil Nadu

Year	GSDP (FC, CurP)	Rev Exp on Nutrition	Nurtition Exp/ GSDP
2000	14,536,900	54,803	0.38
2001	14,893,100	46,305	0.31
2002	15,754,300	52,763	0.33
2003	17,496,900	67,898	0.39
2004	19,668,000	68,772	0.35
2005	21,964,900	82,873	0.38

Notes:

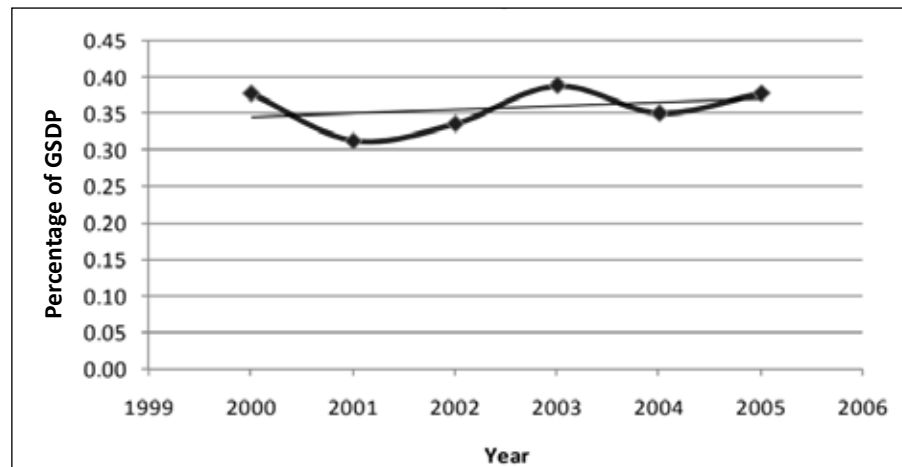
1. GSDP - Gross State Domestic Product

2. FC - Factor Cost

3. CurP - Current Prices

4. Figures are Indian Rupees

Source: Lakshman, 2011

Figure 1: Nutrition Expenditure/GSDP

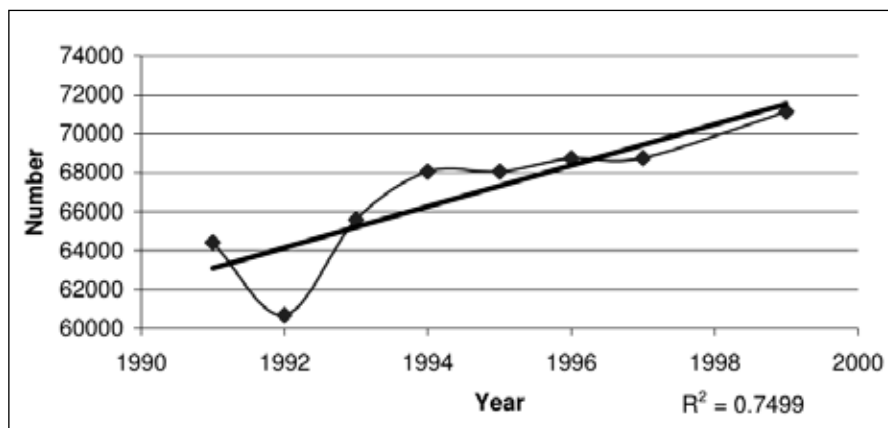
Source: Lakshman, 2011

This level of public expenditure has been broadly sustained through the first few decades of the 21st century. Further, in terms of the number of centres administering the NMS and the number of beneficiaries, there was a steady increase through this period which was again sustained in subsequent years (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 2: Number of Centres Administering Noon Meal Scheme

Year	No. of Centres	No. of Beneficiaries
1991	64,424	6,782,262
1992	60,673	6,619,808
1993	65,587	7,200,000
1994	68,056	7,253,000
1995	68,056	7,305,000
1996	68,740	7,700,000
1997	68,750	7,758,000
1999	71,138	7,446,434

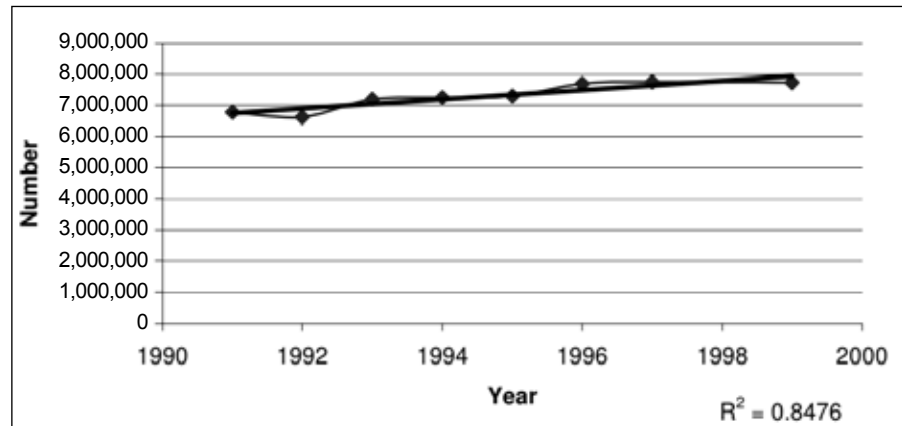
Source: Lakshman, 2011

Figure 2: Number of Centres

Source: Lakshman, 2011

Its impact, in terms of development goals, was so substantial that the Supreme Court made it a mandatory policy in other Indian states, and the World Bank and development organisations also helped extend its scope. Similarly, Tamil Nadu's sharp, early focus on school enrollment and activity-based learning meant that it leads most other Indian states in Programme for International Student Assessment rankings, a measure of pedagogical effectiveness in primary education.

However, analysts of Tamil Nadu's political economy have noted several drawbacks of the paternal-populist model.

Figure 3: Number of Beneficiaries

Source: Lakshman, 2011

This came close to becoming a reality around the turn of the century, when, under a DMK government, Tamil Nadu's fiscal health deteriorated to the point of near bankruptcy.

Firstly, unless there is a concerted push to boost the state's revenue base – say, by creating an enabling environment for manufacturing industries to establish plants in Tamil Nadu and boost job creation – there is always a risk that runaway public expenditures could capsize the state's budget. This came close to becoming a reality around the turn of the century, when, under a DMK government, Tamil Nadu's fiscal health deteriorated to the point of near bankruptcy (see Table 3).

Ironically, it fell to Jayalalithaa, a protégé of MGR and a film star too, who became the chief of the AIADMK after MGR's death in 1987, to use the autocratic control of the party to implement long-term fiscal reforms and stabilise the state's macroeconomics.

Second, a few studies¹² have looked at the net impact of mass welfare policies in a broader context as well as the matrix of resource allocation by the state and questioned whether welfare was truly advanced by these policies for the target groups. For example, the introduction of the NMS in 1982 was closely linked to MGR's repeal of dry laws or liquor regulation in 1981, which begs the question of whether its

12 Arun R Swamy, 'Sense, Sentiment and Populist Coalitions: The Strange Career of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu', in *Subnational Movements in South Asia*, eds. Subrata K Mitra and R Allison Lewis (Routledge, 1996) and Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

true purpose was to replace, at a microeconomic level, household nutrition lost to alcohol consumption.¹³

Table 3: Long-term Trends in Revenue Receipts (RR) and Revenue Deficit (RD)

Year	RD	RR	RD/RR
1988	-282.92	3,374.82	-8.38
1989	-274.17	3,763.04	-7.29
1990	-479.22	4,730.79	-10.13
1991	-522.15	5,087.89	-10.85
1992	-1,903.86	6,775.66	-28.1
1993	-1,526.2	7,016.33	-21.75
1994	-691.86	8,066.15	-8.58
1995	-415.55	9,219.4	-4.51
1996	-311.32	10,599.3	-2.94
1997	-1,103.6	11,961.3	-9.23
1998	-1,363.9	13,587	-10.04
1999	-3,436.57	14,260.8	-24.1
2000	-4,400.3	16,327.5	-26.95
2001	-2,738.94	18,818	-14.55
2002	-4,850.96	20,836.7	-23.28
2003	-1,566.24	23,705.7	-6.6
2004	-703.34	28,541.5	-2.47

Note: RD/RR Ratio (Unit = Crore Indian Rupees)

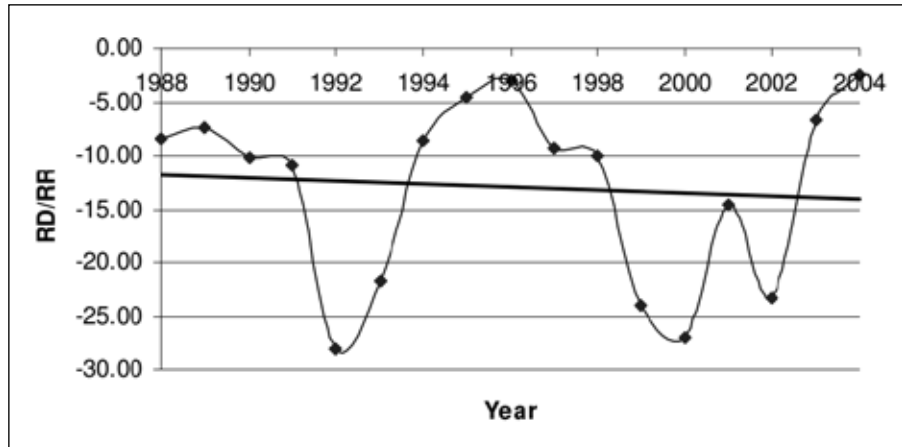
Source: Lakshman, 2011

Third, in fostering and becoming dependent upon this “freebies culture”, the Tamil people appeared to have entered a Faustian bargain governing which political parties and leaders are in power in their state. As has especially been the case in the last two decades of the 20th century, the high values of the early leaders of the Dravidian movement metastasised into an irresistible penchant for leaders to rule their parties with an iron fist, build personality cults around themselves, their families and allies and simultaneously to inflict an

13 Narayan Lakshman, *Patrons of the Poor: Caste, Politics and Policymaking in India* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

enormous cost on the state by engaging in “grand larceny, an unhinged loot on the resources of Tamil Nadu through extortion, bribe-taking, thuggery and corporate malfeasance.”¹⁴

Figure 4: Revenue Deficit/Revenue Receipts



Source: Lakshman, 2011

14 Narayan Lakshman, ‘Adrift on stormy seas’, *The Hindu*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/adrift-on-stormy-seas/article25383439.ece>.

Breaking Away from History

Dravidianism's Unprecedented Challenges

Against the backdrop of this rich history of Dravidian politics, Tamil Nadu today stands on the cusp of momentous change. The reasons for this change are at least two-fold. Firstly, when the eras of Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi as autocratic leaders of the AIADMK and DMK, respectively, passed into the history books in 2016 and 2018, it marked the end of nearly 50 years of their dominance of the political landscape in the state, and likely heralded the end of their leader-centric brand of politics. Second, the rise of the BJP across a steadily increasing number of states and its soaring power as a political entity in the context of the Congress' secular decline has brought a unique challenge to the doorstep of the Dravidian parties, which challenges the very core of their philosophical underpinnings.

Let us consider each challenge in turn.

From New Leadership to New Governance

Firstly, regarding the change at the helm, the passing of Jayalalithaa left the AIADMK bereft of a political anchor because it was the former party chief herself who deliberately degraded young and upcoming leaders over decades. Under her reign, genuflection became the means to political survival within the cadre. Thus, it was hardly a surprise that her death set off a spiral of infighting between new factions that emerged. Firstly, former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam rebelled against the core of the party which was initially controlled by the clan of V K Sasikala, Jayalalithaa's erstwhile confidant, only to return to the fold alongside erstwhile Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami after Sasikala was jailed when she was found guilty in a disproportionate assets case. Secondly, Sasikala's nephew, T T V Dhinakaran, led a gang of rebel Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) into a separate party, Amma Makkal Munnettra Kazagam. Thirdly, there was a period of tension between Panneerselvam and

Under her reign, genuflection became the means to political survival within the cadre.

Palaniswami over who would be Chief Minister, a contest that came to an amicable end within a few months, after the latter occupied that seat and Panneerselvam settled for the post of Deputy Chief Minister.

True to the DMK's relatively more organised and disciplined ethos among its cadre, the senior leadership of the party quickly rallied behind Stalin and there was no looking back.

The situation in the DMK was less turbulent if not bereft of challenges to the leadership. To a considerable extent, the chaos witnessed in the post-Jayalalithaa AIADMK was avoided in the DMK, as the latter had an orderly succession planning process instituted by the party president, Karunanidhi, during his final years. His son, the current Chief Minister, M K Stalin, was anointed heir to the party's political mantle, and his rise to the top role in the aftermath of Karunanidhi's death was largely uncontroversial. The one potential challenger, Stalin's older brother, M K Alagiri, had been expelled from the DMK years ago by Karunanidhi for "anti-party activities". True to the DMK's relatively more organised and disciplined ethos among its cadre, the senior leadership of the party quickly rallied behind Stalin and there was no looking back.¹⁵

The common outcome for both parties of this substantive change in leadership is that there are, today, even more imperatives for issue-centric policymaking and governance rather than leader or personality-centric political management. This new paradigm of political incentives has likely impacted both Dravidian parties considerably.

In the AIADMK, the passing of Jayalalithaa did not result in an immediate loss of power because she died a little more than six months after the state assembly elections, leaving her party with more than four remaining years at the helm of government. However, her departure from the scene also heralded the end of the autocratic style of party management and policymaking that had become the norm. Indeed, it is apparent that Palaniswami likely realised that the only means by which he might be able to hold the party together and prevent internal fissures from causing an outright political implosion

¹⁵ Narayan Lakshman, 'Tamil Nadu at an inflection point', *The Hindu*, 18 March 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/50th-anniversary-of-dravidian-rule-tamil-nadu-at-an-inflection-point/article17521403.ece>.

would be for him to deliver on the promise of good governance. This required renewed focus on mass welfare policies for the social sector that were already in place, but also on additional policies that could be implemented to attract much needed state investment.

A major industrial investment initiative was the second Global Investors Meet held in 2019, resulting in the Tamil Nadu government signing 304 memoranda of understanding and agreements entailing investments of over US\$500 million (S\$684.36 million) and employment generation potential of over a million jobs, with a focus on investments in relatively new sectors, including school education, higher education, office space and tourism, alongside support for micro, small and medium enterprises.¹⁶

However, efforts such as these were necessary to undo the damage done under Jayalalithaa's rule to Tamil Nadu's reputation as a desirable investment destination. Ironically, Jayalalithaa was an architect of Tamil Nadu accelerating recent industrial development, for example, getting Ford Motor Company to set up a plant in the state as far back as in her first term as Chief Minister. That set the tone for "the emergence of Tamil Nadu, particularly Chennai and its suburbs, as a hub of automobile and auto components manufacturing, with more than half a dozen multinational players setting up factories."¹⁷ However, the practice of demanding extortionate payments from private industry for the privilege of being allowed to operate made it unfeasible for many of them to sustain their operations. Nevertheless, between spurring industrial development back to a higher growth path and dealing with intermittent water and agrarian crises, the Palaniswami government had little choice but to focus on delivering governance where it mattered, thereby subtly changing – perhaps improving – what people could reasonably expect from their government.

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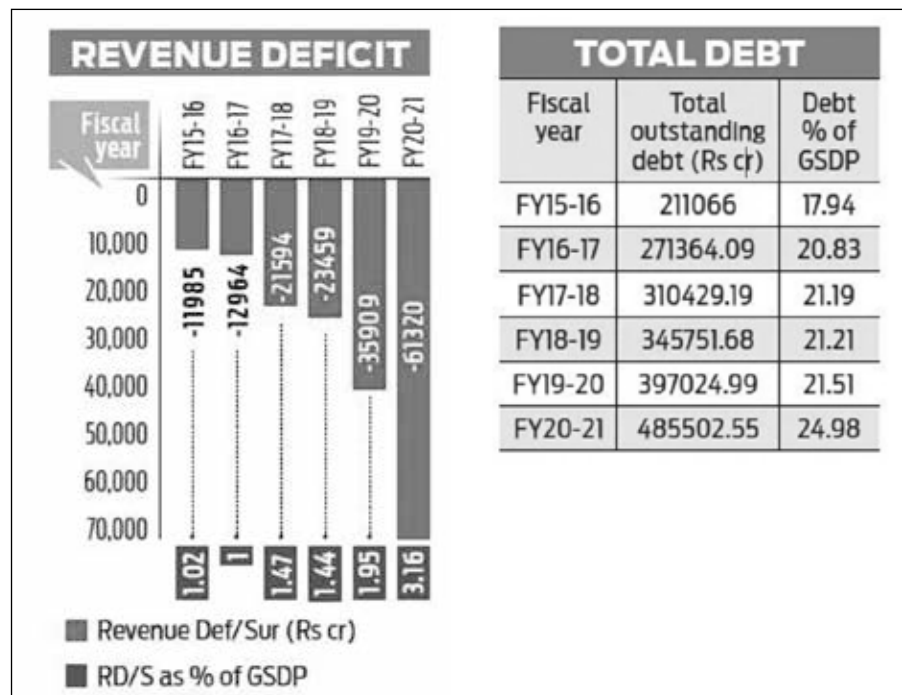
16 'Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet 2019: MoUs worth ₹3 lakh cr. signed, says Edappadi Palaniswami', *The Hindu*, 25 January 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Chennai/gim-to-bring-3-lakh-cr-in-investments-to-tn/article26084111.ece>.

17 R Balaji, 'Jayalalithaa catalysed industrial growth in TN', *BusinessLine*, 6 December 2018, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/jayalalithaa-catalysed-industrial-growth-in-tn/article9412047.ece>.

Turning now to the DMK, in the post-Karunanidhi era, the party appears to have come out strong, well-institutionalised, stable in terms of internal dynamics and led by a man who spent a lifetime in his father’s shadow yet nevertheless emerged with his own vision for governing the state. It was perhaps just as well that Stalin’s party was not beset with the sorts of factional infighting that the AIADMK faced in the aftermath of Jayalalithaa’s passing, because when Stalin finally became Chief Minister in May 2021, it was a time of great turmoil for a state – and nation – in the grip of a deadly second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the considerable pressure from external circumstances, including both a public health emergency and faltering economic growth after a year or more of paralysing lockdowns, Stalin has clearly signalled his intent to fight back. The road ahead for his government is long, given the dire state of public finances in the state at the moment.

Table 4: State of Public Finances in Tamil Nadu



Source: *New Indian Express*, 13 August 2021

Firstly, he appointed proactive party leaders, M Subramaniam and P Thiagarajan, as health and finance ministers respectively. Second, he created an Economic Advisory Council comprising eminent experts, including Nobel laureate Esther Duflo, India's former Chief Economic Adviser, Arvind Subramanian, former head of the Reserve Bank of India, Raghuram Rajan, former Finance Secretary, S Narayan, and welfare economist and activist, Jean Drèze. In a sense, most of these persons had in their previous roles "positioned themselves against Modi's haphazard decision-making."¹⁸

The subtle shift that has occurred in parallel to the exit of Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi from the scene is that the lynchpin of "successful rule" in Tamil Nadu has become good governance, rather than, as in years past, the weight of personality-based politics. This shift might be welcome news to industrial bosses across manufacturing sectors, and even to diplomats from Asia, North America and Europe posted in Chennai, who, weary of trying to get appointments with the late Chief Ministers to talk about investments and more, had given up hope that a day might dawn when files move quickly through the secretariat and the promised action would be implemented efficiently.

The challenge for both Stalin and Palaniswami – or any future leader of either Dravidian party – is that it remains to be seen whether delivering on the promise of good governance is sufficient to win elections. In the case of Palaniswami, it was not, for his party was routed in the May 2021 election despite stable, effective rule for four years before that point. However, in his case, an argument might have been made that he lacked personal charisma and broader ability to hold the AIADMK's cadre together, given the power vacuum in the party post-Jayalalithaa. Yet, this would, in theory, not apply to Stalin, who is viewed not only within the DMK as the sole legitimate heir of Karunanidhi's legacy and the leadership mantle but also as a leader beyond party politics who stands for a dissenting voice and alternative vision to what is proposed by the BJP and Modi.

The challenge for both Stalin and Palaniswami – or any future leader of either Dravidian party – is that it remains to be seen whether delivering on the promise of good governance is sufficient to win elections.

18 'Tamil Nadu's leader offers something India's does not: competence', *The Economist*, 3 July 2021, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/07/01/tamil-nadus-leader-offers-something-indias-does-not-competence>.

Embracing Change While Holding to Core Values

The most telling fact in recent times on how the BJP – as the party of muscular Hindutva, upper-caste dominance, propagation of Hindi, the politics of North India and a homogenising national identity – is viewed in Tamil Nadu is the loss of its ally in the state, the AIADMK, in the 2021 State Assembly Election. Palaniswami's association with the BJP "put the kiss of death on the AIADMK",¹⁹ especially given the widespread belief that without "Amma" – a moniker for Jayalalithaa – to hold the party together, Palaniswami had surrendered his fate to the saffron party in political desperation. In truth, Palaniswami's hands may, to an extent, have been tied. In as early as 2018, Stalin had publicly questioned whether raids conducted by the Income Tax Department, a federal agency, on the properties of Tamil Nadu ministers and officials in connection with the *gutkha* (a chewing tobacco preparation) and noon meal scams were politically motivated and designed by the BJP to keep the AIADMK leadership compliant.²⁰

Regardless of the reason or the extent of compulsion that drove the AIADMK into the arms of the BJP and saw the party fail at the hustings, it is hardly the first time in Tamil Nadu's history that either Dravidian party has joined hands with the BJP, even while decrying it as antithetical to every Dravidian ethos at other times.

This resulted in a vote of confidence that cost the BJP dearly – its government fell within 13 months of having entered office.

In 1998, snap polls were conducted when the Congress Party withdrew support to a coalition government led by I K Gujral; and it was the AIADMK that made it possible for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to assume power. But their joy was short-lived. As relations soured between erstwhile Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Jayalalithaa, and he refused to withdraw pending corruption cases against her and dismiss the DMK government in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK withdrew from the NDA. This resulted in a vote of confidence that cost the BJP dearly – its government fell within 13 months of having entered office.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 'Are I-T raids meant to intimidate AIADMK govt, asks Stalin', *The Hindu*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/are-i-t-raids-meant-to-intimidate-aiadmk-govt-asks-stalin/article25592854.ece>.

Neither is the DMK a stranger to political opportunism in the national space. Scarcely a year after the debacle with Jayalalithaa, the BJP once again began making southward political overtures, this time in hopes of building an alliance with the DMK. After hectic parleys mediated by the BJP's Pramod Mahajan and the DMK's Murasoli Maran, the unimaginable happened, and the professedly atheist DMK lent its support to the country's largest Hindu nationalist party. However, that alliance was also short-lived, given that the DMK leadership was likely dismayed by the 2002 post-Godhra massacre of Muslims in BJP-ruled Gujarat, and subsequently pulled its ministers out of the NDA.

The deeper philosophical question that both Dravidian parties will have to mull over is how each of them will navigate its relationship with the BJP given its dominance at the Centre, and the fact that its footprint is expanding across the country with each General Election. After all, even the DMK will need to have a working relationship with New Delhi to get a fair share of goods and services tax allocations as well as various forms of central government assistance to states to fight the pandemic, natural disasters and much more.

One option for Dravidianism as such is to continue its journey toward inclusivity and accommodationism, with an even sharper focus on economic growth and mass welfare schemes. This may require a party such as the DMK to eschew attacks on Hinduism while emphasising the conflict between the majoritarian politics of Hindutva and the constitutional value of equality. Ultimately, if the DMK hopes to win caste Hindus to its fold, it would be wise to embrace the reality that "for a majority of them, the sheer adaptability of the Dravidian ethos makes it a more comfortable, less alien vehicle to transport them to a promising future."²¹

The AIADMK, contrarily, is in danger of slipping into a position where it plays second fiddle to the BJP – either willingly, with a view to accessing the BJP's deep pockets; as a result of compulsion, with the inability to find alternative means to halt internal frictions from leading to a

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21 Narayan Lakshman, 'New dawn in Dravidian politics', *The Hindu*, 6 May 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/new-dawn-in-dravidian-politics/article34492963.ece>.

breakdown of party dynamics; or through coercion to avoid the threat of income tax raids. Whatever the reason, the AIADMK leadership would have to think long and hard about what consequences this might have in a state such as Tamil Nadu, where a visceral distrust of North Indian political parties has been deeply ingrained into the collective psyche for well over half a century. On the other hand, if a single leader, such as Palaniswami, were to emerge from the shadows of equivocation and establish themselves as a centralising vector within the party, that could galvanise the cadre to fall in line and help deliver the dream of “paternalist populism” as they did under Jayalalithaa and MGR.

Conclusion

Dravidianism, as a transformational social movement in South India, has demonstrated remarkable resilience and the ability to reinvent itself time after time in response to external flux and a constantly changing political ecosystem.

The firebrand leaders of its early days ignited the flames of the ‘revolution’ by targetting Brahmin dominance, caste discrimination in society and in government policies and relying on “assertive populism” to mobilise a diverse rainbow coalition of lower caste groups and small property holders to political action. Their success was measured by the ousting of the Congress Party from power in 1967, an act that has echoed through the corridors of power at the Chennai Secretariat for well over 50 years.

However, as the federal system of governance deepened its roots across India and it became evident that even strong regional parties would have to play a cooperative-competitive game with the Centre, the DMK, as the main vehicle of Dravidianism through the 1970s, shed its antagonistic edge in favour of smaller battles to preserve state autonomy within the federal framework.

The rise of the AIADMK, through the late 1970s and 1980s, changed the face of Dravidianism yet again, this time by shifting its policy focus from reservation and anti-Hindi-imposition to include mass welfare schemes, now a permanent feature of the agenda-setting process of both major parties.

Through the 1990s and the turn of the century, this basis of policymaking became manifested in competitive populism between the DMK and the AIADMK, with each party channelling its redistributive policies toward somewhat variegated and differentiated caste groups, yet remaining broadly responsive to the welfare needs of lower classes. At the same time, the grip of autocratic leaders on both parties, respectively, meant that corruption, from petty bribe taking to grand larceny and extortion

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from industry on a massive scale, led to a shadow economy taking hold, sometimes driving industry out of Tamil Nadu.

The surging popularity of the BJP across India through the second decade of the 21st century has arguably presented the latest and most profound challenge to Dravidianism in its history, prompting one party to lean toward a 'soft' adoption of saffron politics, and the other to hold firm to its anti-religiosity and anti-North Indian political stance.

Whichever direction Dravidianism evolves in going forward, one thing is clear: it is likely to remain the defining political movement of Tamil Nadu for the remainder of the 21st century, if not longer, and will continue to be the lens through which the common Tamil man and woman view their political prospects. The extent to which it truly delivers on the promise of good governance while continuing to recognise the unspoken exceptionalism of the Tamilian ethos depends on how politically dextrous and creative its leaders are in responding to great challenges and opportunities, within and without.

Appendix 1

About the Author

Dr Narayan Lakshman is an Associate Editor at *The Hindu*, one of India's largest English-language daily newspapers. As a member of the senior editorial management of the newspaper, Dr Lakshman co-edits its opinion pages, writes editorial and opinion articles and has curated special editorial projects, including article series on India's water and healthcare crises and investigative features. He has written over 2,000 articles to date. He regularly appears on news television channels as an expert political commentator. From February 2010, Dr Lakshman served for six years as *The Hindu's* United States (US) correspondent based in Washington DC, sending dispatches on a wide range of subjects, from strategic issues in India-US politics to healthcare reform and immigration controversies. Prior to this role, Dr Lakshman worked in the Tamil Nadu bureau at the Chennai headquarters of *The Hindu*, where he wrote on rural poverty and development.

Dr Lakshman's doctoral research at the Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, focused on the political economy of poverty alleviation in India. His research was synthesised into a book titled *Patrons of the Poor: Caste Politics and Policymaking in India*, published by Oxford University Press (India) in March 2011. He also served as a consultant at the Asian Development Bank, where he authored a Working Paper on 'The Political Economy of Good Governance for Poverty Alleviation Policies'. He also worked as a research analyst at a London-based hedge fund.

Dr Lakshman has a BA in Economics from St Stephen's College at Delhi University, an MA in Economics from Cambridge University and an MSc (with Distinction) and PhD in Development Studies from the London School of Economics.

Dr Lakshman is currently a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is also a Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellow at the Ananta Aspen Centre, New Delhi, India, and a member of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

