

Standout State: Tamil Nadu in the 2024 Election

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Summary

Tamil Nadu politics has been dominated by regional parties for nearly half a century. However, the leadership churn in recent decades has altered the power balance significantly. On the eve of the 2024 election results, this paper raises critical questions on what ramifications this has for the governance of the state.

Introduction

The ongoing 2024 general election in India comes at the culmination of a lengthy process of political evolution in Tamil Nadu. During this period, the ruling paradigm of Dravidianism in the state underwent a remarkable transformation and faced a new crossroads¹ in terms of its purposes and methods, the qualities of its leadership and its engagement with the broader political firmament that is the Indian nation-state.

The series of events and processes that were set in motion with the passing of former chief ministers Jayalithaa of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and M Karunanidhi of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), respectively in late 2016 and 2018, ended up redefining the very heart of the Dravidian project, which since its heyday in 1967, has always stood for Tamil exceptionalism and fought for state autonomy.

On the eve of India's looming tryst with the general election results, it is worth examining the latest contours of the politics of Tamil Nadu to understand the extent to which the state offers a bulwark against the rise of Hindutva politics or whether, as a corollary, its resistance to the majoritarian call of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been worn thin.

This paper will examine the major shifts in state politics that occurred in Tamil Nadu during the past decade, outline the landscape of the balance of power in politics as it stands today, and raise and answer critical questions regarding what the future might have in store for the land of the Dravidian movement, given the new political ecosystem that its institutions find themselves in during the third decade of the 21st century.

¹ A term applied to Dravidian politics in the current phase, in an earlier ISAS Special Report: Narayan Lakshman, "New Crossroads: Reinventing Dravidian Politics for the 21st Century", Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 1 February 2022, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/new-crossroads-reinventing-dravidian-politics-for-the-21-st-century/>.

From Humble Beginnings to Centralised Power

For the best part of half a century, two leaders dominated the politics of Tamil Nadu and left their unique footprint on its governance ethos. They were, respectively, Jayalalithaa Karunanidhi.

Karunanidhi's rise into super-star status in Tamil politics began during the early years of the Dravidian movement, when his forebears C N Annadurai and Periyar E V Ramasamy "recognised their young protégé's talent for firing up people through his mastery of Tamil and his fearlessness in pushing back on hegemonic Brahminism, to the later years when, after his meteoric rise to the Chief Ministership of the State he was noticed on the national stage for his brilliance as a party organiser."²

He also emerged as a powerful negotiator and a builder of compromise solutions in politics. An earlier report noted:

"It was compromise that enabled Karunanidhi to hold the party together after the debilitating split with M G Ramachandran and the subsequent emergence of its arch-rival in 1972. It was compromise that deepened the DMK's electoral grip in constituencies spread across 32 districts, each with a different caste group dominating it, the leaders of each such middle and backward caste group clamouring for a share of the spoils of power. What immense knowledge of local issues and traditions, what a profound negotiating ability, and what a decisive personality it must take to bring together Mudaliars, Gounders, Pillais, Chettiars, and a smattering of Dalits and Thevars together into a veritable rainbow coalition of castes...His most drastic compromise came in 1999, when he entered into an alliance with the BJP, a party that stood for everything that the radical phase of Dravidianism militated against: Hindu nationalism, North India-based political vision, Hindi roots and the hegemony of upper castes. That was a short-lived foray and, some argue, the result of expediency as he otherwise risked having his government dismissed – for the third time, potentially – by the central government."³

Similarly, Jayalalithaa came from modest beginnings, as a movie star and the protégé of Ramachandran, the former DMK leader and enormously popular hero on the silver screen, who broke away from the Karunanidhi-dominated party and established the AIADMK as a force to be reckoned since the 1970s. Jayalalithaa's rise was "... a trial by fire, the comeback of an underdog, after her political mentor, MGR, passed away and others vied with her for the highest office in the party."⁴

² Narayan Lakshman, "The last anchor: the legacy of M. Karunanidhi", *The Hindu*, 9 August 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-last-anchor-the-legacy-of-m-karunanidhi/article24636368.ece>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Narayan Lakshman, "Two leaves, one leader, and a party reborn", *The Hindu*, 15 July 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/two-leaves-one-leader-and-a-party-reborn/article65640228.ece>.

Yet, she endeared herself so profoundly to the ranks of her supporters, many among them women that “... more than five years after Jayalalithaa’s death...she was not so much a god as much as her name – ‘Amma’ – continues to be a politically useful rallying cry to mobilise women, the destitute and other vulnerable groups, and the minorities in the state; and the symbol of the party’s promise to deliver to them the mass welfare policies that have historically been the AIADMK’s won’t.”⁵

While their paths to power may have differed significantly, both Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa came to be known for their white-knuckled grip on the reins of power, not only in terms of centralised decision-making while running the state government, but also as the leaders of their respective parties who each had to hold together a vast cohort of party cadres reflecting the full variegation of Tamil Nadu society in terms of castes, sub-castes, regions, religions, gender and more.

Convergence Under Populism’s Umbrella

Under these two leaders – with a decade’s interregnum of rule by Ramachandran from 1977-87 – the nearly half-century from 1969 to 2018 was dominated by a unique brand of Dravidian welfarism that alternated between the ‘assertive populism’ of the DMK and the ‘paternalist populism’ of the AIADMK as the mechanisms for the state government to redistribute resources to certain demographic cohorts. Across both types of rules, there was a notable convergence on three parameters: mass welfare interventions, unhinged populism, and runaway corruption.

First, let us ask why populism became the generalised *modus operandi* for the state, and what precisely these governance paradigms were, in style and substance.

The Dravidian movement evolved and adapted to the changing political and social realities including the complex relationship between Madras and New Delhi and how that relationship was viewed by the people of the state. This meant that, at a broad level, a once-radical social reform movement for the lower castes based on anti-Hindi and anti-North agitations – described by scholars such as Narendra Subramanian⁶ as “assertive populism” – transformed into a proclivity towards inclusive accommodation of many more castes, with economic opportunities as the *raison d’être* of governance.

Under Jayalalithaa, a somewhat different form of governance took root – again what Narendra Subramanian describes as “paternalist populism” was in vogue, built less on radical Dravidianism’s ethnic demands and more on providing mass welfare to a broad swathe of society, including the lowest levels of the class pyramid but also some elites.⁷ This form of governance originally emerged from the very persona and cinematic associations of Ramachandran, for example, in movie roles where he routinely played Robin Hood-like

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷ Narayan Lakshman, “Embattled path to stability” *The Hindu*, 27 November 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/embattled-path-to-stability/article20665650.ece>.

characters who were the saviours of the poor and the downtrodden. However, it was equally motivated by far-thinking policy plans to ensure that basic needs such as nutrition, education and healthcare were met, in a bid to truly mitigate rampant poverty and inequality at the time. Indeed, the latter motivation undergirded the intensity with which Ramachandran, Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi pursued the Mid-Day Meal Scheme of free hot meals to children in primary school – a pioneering policy intervention that the Supreme Court of India recommended other Indian states emulate, to be implemented across the country – and they did.

The less salutary aspect of these redistributive interventions by the Tamil Nadu government through the mid and late-20th century and the early decades of the 21st century was that what began as well-intentioned mass welfare schemes segued out of control into what is now described in the popular discourse as a ‘freebies culture’, entailing the distribution on an eye-watering scale of public expenditure of goods such as colour televisions, bicycles, washing machines and the like.

While recent years have witnessed successive governments of Tamil Nadu make a concerted push to broaden the state’s revenue base by creating an enabling environment for manufacturing industries to establish plants and boost job creation, there have been instances in the past, including around the turn of the century, when runaway public expenditures nearly capsized the state’s budget after Tamil Nadu’s fiscal health deteriorated to the point of near bankruptcy. It is also a fact in terms of the net impact of these mass welfare policies, one has to also account for the murky liquor regulation in the state, which is to say that the true purpose of the welfare schemes was likely to replace, at a microeconomic level, household nutrition lost to alcohol consumption.⁸

Finally, there was also convergence across the DMK and AIADMK in terms of grand corruption, through which the higher and middle rungs of political leadership in both parties systematically enriched their personal and party coffers – essentially a form of widespread, institutionalised rent-seeking. Numerous ministers and their families enjoyed multi-decade control over vast resources through a shadow economy built on illicit transactions involving cash, real estate and a myriad of other assets. Jayalalithaa herself was convicted in 2014, along with her associate, V K Sasikala, in a corruption case based on charges relating to disproportionate assets to the tune of US\$46 million (S\$62.1 million).

Divergent Party Leadership

Even though Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi managed party matters with a heavy hand and held political power close within their inner circles, they faced significantly divergent party ecosystems and incentives, and accordingly varied in how they responded to the imperatives of party leadership.

Firstly, let us consider the AIADMK. Both Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa, under the ‘paternalist populism’, approach sought to broaden the social base of the party to include

⁸ Narayan Lakshman, “New Crossroads: Reinventing Dravidian Politics for the 21st Century”, op. cit.

not only their core constituency from the *Thevar* caste of southern Tamil Nadu, but also, over time, Dalits, women and several lower and middle caste groups as well. To hold together what was effectively such a rainbow coalition of caste groups, there was even greater pressure on public resources that had to be committed to redistribution policies. Further, to implement such redistribution in the face of competitive populism with the DMK, the AIADMK leadership turned to a unipolar party model. Jayalalithaa was appointed the 'eternal' General Secretary of the party and systematically degraded several rungs of leadership beneath her.

This meant that by the time of her passing in 2016, for decades, genuflection had become the sole means of political survival, leaving no other leader strong enough to command the rank and file and disparate sub-groups within the AIADMK. It was thus unsurprising that after 2016, the party's top leadership structure imploded in a bitter conflict between former Jayalalithaa acolyte, O Panneerselvam, and former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Edappadi Palaniswami.

It is true that in 2023 the Madras High Court effectively gave Palaniswami full control of the party and its 'two leaves' symbol when it saw off several challenges to his leadership of the AIADMK issued by Panneerselvam. Additionally, Palaniswami was seen as an able administrator for the years that he occupied the chief minister's chair, further bolstering his credentials as the best person to lead the party. In this context, the 2024 general election will also serve as a limited referendum on the extent to which the Tamil Nadu electorate has faith in his vision for the AIADMK and the state itself.

Second, the DMK is, by comparison, far closer to the classic case of planned leadership transition for a political party. Its current chief, M K Stalin, son of Karunanidhi, was elected president of his party unopposed, and any potential challenge from his brother, M K Alagiri, was swiftly seen off by the party cadres who coalesced behind their leader. Nevertheless, the difference in context between Stalin and Karunanidhi matters. As a previous report on this subject noted, as a five-time chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Karunanidhi was considered "a legendary figure within the pantheon of the Dravidian movement, scripting not only the many movie screenplays and poems that he was famous for, but also the political pathways chosen by the DMK, whether it was to make fierce opposition to Hindi imposition in Tamil Nadu a vector of mass mobilisation of people, or to act upon the immediate imperative of expediency and align with the Hindu nationalist BJP at the centre, as the DMK did during 1999-2004."⁹

It was noted in the same report that Stalin's challenge has been to deal with the unspoken pressure to perform in office and deliver good governance, especially policies that matter to the citizenry's daily lives. This could indeed explain why the present DMK government has ensured that the balance of policy priorities today includes job creation and economic growth, investor confidence, urban infrastructure, climate change, crop insurance and flood and drought mitigation "even while periodically reminding voters that on issues impacting State autonomy, including National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET) and Hindi

⁹ Narayan Lakshman, "Prospects for Dravidian renewal", *The Hindu*, 1 April 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/prospects-for-dravidian-renewal/article66685016.ece>.

imposition, the DMK would hold firm to the values enunciated by its forebears during the heyday of the Dravidian movement.”¹⁰

Saffron Challenge

It is widely acknowledged that the BJP is, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, locked in a fierce contest to equal or better its 2019 poll performance, wherein it won 303 seats on its own and 353 seats alongside allies within the National Democratic Alliance, out of a total of 543 seats up for grabs. While many of the states in the northern, western and eastern regions are for the most part saturated, as it were, with the BJP vote, it is primarily in the southern states where the BJP theoretically could make gains if it were to win over the hearts and minds of the voters.

That ‘if’, however, is the point of contention in this election – for the southern states have over the past decade for the most part proved less than favourable to the BJP’s brand of Hindutva politics. Karnataka was, until 2023, an apparent exception to the BJP’s ‘Deccan dilemma’,¹¹ yet even in that state the previous state Assembly election saw a floundering BJP administration voted out.

Nevertheless, in the era that began after the passing of Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi, the door opened for the BJP to find opportunistic inroads into the state’s politics, and it could leverage its vast war chest to this end, perhaps by “funnelling enormous amounts of money to finance the campaigns and coffers of parties and individuals with whom it could potentially form alliances. Similarly, the long arm of federal enforcement agencies, such as the Central Bureau of Investigation and the income tax department, may be used to punish and reward as required. Even the office of Governor may not be beyond the pale in a politically fraught climate, where procedural delays or discretionary actions can materially affect power outcomes.”¹²

However, the problems of the BJP in Tamil Nadu are both ideological as well as practical. On the one hand, the Dravidian movement has long roots as an oppositional force to political domination by Hindi-speaking, upper-caste, north India-based, religiously polarising parties. This suggests that some voter cohorts, perhaps the older generations that are more familiar with the heritage and values of the Dravidian movement, will be committed to voting against the BJP.

To paraphrase from a previous report on this subject, the DMK and the AIADMK were built on the ideal of social justice, a concept that to a great extent focused on improving the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A term that signifies the conundrum faced by the BJP as it seeks to expand its electoral footprint in the southern states although the politics of this region are, in most cases, dominated by regional parties and the voters here are relatively less familiar with and supportive of the BJP’s core values as per the mainstream Hindutva doctrine. See Akhilesh Singh, “Census, delimitation soon after Lok Sabha polls, any ‘flaw’ in bill can be rectified later: Amit Shah”, *The Times of India*. 23 September 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/census-delimitation-soon-after-ls-polls-any-flaw-in-bill-can-be-rectified-later-amit-shah/articleshow/103822431.cms>.

¹² Narayan Lakshman, “The last anchor: the legacy of M. Karunanidhi”, op. cit.

social status and rights of women and social minorities. Similarly, the Dravidian parties excelled at using the power of the Tamil language to mobilise voters and bring them into the fold – “including not only language campaigns during the DMK’s radical phases of anti-Brahminism in the 1960s, but also then AIADMK head Ramachandran’s ingenious use of Tamil cinema to foster an image of him as a paternalistic hero-saviour of the ordinary Tamilian.”¹³

Thus, unsurprisingly, the DMK’s campaign messaging has focused on what their leaders have described as the divisive rhetoric of the BJP and its allies, including everything from fears of Hindi imposition in a state that has a tradition of defending and promoting the use of Tamil, to publicly attacking the Governor of the state for what is alleged to be overstepping of the boundaries of the gubernatorial office and interfering with the work of an elected government.

This messaging could potentially impact the views of undecided or independent voters, to whom the quality of governance under state rule by the BJP is still an unknown quantity and one to be concerned about. Perhaps it also does not help build trust in the BJP, given that the party openly favours a delimitation exercise to be carried out after the next national census,¹⁴ which, if it is based on redrawing election constituencies based on population numbers, could weaken representation of the southern states in a future Lok Sabha.

The practical concern for the BJP this time around in Tamil Nadu is the fact that owing to comments by its state unit leader, K Annamalai, against Dravidian movement patriarch, Annadurai, the erstwhile pre-poll alliance with the AIADMK became unsustainable and broke down. Thus, when it has had to fight this election more or less alone in the state – their notable ally being the Pattali Makkal Katchi representing the Vanniyar caste in north-western Tamil Nadu – that leaves a much smaller window for BJP functionaries on the ground to compete with the much larger vote mobilisation networks of the DMK and AIADMK.

One thing is clear – the BJP are playing the long game and are, hence, likely planning for four or five elections into the future. Only such a grand strategy for Tamil Nadu would leave them with a sufficient runway to gradually attempt to turn the hearts and minds of voters in their favour, including through the quiet work done by their ally, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, to promote Hindu festivals and temple worship at the grassroots level across the state.

The force that they will have to contend with, even in the long run, is the ability of the Dravidian parties to adapt and absorb younger generations of voters into the fold – by shifting the focus from broad messaging on Tamil exceptionalism to practical issues relating to job creation, education and healthcare; and also reaching out to these youth on the tech platforms and media that they most trust, use and follow.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Akhilesh Singh, “Census, delimitation soon after Lok Sabha polls, any ‘flaw’ in bill can be rectified later: Amit Shah”, op. cit.

Conclusion: A New Future Beckons

Given the above context of a strong governance record and internal cohesion of the DMK, the party is by all accounts expected to perform well in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. However, similar to the BJP's national-level conundrum, it faces a problem of besting an already-exemplary previous performance, which was that the DMK and its allies won 38 out of 39 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

It is well noted that, across Indian states, voters cast their votes according to varying reasoning for Lok Sabha and state Assembly elections, typically voting on national and ideological issues for the former and on local and regional issues, such as civic concerns, for the latter. The final tally of Parliament seats for the DMK will then be directly proportional to the major national questions on issues such as Hindi imposition and NEET, whether Tamil Nadu is being given a fair share of fiscal resources by New Delhi, and whether under the current dispensation, the 'Raid Raj' and implied weaponisation of federal law enforcement agencies is leading to serious democratic backsliding.

The broad expectation is that the DMK could still end up with a comfortable majority of seats in this election, even though the BJP would likely savour the small but significant win of gaining considerably since 2019 in terms of vote share. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won 3.66 per cent of the popular vote – this time, some project that it might reach double digits.

It is important not to understate the continuing relevance of the AIADMK in this regard. On one hand, it is true that the anti-incumbency factor that militates against the DMK will potentially get split between the BJP and the AIADMK. On the other, it is not unthinkable that the voters may appreciate the stance of Palaniswami in rejecting the alliance with the BJP owing to the latter's purported disrespect shown to a hallowed figure in the pantheon of Dravidian movement elders. Combined with the fact that the factional infighting between Palaniswami and Panneerselvam has been brought to a summary end by the courts that placed the mantle of leadership firmly in the former's hands, the possibility of the AIADMK performing better than expected cannot also be ruled out.

So far, as the BJP is concerned, Sudha Ramachandran points out that they have gone the extra mile, in terms of political gestures, to win the battle of political sentiment in the state, for example with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches that have referenced Tamil literary works and appeal to Tamil pride. "The BJP government gave prominence to the *sengol*, a Chola dynasty sceptre, during the grand inauguration of the new Parliament building in 2023. In a bid to project itself as the guardian of Tamil interests, the Modi government also raked up a settled dispute with Sri Lanka over the Kachatheevu island to win the support of Tamils."¹⁵

¹⁵ Sudha Ramachandran, "Will the BJP Gain a Toehold in Southern Indian States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala?", *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/will-bjp-gain-a-toehold-in-southern-indian-states-of-tamil-nadu-and-kerala/>.

It is also well noted that Modi has, during the campaign period this year, travelled to Tamil Nadu at least seven times to inaugurate a variety of infrastructure projects and other initiatives. Similarly, in recent years, the BJP has organised Tamil *Sangamams* in Varanasi and Gujarat and “...the BJP manifesto...spoke of setting up Thiruvalluvar centres across the world and work to enhance the global reputation of Tamil.”¹⁶

Earlier, during the campaign, the BJP also appeared set to capitalise on a comment made by Udhayanidhi Stalin, son of Chief Minister Stalin, and currently the Minister of Youth Welfare and Sports Development, to the effect that *Sanatana Dharma*, a term used to “denote the ‘eternal’ or absolute set of duties or religiously ordained practices incumbent upon all Hindus, regardless of class, caste, or sect”,¹⁷ was a disease not unlike dengue and malaria, and ought to be eliminated. While he and other DMK functionaries were quick to clarify that the younger Stalin had referred to the destruction of the evils of the caste system, the BJP attacked the remarks as being derogatory to the Hindu religion in its entirety. Some are worried about how the principal opposition grouping in the 2024 elections, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc would manage the fallout of Udhayanidhi’s comments. However, it appears not to have gained much traction in the public discourse once the immediate week of furore died down, especially in media headlines.

The election results will be announced on 4 June 2024. While the outcome will matter to India’s governance for the next five years, in Tamil Nadu the clash between Dravidian and *Hindutva* politics will continue to be a defining feature of the polity for many more elections to come. Now, more than ever, it is clear that the answer to the question of which party will rule Tamil Nadu will be determined by the fluid, evolving matrix of voter preferences and the performance of the political leadership in the policy areas that matter most to the common man and woman.

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¹⁶ Raghav Aggarwal, “In Tamil Nadu, BJP hopes to blunt criticism, break ‘2-party’ poll system”, *Business Standard*, 19 April 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/elections/lok-sabha-election/in-tamil-nadu-bjp-hopes-to-blunt-criticism-break-2-party-poll-system-124041801185_1.html.

¹⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sanatana-dharma>.