



The Enduring Bipolarity: Dravidian Ideology And The Hegemonic Contest Between DMK And ADMK In Tamil Nadu Politics

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Abstract

The political landscape of Tamil Nadu stands as a striking anomaly in India, a unique case of Dravidian exceptionalism where regional parties, the DMK and ADMK, maintain absolute hegemonic control. This paper narrates the evolution of this stable bipolar system, tracing its roots from the early 20th century's Justice Party and its foundational focus on social justice, non-Brahmin representation, and agitational politics. This historical journey culminated in the establishment of stable, alternating Dravidian rule post-1967. At its core, the political contest is not a mere struggle for power, but an ideological battle over who is the true guardian of Dravidian ideals—social justice, state autonomy, and linguistic pride. The rivals wage this competition primarily through extensive welfare populism and the strategic co-option of smaller, identity-based parties, which successfully fortifies the system's bipolar structure. Despite the recent deaths of charismatic stalwarts and mounting ideological challenges from national parties, the Dravidian mandate remains the non-negotiable prerequisite for state power, ensuring the continued resilience and distinctive character of Tamil Nadu's politics.

Keywords: Dravidian Exceptionalism, Bipolar Party System. DMK and ADMK, Social Justice, Welfare Populism, Political Hegemony.

Introduction

In the analysis of a democratic party system in India the political landscape of Tamil Nadu gives a unique and gripping case study. When all the other states were predominantly dominated by the national parties, politics in Tamil Nadu is dominated by the regional parties which has its base rooted in Dravidian ideology. These regional parties are termed as Dravidian parties, primarily two : Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). This lasting dynamism can be called as Dravidian exceptionalism which influences political participation and the very basic concept of governance in the state, which eventually influences the electoral politics also.

Another important aspect is the historical existence of agitational politics which distinguishes the state from the rest of the country. This aspect is deeply rooted in the socio-culture of the state. During pre-independence period which is the early stage the politics of agitation was primarily on the ideological basis of regionalism and nationalism, and on the long existing caste divisions particularly centers on brahmins and non-brahmins. From the 1940s onwards there was a shift and a strong focus towards cultural nationalism which emerged as a defining feature, which formed the emotional and intellectual for the following political movements in the state.

The foundations of the Dravidian ideals are social justice, equality, anti-caste, primacy to Tamil language which makes it a necessary case for the political actors in the state to align with the core values. The politics in Tamil Nadu is not merely a struggle for political power rather it is continuous fight for hegemony where the competing parties try to establish themselves as the guardians of the Dravidian ideals and the legal successor of the justice party, is the main argument of this paper. The aim of this paper is to analyze this unique political system, to trace the evolution of the stable bipolar party system. Finally, how the Dravidian ideals continue to influence and shape the politics of the state, and how despite there has been so many attempts from the national parties and other new parties from the state to come to power still the two major Dravidian parties maintain their hegemony in electoral politics (Gorringe, 2011; Subramanian, 2005).

Early Development and the Rise of Agitational Politics (Pre-1947)

The origin of the party system in the state goes back to the early 1900s, which is then known as Madras presidency. Two major parties existed in the presidency in the pre-independence namely Indian National Congress and the Justice Party. Politics at that time was a fight between these two parties only. Congress presented itself as a pan-India movement whose aim is to get independence for the country. But it is often characterized as the parties of elite from upper caste. Opposing it Justice party emerged as a party for non-brahmins, establishing a pivotal ideological and social movement opposing congress dominance (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998).

South Indian Liberal Federation (SILF) was formed in 1916 by the non-brahmin intellectuals in the Madras presidency. This federation later renamed as Justice Party as an opposition to the brahmin dominance in the presidency with respect to opportunities in educational institutions, civil administration and in public life.

Subsequently it has established itself as the primary representative of the non-brahmin communities in the Madras presidency. The justice party also emerged as an ideological alternative to the congress. The Dravidian ideology which is the defining nature of the politics of Tamil Nadu today has taken its shape during justice party era only. Social justice and empowerment were the core political and social agenda of the party. Also, the party advocated for reservations for the non-brahmin communities in terms of education and employment. Most importantly, the party for the first time in the country has established the system of communal reservation through affirmative actions (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). This has formed as a guiding framework for the present Dravidian parties in the state.

The Justice Party found early electoral success, winning elections in 1920, 1923, and 1930. However, the early 1930s marked a crucial turning point. After 1930, the Congress Party, capitalizing on the rising tide of the national independence movement, began to gain significant momentum. This national fervor, coupled with internal deficiencies, led to a gradual decline in the Justice Party's influence in the administration. The justice party leaders have failed to do garner mass mobilization among the substantial non-brahmin population, shows their elitist mindset. The primary reason for the decline of the Justice party is this only. This lack of interest in agitation and mass mobilization has given an image to the party as dominated by forward caste Hindus and wealthy individuals leaving the very mass that they assert to represent (MIDS Analysis, 2000 n.d.). Previous works on the Tamil Nadu politics shows that the justice party remained largely an elite group with no popular base.

At this juncture, a more radical social movement started to take place. In 1925 E.V. Ramasamy commonly known as Periyar has started the self-respect movement, a movement as a socio-cultural force which is based on anti-caste, critically examined the perceived the dominance by the North India and the Brahmin community particularly on the social and cultural domains. Periyar directly challenged Brahmin's political and social hegemony, and he insisted that freedom will be realized in true sense only when the caste-based inequality goes away and individual lives with self-respect (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). His main objective was to attain social equality by promoting dignity and self-respect among the marginalized sections, by advocating rationalism and by rejecting religious convictions which assert social hierarchies.

As mentioned earlier, Congress started to gain momentum after the 1930s. It won two consecutive legislative council elections, one in 1934 and the other in 1937. In both elections, the justice party came as an opposition party. In 1937, Congress came up with the idea of introducing Hindi as a compulsory language in schools. There was a huge uprising against this move, both the justice party and the self-respect movement fought against it and it has created a social base for the subsequent Dravidian movement to come. After the loss in 1937 elections, the Justice party lost its relevance, and it merged with the Self-respect movement of the Periyar. Periyar took over the leadership of the Justice party in 1938, signifies the formal merger of socio-cultural and political streams.

The Dravidian Movement's Evolution and the Birth of the DMK (1947–1967)

Periyar's vision for the merged entities was transformative. He was not interested in the transactional nature of electoral politics. Instead, he renamed and merged the two organizations to form the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1944. His main and explicit goal was to fundamentally transform the Justice Party into a political force truly representing the masses, effectively replacing its inherited elitist image with a popular, mass-based mandate. Periyar used the DK to propagate his uncompromisingly radical ideology, promoting a demand for an independent state called Dravida Nadu and withdrawing from parliamentary politics, believing elections would lead to a compromise of principles. The 1940s established the Indian National Congress as the dominant political force in the presidency, facing no significant, unified opponents. Nevertheless, behind the Congress's political dominance, Periyar actively and vocally promoted Dravidian political ideals during this crucial decade, successfully transforming the Vellala elite's ideology into a "new arsenal with which the ruling elite was attacked" and sowing the seeds for future political movements.

The defining moment that irrevocably shaped modern Tamil Nadu politics occurred after India's independence. A crucial split occurred within the DK in 1949. The rupture centered on a dispute over Periyar's personal life and, more importantly, a fundamental divergence in strategy: Periyar's continued insistence on non-parliamentary social reform versus the desire of a younger guard for direct electoral participation. This internal rupture led directly to the formation of a new, electorally focused political party called the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). This new party was established under the charismatic leadership of C.N. Annadurai, universally known as Anna.

Annadurai successfully moderated the DK's radical ideology, replacing the demand for an independent Dravida Nadu with a more feasible demand for greater state autonomy and focusing on winning elections. The DMK adopted the Dravidian ideology but framed it through the lens of Tamil cultural nationalism, which was powerfully disseminated through the medium of Tamil cinema. Leaders like Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi were acclaimed scriptwriters, and M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) became the party's star campaigner. Cinema was strategically employed as a mass propaganda tool, conveying the party's messages of social justice, anti-Brahminism, and Tamil pride to the illiterate and semi-educated masses, making the DMK a truly mass-based party (India Today, 2020). The very establishment of the DMK marked a historic juncture, signifying the official beginning of Dravidian parties as serious electoral contenders in the state.

In 1957 the elections for the first time happened for the separate Tamil Nadu state. In the first two elections of 1957 and 1962, congress came victorious, due to the image it got during the independence movement and from its existing organizational strength. During these two elections there was no single unified opposition which directly benefitted congress. But it did not last for longer period, from 1960s onwards the principal opposition party DMK has started to reorganize themselves by strengthening its organizational structure and by intensifying its propaganda efforts. It effectively promoted and established a very strong and emotionally resonant political narrative. It has set a narrative that Congress as a national party is fundamentally against and

disconnected from the Tamil people. It was further asserted by other external factors also. The congress parties again came up with the idea of making Hindi a compulsory subject in 1965. This step taken by the congress has led to widespread public violence and unrest. During this protest the actions taken by the then Congress government were a critical misstep in their political history. More than 20 individuals were shot dead in the protest. This incident has significantly helped the DMK in establishing congress as an imposer of North Indian cultural and linguistic hegemony and subsequent raising to power. The anti-Hindi agitations of 1965 acted as a catalyst for a cultural movement into a decisive electoral power.

The Ascent of Dravidian Rule and the Consolidation of the Two-Party System (1967–1996)

The Assembly elections of 1967 in Tamil Nadu marked a definitive and significant turning point in the state's political history. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) for the first time has defeated Congress, marking a pivotal moment in the party's political history. This marked the beginning of long-term dominance of the regional parties in the state. Also, this victory has put an end to the congress party's long term political hegemony in the politics of the state. In the two consecutive elections of 1967 and 1972, the DMK party won it Same as Congress party.

But the victory did not last longer. In the aftermath of the 1972 victory, the party experienced an important split in it. A prominent superstar actor, MG Ramachandran known as MGR, has publicly asserted that corruption is happening inside DMK's administration under Karunanidhi. After this, he was expelled from the party. The actor went on to create his own party Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), in response to his expulsion. He named his party after the name of his mentor Annadurai, the naming is significant is that by this he wanted to claim himself as the moral and political legacy of the Dravidian Movement (Kannan, 2017).

The bipolar party system in Tamil Nadu has been significantly shaped by the above-mentioned split which has its fundamentals, based on personal rivalry and contrasting approach to welfare and governance. The ruling of the state by the Dravidian parties consistently from 1967 to present day is a historical fact and it defines the governance and political identity of the state.

MGR has always been shown as the champion of the poor people and one among them in his films. ADMK won in the very first elections it contested and showed its strength in the elections by coming to power by capitalizing on his image. He also transformed the political landscape of the state by catalyzing an era of populism. ADMK came to power three continuous times, in 1977, 1980 and 1984. ADMK has positioned itself as a dominant party among the people particularly among the underprivileged sections and women's. It was due to the notable schemes of the MGR rule such as Mid-Day meal scheme and giving away free textbooks. His style of ruling has always been characterized by the importance of poverty alleviation and social welfare. This model has deeply resonated by the people, and it has reinforced Tamil Nadu's welfare model.

The ADMK has experienced a split inside the party after the death of MGR in 1987. It was between MGR's wife Janaki and his political heir Jayalalitha, another important actress in the film industry. The split did not

lasted for long time as Jayalalitha has taken over the party and Janaki has opted herself out from politics. DMK won the subsequent election after 1997. It won the 1989 elections but in 1991 the government got dismissed citing it has a link with LTTE. Until 1991, the political environment of the state has always remained volatile. From 1991 onwards only the started having their stable government, which is a significant transition. It marked the period of consistent regional governance, and it coincided with Jayalalitha's first term in office.

The "Two-and-a-Half Party System" and the Era of Stable Alternation (1980–2011)

The period spanning the late 20th and early 21st centuries in Tamil Nadu is best understood through the lens of a "two-and-a-half party system". This analytic concept, applied to the state's political structure, posits that the two major parties are clearly the DMK and the ADMK, which effectively became the only viable contenders for forming a state government. These two parties captured the entire political space, leaving little room for a third force to emerge as a genuine contender for power.

The "half party" in this academic categorization was primarily comprised of the Congress party during this specific time. This classification signified a stable political arrangement where the Congress, though historically significant, lacked sufficient electoral support to form a government independently. Instead, its influence was critical because it could significantly influence the outcome of elections by aligning with one of the two major Dravidian parties, often serving as a key ally in coalition formations for either the DMK or ADMK.

Following the death of MGR in 1987, the state began to see the emergence of many new political parties. These included the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), and Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK). The establishment of these parties was driven by various specific factors, often related to caste-based mobilization (e.g., PMK for Vanniyars), sub-regional issues, or the personal ambitions of founders who had split from the major Dravidian parties (e.g., MDMK). The rise of Dalit parties, notably the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK—Liberation Panther Party), also offered a challenge by mobilizing around anti-caste principles.

Previous works and scholarly analysis of the smaller parties particularly VCK, shows a crucial dynamic: although these parties have its emergence based on radical social movement they often become institutionalized by adapting itself to the established template to enter the political institutions and to the conventions of political engagements which is well established by the Dravidian parties. Subsequently these smaller parties have started to act as secondary players in an alliance to these major parties and use their capacity to get particularly section of the votes, thereby establishing them as indispensable alliance partners to the Dravidian parties. This pattern of co-operation ensures the bipolar nature of the state but also incorporates new social cleavages into the established Dravidian structure. As a result, these smaller parties have failed to become an independent political force.

A broader national political shift further solidified the stability of regional parties. In 1989, the Congress party lost the national elections to an alliance led by the Janata Dal. Since then, a sequence of coalition and minority governments at the federal level fundamentally altered the power dynamic. This shift made federal relations less coercive and more favorable to the states, granting regional parties greater bargaining power and autonomy in governance. The changing dynamics of strategic interactions among political parties—both state and national—encouraged the formation of new political entities and strengthened the hands of existing regional ones.

The era between 1991 and 2011 is characterized by exceptional political stability in Tamil Nadu. The state experienced a stable governance framework, with the two major Dravidian parties, DMK and ADMK, alternating in power for two full decades. This alternating rule became the characteristic feature of the state's politics, creating a predictable cycle of government change driven by public fatigue or short-term anti-incumbency sentiment rather than profound ideological shifts. The resilience of this bipolar model was evident even when national elections in 1998 and 1999 suggested a fragmented, multi-party trend at the federal level; these national trends failed to dislodge the core alternating power structure in the state assembly.

Shifting Dynamics and the Post-Stalwarts Era (2011–Present)

The predictable alternating rule of the Dravidian parties came to a notable and surprising end in 2016. The ADMK, under the powerful and centralized leadership of J. Jayalalitha, broke the long-standing trend by returning to power for a second consecutive time after having won the 2011 elections. The two-decade pattern of alternating in power has been surpassed by this victory, and it shows ADMKs' ability. It can be attributed to the effectiveness of popular welfare strategies by Jayalalitha. Same as her mentor MGR, her schemes were also targeted on marginalized sections and womens (Narayan, 2018).

Then sighnificant and dramatic changes happened in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu after 2017, marks the beginning of a new era. ADMK leader Jayalalitha passed away in 2017 and in 2018 a prominent political leader of Tamil Nadu Kalaingar M. Karunanidhi passed away. These two leaders have significantly shaped the politics of Tamil Nadu for more than four decades and their passing away resulted in a widespread perception of political leadership vacuum in the state.

This period saw the emergence of new generational leaders inside both parties. Former Chief Minister E. Palanisami, who has consolidated his power over the fragmented ADMK party, comes under this generation of leaders only. The present Chief Minister of the state MK Stalin also under this cohort only. As a subsequent event the void has established the space for new entrants to come. This period saw the emergence of new parties who wanted to capitalize the space left by prominent leaders. The arrival of actor Kamal Hassan's Makkal Needhi Maiyam (MNM) in 2018 and the most recent Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) established in 2024 by actor Vijay are the notable examples of this kind. These new entrants have taken MGR and Jayalalitha as their mentors and followed their route, that is leveraging the popular and anti-establishment appeals of their

celebrity founders. But the electoral results show that the ideological foundations made by the Dravidian movement and its political movement remains unchallenged.

Apart from new entrants within the state, there was a significant factor which was happening in the state, which is the increased assertion of national parties, particularly BJP. Unlike congress in the previous era, the BJP posed an ideological challenge to the very principal foundations of the Dravidian movement. It advocated for pan-Indian cultural nationalism which directly contrasts with regional and linguistic identity politics of the DMK and ADMK. While the BJP has not achieved its electoral strength to come to power alone, its active presence and electoral alliances have complicated the existing bipolar system in the state. In response to the ideologically challenge exhibited by the national party BJP and the changing political dynamics of the state, necessitates the Dravidian parties to re-assert and stick to the core Dravidian ideals. Subsequently, the political landscape has transformed from a straightforward bipolar contest between the regional parties to an intricate contest. Now DMK has been pushed to an ideological defense of the Dravidian parties against the push by BJP. At the same time another Dravidian party ADMK is struggling inside them to keep the party relevant and alive without its supreme leader.

The Nature of Political Contest: Ideology, Populism, and Social Justice

The contest between the DMK and ADMK, while appearing as a classic bipartisan struggle, is fundamentally unique due to the shared, yet subtly distinct, ideological scaffolding of Dravidianism. The nature of political contest among parties in Tamil Nadu can be dissected into three primary dimensions: Ideological Continuity and Conflict, Welfare Populism, and the Politics of Identity and Social Justice.

Ideological Continuity and Conflict

Both the DMK and the ADMK are direct descendants of the Self-Respect Movement and the Justice Party. They both claim the legacy of C.N. Annadurai and are committed to the core principles of social justice, state autonomy, and linguistic pride. This shared ancestry means the political debate is not about replacing the Dravidian ideology but about who is the truer, more effective custodian of that ideology. The original split in 1972 was framed as an ideological difference between the DMK's perceived deviation into corruption and MGR's commitment to clean, Anna-inspired governance (Kannan, 2017). This framing forces both parties to constantly reiterate their commitment to the founding principles, maintaining an ideological continuity that stabilizes the system. The conflict, therefore, is often tactical and framed in moral terms (e.g., corruption, efficiency) rather than a deep philosophical divergence, thus preserving the overarching Dravidian hegemonic framework.

Welfare Populism as Competitive Strategy

Since MGR's tenure, a key feature of the political contest has been the competition in welfare populism (Narayan, 2018). This involves the implementation of extensive, visible, and universally or near-universally accessible government schemes, often distributed with personal branding of the party leader. MGR's Nutritious Meal Scheme, Jayalalitha's 'Amma' brand of canteens, water, and pharmaceuticals, and the DMK's free-bus travel for women and loan waivers are all examples of this. This form of populism acts as a crucial strategic tool for political contestation:

Direct Benefit Transfer: It bypasses traditional patronage networks and provides direct benefits to the marginalized, securing a loyal mass base.

Leader Cultivation: It links the scheme directly to the personality of the supreme leader (MGR, Karunanidhi, Jayalalitha), cementing celebrity worship into the political culture (Pandian, 1992).

Competitive Credibility: It forces the opposing party to not only match the incumbent's schemes but devise new, more ambitious ones, making the electoral cycle a contest of competitive welfare promises.

This model, while criticized for potentially straining state finances, has cemented Tamil Nadu's reputation for strong welfare indicators and acts as the primary non-ideological differentiator between the two Dravidian rivals (Narayan, 2018).

The Politics of Identity and Social Justice

The Dravidian Movement's legacy lies in its commitment to Social Justice—specifically through reservation and affirmative action (Narayan, 2018). Tamil Nadu has historically been a pioneer, achieving a high percentage of reservation that has significantly increased social mobility for Backward Classes (BCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs).

The emergence of caste-based parties (PMK, VCK) post-1987 represents a contestation within the Dravidian framework, not against it. These parties articulate the specific, sometimes conflicting, interests of distinct caste groups (e.g., Vanniyars, Dalits) who feel inadequately represented by the two dominant Dravidian parties, which primarily draw support from broader middle-ranking non-Brahmin castes. The DMK and ADMK strategically manage this contest by forming alliances with these smaller parties. This co-option strategy ensures that the grievances of subaltern groups are channeled through the electoral process, reinforcing the dominant parties' control over the ideological centre while providing essential political representation to the smaller, identity-based groups.

The current political contest is being redefined by the challenge from the BJP-led national front. This challenge attempts to shift the contestation from a Dravidian/regional identity axis to a Hindu/national axis. This ideological confrontation compels the DMK and, to a lesser extent, the ADMK to vigorously reassert their

regional, rationalist, and secular roots, ensuring that the Dravidian hegemonic narrative remains the non-negotiable lingua franca of Tamil politics.

Conclusion

The politics in Tamil Nadu is a well-established and ideologically driven framework. It has its roots in agitational politics and social reforms which shape the politics of the state. The political history of the state is an illustration of the impact of regional and socio-cultural movements. Starting from the Justice party's foundational efforts towards social justice and to have non-brahmin representation through affirmative action. Subsequently, the DMK's effective mobilization of masses on cultural nationalism and anti-Hindi sentiments are best examples.

The split which happened in DMK in 1972 and the subsequent decades after that has established a stable bipolar contest between DMK and ADMK. This bipolar nature has minimized the need and diminished the electoral relevance of the national parties. This scenario solidified what is referred to as a "two-and-a-half party system". Though the political landscape of the state has changed after the deaths of two important leaders, Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha. Many new parties have started to come up, and the state started seeing the sudden assertion by national parties like the BJP. Even after this, the fundamental framework of the state remained intact.

As Subramanian (2005) points out, it is important to note that, despite challenges to Dravidian politics, the core concept of Dravidianism maintains a hegemonic role in Tamil society and actively shapes the political and cultural sensibilities of the Tamil people. Dravidian rule has defined what it means to "do politics" in the state, and this enduring legacy may persist even in the face of electoral setbacks and the challenges posed by new political entities (Gorringer, 2011). Consequently, the political landscape and party system, even in its post-stalwart era, continue to revolve primarily around the two major Dravidian parties. Although several new entrants are attempting to break into this dynamic, a detailed analysis of these newcomers shows they are largely co-opted into the existing alliance structures, failing to create a viable third pole of power.

In brief the political landscape of Tamil Nadu presents a political contest that goes beyond the fight for political power alone, rather for the interpretation and implementation of the Dravidian political ideal which is based on social justice, regional pride, and cultural self-respect. These ideals are so influential in a way that any party who wants to attain state power must operate within these ideals only. This gives advantage to the two major Dravidian parties, DMK and ADMK, a sustained presence and resilience. Even under a change in leadership though a change in nature of alliances and tactics can evolve, the fundamental ideologically driven party system with its bipolar nature is expected to continue in the future also, keeping the state's distinctive political character.

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