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Tamil Nadu: Loyal Vote Banks Help AIADMK Overcome Anti-incumbency

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The Governor of Tamil Nadu, K. Rosiah, greets the State's Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, after the swearing-in ceremony held at the Madras University Centenary Auditorium in Chennai on May 23, 2016. Photo: R. Ragu

What helped the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) break free from the weight of incumbency and retain power in Tamil Nadu? P. Ramajayam, Assistant Professor, Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirapalli, analyses the electoral dynamics that influenced the results. A coalition of smaller parties dispersed the anti-incumbency vote and deprived the main challenger, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) from reaping the benefits. In addition, he points out, the strategic geographic and caste representation in the outgoing State Cabinet of Ministers in 2016 played a role in the AIADMK's victory.

I

The results of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly elections held in May, 2016, have proved, once again, that political choice remains bipolar in the land dominated by Dravidian politics. In the space of two years, it has prevailed against a national wave, the 'Modi phenomenon', in the 2014 Parliamentary election, and against its main rival, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in 2016, breaking the trend of incumbents being voted out for the past three decades.

A multi-party coalition of Left and smaller parties, the People's Welfare Alliance (PWA), which positioned itself as an "alternative to the Dravidian parties" failed to convince voters and lost in all constituencies. There are two messages that the electorate seems to have conveyed to such 'alternative forces'. One, an alternative should not be merely a slogan or a rhetoric, but needs clarity, credibility and operationalising possibilities. Two, the strong

criticism thrown at the Dravidian parties for the sake of politics, especially the ridicule of their policy of social change/transformation, left the electorate, by and large, dismayed.

The alternative political discourse mooted by the Left parties, in particular the serious efforts by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), [CPI (M)], and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), was mismanaged and deeply personalised by the general secretary of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and the coordinator of the PWA, Vaiko, and hence, failed at the polling station.

Barring the CPI(M) and the VCK, none of the other alliance partners, the Desiya Murpokku Dravidar Kazhagam (DMDK), the MDMK, and the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) came across as being committed to the basic objectives that the PWA outlined at the formation stage. The entire election campaign revolved around who would benefit from the formation of 'People's Welfare Front'. A cluster of mixed voices, including that of the Left, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and self-proclaimed Tamil nationalists, rose to check the half-a-century Dravidian duopoly in the State. This ought to be read with the reality that third front experiments have been consistently invalidated at the all-India level.

Facing hardships on charges of disproportionate wealth, the AIADMK general secretary, Jayalithaa, in 2014, broke with the convention of aligning with the national parties and positioned herself as a regional leader with aspirations to become the Prime Minister. Given the force of the Modi wave, this was a debatable political manoeuvre, which Indian politics had not seen in the past. However, Jayalithaa stood strong and stopped the Modi wave in Tamil Nadu. In the Assembly elections, the AIADMK was determined to carry forward the same image, and, riding on its massive victory of 2014 parliamentary election, the party decided to go it alone, consciously ignoring the long-term trend of alternating victories for the two Dravidian parties.

II

Three different contexts formed the framework for the 2016 Assembly election. Firstly, both the Dravidian parties found themselves framed as decaying political forces in Tamil Nadu. The impact of national politics influenced the educated middle class to shift their loyalties to the BJP, which is now fading away. Secondly, the long-term trend of alliances in electoral politics meant that the role played by Tamil Nadu's minor political parties would increase. This placed a big burden on the Dravidian parties in terms of their choices for the right electoral allies. Third, the DMK and AIADMK did not want to share power in the State with the alliance partners under any circumstances. This refusal by the State's two major parties—the AIADMK and the DMK—to adopt an inclusive approach led to the creation of caste-based parties. Over the past few decades, almost all Backward and Dalit caste groups had floated political parties in various parts of the State, depending on their numerical dominance. This pushed the two main Dravidian parties into a situation where they had to either form alliances with them or contest alone.

This reluctance of the Dravidian parties to practise an inclusive approach to their politics was not adequately highlighted by the parties proposing to be an alternative. Though the PWF claimed to be the force for sections of the underrepresented, unrepresented and oppressed castes in Tamil society, this was not practised in spirit as they replicated the pattern of mainstream parties—they fielded candidates from the same dominant caste or sub-caste groups, even within Dalit communities.

For example, there was not a single Arunthathiyar candidate (a category of Dalits that has a sub-quota in reservation under the Scheduled Castes category in Tamil Nadu because of their social, economic and educational backwardness compared with other Dalit groups) among the 25 candidates fielded by the VCK. The party gave nominations to two Devendrakula Vellalar (a Dalit sub-caste that is numerically dominant in the southern districts) candidates and two Muslims. The VCK's eagerness to shed its image as a Dalit party because of which the party had in the past become a political untouchable made its leader, Thol. Thirumavalavan, reach out to other castes in order to expand his vote base and territory.

A note-worthy indication in this election was the representation of Muslims in the DMK-led front: five seats to the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and four seats to the Manithaneya Makkal Katchi (MMK), taking the total number of seats allotted to parties representing Muslim interests to nine. The AIADMK gave two seats to the Jananaayaga Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (JMMK), a break-away faction of the MMK. The JMMK's chief, Thameem Ansari, had narrowly lost the 2011 election from the Chepauk-Triplicane constituency in Chennai as an AIADMK ally.

An added issue was the politics of liquor. Excluding the AIADMK, all parties promised total prohibition in the State in view of the increasing number of liquor-related accident and deaths. Gandhian Sasiperumal's agitations against liquor shops that were located near schools and temples indicated the extent of damage caused by the State's monopoly over the liquor trade. The principal electoral opposition, the DMK, declared that it would enact a law to implement prohibition. The anti-liquor move has partially succeeded and there is currently across-the-board consensus on the need for total or partial prohibition. Indeed, thanks to the social and political pressures, the AIADMK, which was initially steadfast that prohibition would not be rolled back, announced in its manifesto that it would implement prohibition 'in stages'.

As has been the case before, welfare politics formed a major plank for all political parties in this election as well. But this time, both sides were conscious of criticism and concern from various social and economic platforms that freebies affected the dignity and self-respect of the poor and were, therefore, a curse. A case in point was the flood relief distribution in 2006 that was marred by a couple of terrible stampedes claiming nearly 70 lives. Similar incidents have been reported regularly from across the State during the disbursal of gifts. The question to be addressed was how would the government reach out to the poor constituting two-thirds of the State's population without such free goods. The DMK's 'holistic manifesto', aimed at including all castes and classes and focussing on the overall rural economy and agriculture, was countered by the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a Vanniyar party which is attempting to come out of the casteist image. It alleged that the DMK had copied the manifesto from it, since they had already released the document highlighting prohibition and a separate budget for agriculture. After due deliberations, AIADMK came up with a manifesto promising 50 per cent waiver in the price of two-wheelers for women.

The election saw a fine combination of arithmetic and chemistry of caste, class, rural, urban and gender equations. At the same time, it reminded the Dravidian parties that they should now introspect on their politics from a different perspective. There was a need to restructure the social composition of the Cabinet where key ministerial berths had traditionally gone to a few dominant castes. This ran counter to the principle of social justice and exposed the hollow claims and ideals of the Dravidian parties. Many of the nominated statutory institutional positions had also, over the years, reflected the dominance of a few better-off backward castes.

So far, the electoral outcome has been discussed and analysed in the public space on the basis of voting patterns but the shifts that have taken place in certain regions also need attention. Smaller sub-regional parties like the Thevar caste-backed Forward Bloc (FB) in the Madurai region, the Gounder caste-based Kongu Nadu Makkal Katchi (KNMK) in the western region, the Udayar caste-based Indhiya Jananayaka Katchi (IJK) in the central region, which previously had considerable presence in their respective regions, were this time swept away by the Dravidian parties.

Revival and resistance against dominance

Tamil Nadu can be divided geographically into seven regions—Upper North, North, Central, East Delta, West, South, and Down South. This will help in understanding the nature of sub-regional representation in the Assembly, analysing each dominant caste factor, and exploring the role of other factors such as economic development, unemployment, and social (caste) awareness against backwardness of certain communities. Such a methodology would be a departure from the past and would be critical in evaluating the nature of representation in India's parliamentary democracy.

In the Upper North and the North regions of the State, the dominant backward caste groups are the Mudaliars and the Vanniars. The Upper North region comprises four districts: Tiruvallur, Kancheepuram, Chennai, and Vellore. Of the 49 Assembly constituencies in this region, the DMK won in 27 and the AIADMK won in 22. This region, which was dominated by the Mudaliar caste, was a stronghold of the DMK. It gradually turned into a Vanniyar stronghold and the PMK has been an influential alliance partner to both political parties ever since the 1998 Lok Sabha elections when it tied up with the AIADMK and came out victorious in four seats.

In the Northern region comprising six districts—Thiruvannamalai, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem, Villupuram, and Cuddalore—the PMK has individually made its presence felt, securing more than 50,000 votes each in five constituencies, 40,000 votes each in three constituencies, 30,000 votes each in eight constituencies, 20,000 votes in 21 constituencies and 10,000 and above in 25 constituencies. Though it bagged about 5.6 per cent of the total vote share in the 2016 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections, it could not cross the winning mark in any of the seats in this region. All its senior leaders lost, the most notable being the loss of its scion and chief ministerial candidate, Anbumani Ramadoss.

The interesting social dynamic emerging in the region is the consolidation of the anti-Vanniyar votes in favour of the Dravidian parties. The Mudaliar community, which was ruling the region right from the Justice Party era, had felt let down by the Dravidian parties, because of its declining representation within the parties and the emergence of Vanniyar dominance in the region. It shifted its loyalty to the BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha election when the New Justice Party leader, A.C. Shanmugam, contesting as a BJP candidate, secured second place in the Vellore Lok Sabha constituency. Importantly, this region is equally dominated by Muslims who, along with Christians, have been supporters of the DMK and have helped the party consolidate its secular credentials. The PMK, which had challenged the Dravidian parties, fell into its own trap due to its exclusive focus on issues pertaining only to the Vanniyar community. The party could not win a single seat in the Assembly polls.

The crushing defeat of Anbumani Ramadoss by a DMK candidate in Pennagaram in Dharmapuri district—deemed to be the cradle of the PMK—has shocked the PMK's top leadership. The party had raised the 'son of the soil' issue against leaders from other regions who have in the past contested from the Dharmapuri district, like P.T. Elangovan from Bhuvanagiri in Cuddalore District, and Pari Mohan from Salem district. The defeat of Anbumani suggests that the Vanniars have started rethinking representative politics within their caste identity, locality, and nativity, and are not averse to voting for a Vanniyar candidate outside the PMK.

Western Tamil Nadu, also known as the Kongu belt, has undergone a serious change in the 2016 Assembly election. In the 38 constituencies in this region where the Gounder caste is numerically dominant, the DMK managed to overcome its past poor performance. It won seven constituencies in this region, as against three in 2011. This, of course, includes Ottanchatram in Dindigul district, which the DMK candidate R. Sakkarapani, has been winning since 1996.

Besides, in 30 other constituencies, it narrowed the margin with the AIADMK compared to the 2011 Assembly election by over half. In some of the constituencies, the margin of victory for the AIADMK was barely a few thousand votes. Though the DMK's performance showed a marked improvement, it was not enough to dominate over the AIADMK's. The party had to face several organisational issues and cross-voting with respect to caste of the candidates, which weighed in in favour of the AIADMK in several constituencies.

Ironically, the vote shares in this region suggested an invisible, latent and strong anti-incumbency against the AIADMK. It was, however, negated by internal wrangling within the DMK. The party's district secretaries, who have been facing many allegations on corruption, land-grabbing and tussles with businesspersons in the region were denied tickets, were annoyed with the high command for fielding candidates without their consent.

It is important to note that the Kongu region, which had the reputation of being a laggard in terms of development, had more than half a dozen ministers with powerful portfolios in the outgoing AIADMK Council of Ministers. Important portfolios, including Industries, Public Works, Highways, Higher Education, Municipal Administration, and

Transport, were given to ministers from the Gounder community, which proved its loyalty during the 2016 Assembly election. However, the shrinking margin showed that there was a tide against the AIADMK from the non-Gounder caste groups.

Similarly, in the Southern region, the Thevar community, too, had many powerful portfolios in the outgoing Council of Ministers, such as Finance, Revenue, Health, Food, Cooperation, Law and other equivalent positions. The result: the 36 Thevar-dominated constituencies in the six southern districts yielded a rich harvest for the AIADMK, although not as high compared with the Western region. In this region, the DMK managed to win thirteen seats, an improved performance than the four it bagged in 2011. But in the rest of the constituencies, things did not change much and the AIADMK kept its margin intact.

Therefore, it was the two dominant caste groups, the Gounders and the Thevars—which together held more than half of the portfolios in the outgoing Council of Ministers—that played a strong role in consolidating their respective castes in favour of the AIADMK and helped it overcome anti-incumbency. With the AIADMK becoming a party backed by these dominant caste groups, the DMK worked out its own counter-strategy and secured more seats in Upper North, North and Down South. In down South, where caste (Nadar, Pillai and Dalit and these three caste have control over religion as Christian Nadar, Pillai and Dalits along with Muslims in this region mattered to maintain its secular and social justice credentials.

Regional Divide: Reflection of Caste Consolidation

Region	Districts	Constituencies	ADMK +	DMK +	Dominant Social Groups*
Upper North	Chennai, Kancheepuram, Thiruvallur, Vellore	49	22	27	Mudaliar, Vanniyar, Parayar, Muslims
North	Thiruvannamalai, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem, Villupuram, Cuddalore	51	28	23	Mudaliar, Vanniyar, Udayar, Parayar, Muslims
Central	Tiruchirapalli, Perambalur, Ariyalur, Pudukkottai	19	12	7	Mutharayar, Vanniyar, Parayar, Muslims
East - Delta	Thanjavur, Nagappatinam, Tiruvarur	17	9	8	Thevar, Vanniyar, Parayar, Devendrakula Vellalar, Muslims
West	Namakkal, Karur, Erode, Tiruppur, Coimbatore, Udthagamandalam	38	31	7	Gounder, Arunthathiyar, Devendrakula Vellalar, Muslims
South	Dindigul, Madurai, Theni, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Ramanathapuram	36	23	13	Thevar, Devendrakula Vellalar, Arunthathiyar, Dalit and Nadar Christians, Muslims
Down South	Tuticorin, Tirunelveli, Kanniyakumari	22	9	13	Nadar, Pillai, Devendrakula Vellalar, Arunthathiyar, Dalit and Nadar Christians, Muslims
Total	(32 districts, 234 constituencies)	232	134	98	

Source: Compiled by author based on election results.

**The Dominant Social Groups for each region are approximations, based on the author's experience in conducting election studies.*

There was criticism from some quarters that the Congress was a liability to the DMK in the election. This was based on the serious setbacks the DMK received in the 2011 Assembly and 2014 parliamentary elections.

In fact, this has been a constant point of attack by critics ever since the DMK, in alliance with the Congress, lost the battle for the State Assembly in 1980. The polls were a result of the dissolution of the AIADMK government led by M.G. Ramachandran that year, soon after the Indira Gandhi-led Congress rode back to power in the Centre. In Tamil Nadu, the Congress had allied with the DMK and won 20 seats (the DMK won 17), which helped Ms. Gandhi consolidate her win. The DMK found itself stung with this criticism every time it lost an election in alliance with the Congress. Interestingly, the AIADMK, too, had suffered a poll defeat in alliance with the Congress in 1996.

While in alliance or not, the two Dravidian parties have been primary contenders to power in Tamil Nadu chiefly due to their strong moorings in the principles of social justice espoused by the Dravidian movement since the late 1940s. Tamil linguistic identity—just as Telugu and other linguistic identities—was only a part of the Dravidian movement and did not make up the entire movement per se. This inclusive political framework helped the DMK and the AIADMK retain power among themselves for over half a century. Added to that, of course, was the cult of personality that hovered around leaders like M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalithaa.

Both parties have compromised on their core ideology of creating an egalitarian society and have miserably failed to control the growing levels and forms of discriminations (both in caste and class) at all levels, a feature that threatens to continue into the third generation. During recent incidents of caste violence in the State, the Dravidian parties did not stand with the victims. While a casteless society is still distant, the two parties could have strived to, at least, minimise caste discrimination. This has now become a point of debate among the young and middle-aged voters in the socially weaker sections, like Dalits and minority groups, particularly Muslims.

Dalits and religious minorities have not got their due share in the realm of power from the two parties. Indeed, while Dalits have largely voted Dravidian parties, both parties have disproportionately favoured the better-off intermediate castes in the award of Cabinet berths and other politically important positions.

An unusual feature this time was the lower-than-expected voter turnout. Even violence-prone States such as West Bengal, Assam and Kerala showed greater voter participation than Tamil Nadu. The much-expected young voters, the 'Netizens', did not make a great difference even after the Election Commission instructed the Information Technology firms and related private companies to declare a holiday on election day to help them cast their votes. The lowest turnout in Chennai city and suburban constituencies reflects the political indifference of the youth.

What forced the Dravidian parties and others to contest alone?

Two strands outline the brand of politics in Tamil Nadu. One is that all the parties should contest alone in order to get a true measure of their respective vote banks at the grass-root level. And, the second is the popular endorsement of the party's leader, which is often described as personality cult in politics. Even in this context, the AIADMK's founder and three-time chief minister, M.G. Ramachandran, succeeded thanks to a strong alliance with the Indian National Congress [INC, then the Congress (I)] in 1984.

An alliance with the INC was, for long in Tamil Nadu's political history, thought to be a safe bet for achieving power for both DMK and AIADMK. And yet, in 2014, Jayalithaa went against the trend and contested the election on her own. The Grand Alliance broke down because of the way the AIADMK leadership treated its alliance partners during seat sharing. The same alliance parties bargained for seats with DMK, citing their organisational and regional leadership. In the 2011 assembly election, the INC had bargained for a greater share of seats and forced the DMK to contest in 124 seats, thereby downsizing its vote share. (Refer Table 2)

	Vote share in percentage in Assembly and Parliamentary Elections						
Parties	2001 A	2004 P	2006 A	2009 P	2011 A	2014 P	2016 A
AIADMK	31.44	35.59	32.64	22.91	38.40	44.92	39.7
DMK	30.92	58.24	26.46	25.12	22.39	23.91	40.8

A - Assembly election

P - Parliamentary election

Source: *Compiled by author based on election results.*

Statistics show that multi-party grand alliances have affected the DMK's vote share considerably in the elections since 1996. Yet, the party relied largely on such broad alliances. It built a large alliance against the AIADMK in the 2004 parliamentary election and distributed 50 per cent of the seats to the alliance partners. The result: It whitewashed the AIADMK and won all the seats on offer in the State. The same alliance continued in the 2006 Assembly election. However, this time the alliance did not give the DMK enough seats to gain a full majority on its own. The DMK contested in 124 seats and won 96. Though it formed the government on the merit of being the largest political group in the Assembly, supported from outside by the INC, it faced constant criticism from Jayalalithaa, who termed it a "minority government".

In 2011, due to the 2G spectrum allegations and various other internal reasons, the DMK was on a sticky wicket and was forced to allot 71 seats to the INC at the seat sharing negotiations, which was the highest since 1980. (After winning the 1980 Lok Sabha election in a big way, the DMK-INC alliance sought to carry forward the momentum to the Assembly election, which was held a few months later. For the Assembly elections, the two parties had decided to share power and contested 110 seats each. However, the alliance suffered a debacle.

As in 1980, the DMK-INC alliance suffered a defeat in 2011 as well with the DMK winning only 23 seats and the INC five seats. This defeat was widely attributed to perceptions about family rule, and charges of corruption, although the incumbent DMK government had performed quite well on many social and economic fronts.

The DMK had earned a reputation as an 'accountable and reliable alliance partner' thanks to its support to the BJP [as part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that ruled the country between 1998 and 2004] and the INC (as part of the UPA) and its continuous presence in the Union government between 1996 and 2013 [barring a short period in 1998-99]. As a consequence of this power sharing in the Centre, it received many national projects for the overall development of Tamil Nadu and enjoyed many privileges. Since it contested the parliamentary election in alliance with other smaller parties, the coalition continued in the Assembly elections too. Over a period of time, the DMK became heavily dependent on alliances rather than raising its own political issues to secure the social base for its regional identity politics.

Therefore, the alliance factor weakened the individual vote share of the DMK continuously, which, in turn, affected its widespread presence across the State. As it was in alliance with many parties, the popular impression was that without a strong alliance, the DMK would not be able to come to power in the State. The DMK's 2016 strategy was on account of the realisation that its vote share was shrinking and it had been reduced to the status of an alliance partner, albeit a leading one. The party decided that it had to regain its individual vote share and recapture its shrinking political space. The alliance partners that continuously benefitted in the DMK combine—the PMK, the INC and the Left parties—began to treat the party as a weak force that did not have a 'strong vote bank like the AIADMK'.

Consider the impact of this in the 2016 election: The DMK was in the process of a leadership change and M. K. Stalin was seen as the successor. For MDMK general secretary Vaiko, who broke away from the DMK protesting

dynastic politics, Stalin was an arch rival and there was no question of an alliance with him. He kept his distance from both the Dravidian parties and was soon followed by the DMK, the Left parties and the VCK.

For his part, Stalin, who had led the campaign machinery in the 2009 Lok Sabha election and 2011 Assembly election, and who was the decision maker in matters of alliance formation, decided to contest alone to prove the DMK's organisational strength. Essentially, he wanted to counter the impression that the party had become dependent on alliance partners to such an extent that its own vote share was affected and its bargaining power with the allies was reduced.

Alliance compulsions and the Sri Lankan Tamils issue

After 1996, the more focussed economic growth and investment-based development took the Dravidian movement away from its regional ethnic Tamil identity politics. The DMK and the AIADMK became integral parts of coalition governments at the centre, with the DMK raising several issues with regard to the Sri Lankan Tamils in the 1980s. Historically, it has been synthesized that the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Tamils issue cannot be separated. To start with, the AIADMK founder and former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M. G. Ramachandran, supported the LTTE. The DMK supported the LTTE when it returned to power in 1989 after 13 years of wilderness in electoral politics. The assassination of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the anti-LTTE political mood in Tamil Nadu generated by the then AIADMK-Congress alliance in 1991 forced the DMK to alter its policy towards the LTTE. Finally, in 2009, during the war between LTTE and the Sri Lankan army, the DMK sought the Indian government's intervention to stop the war in which thousands of civilians were killed. Despite being an important alliance partner, the DMK failed to influence the UPA government, but the popular expectation was that the DMK would quit the government to stick with its long term ideological standing on Tamil Identity politics. As a face-saver, it did quit the UPA government in 2013 over the Centre's stand on the US-sponsored resolution on war crimes against Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council but it was deemed too little too late.

In post-1996 politics, the DMK emerged as a party that could engage in dialogue with the national parties so as to claim its state autonomy and regional share of power at the central coalition governments. Though its antipathy to the INC was revived from time to time at some critical phases since the proclamation of Emergency, the DMK faced uncertainty over continuing in power in the United Front Government headed by Deve Gowda and then by I.K. Gujral. This despite its massive victory in the State election over Jayalalithaa in 1996. Indeed, the 1998 and 1999 parliamentary elections reshaped Dravidian politics and the DMK came to the conclusion that to be an influential alliance partner and increase its bargaining power, it was necessary to put its core ideology in the back burner.

In 1998, when Jayalalithaa had an alliance with the BJP and other smaller state parties like the MDMK and the PMK, it could be interpreted as the emergence of 'multi-polar politics' in Tamil Nadu as the BJP was seen to break the monopoly of Dravidian parties. Late, in the same year, Jayalalithaa's AIADMK abruptly quit the BJP alliance and the DMK replaced it in 1999 with same alliance partners—the MDMK and the PMK. This ideological irony had greater electoral repercussions. In 2001, religious minority votes in Tamil Nadu largely helped the AIADMK come back to power even though Jayalalithaa faced corruption charges and the DMK's performance was the best since 1996-2001. This showed that the role of minorities in deciding Dravidian rule in Tamil Nadu was critical. The DMK lost its accountability with religious minorities, that too with the Muslims who had voted for the party for a long time. Between 2001 and 2006, when the AIADMK was in office in Tamil Nadu, the BJP's educational policies at the centre, and the State government's policies like the anti-conversion bill, banning animal sacrifice at places of worship and scraping free electricity for farmers resulted in consolidation of minorities against the BJP at the centre and the AIADMK at the State. This favoured the DMK when it faced Assembly polls in the State in 2006.

This juncture in Tamil Nadu politics saw high polarisation of minorities, Dalits and other caste forces that emerged as important players in the regional politics. The combination of the DMK, the Left parties, the MDMK, the PMK, the VCK and the Congress swept the 2004 Lok Sabha polls, with the AIADMK drawing a blank.

The Congress-led UPA at the national level took a final shape in Tamil Nadu with the formation of its predecessor, the DMK-led Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA), in the State just before the 2004 general polls.

DMK president M. Karunanidhi continued to play a key role in the central government and its policies. Though the DMK managed to come back to power in Tamil Nadu in 2006, multi-polar politics consistently affected the party's vote share from 1996 onwards. The party was defeated in both the 2011 assembly election and the 2014 parliamentary election. The DMK's family politics took its toll. Though it got important portfolios in the UPA Government, the party got embroiled in scams like the 2G spectrum scam and became a target for all the national and regional parties. The Sri Lankan war and 2G spectrum scam are the major factors behind the DMK's recent setbacks. More importantly, the DMK could not change many of its policies within the party structure, except a few like appointing Dalits and women at second-level positions, when it was out of office.

The new dimension that the party needs to work out is to have an 'inclusive social coalition' where there is a possibility for reclaiming and widening the social base taken away by the DMDK, the PMK, the VCK and other smaller parties. Controlling the dominance of backward castes in the party and redistributing representation with shares of power to newly emerging social groups would be the way forward for renewing and expanding Dravidian politics in future.

Checking the Dominance: Perception of small parties about DMK

Another factor that comes forth while analysing the defeat of the DMK is the number of seats that the Congress contested as an ally of the DMK. If it could have contested in fewer constituencies, the alliance would have been in a better position to topple the AIADMK. The AIADMK has performed well in the Congress-contested constituencies raising questions about the cooperation extended to the Congress by the DMK. In the Kongu region, which is plagued by issues like sick textile industries, migration, electricity shortage, and frequent power cuts, the DMK was well placed to defeat the AIADMK. However, even where it was in a straight contest with the AIADMK in this region, the DMK could not win. And yet, the sharp decline of the AIADMK votes in this region reveals that a silent change is taking place against the industrial class and dominant peasant castes.

As for the political exclusion of the DMK, it was the Sri Lankan Tamils issue that demoralised and isolated the party. Vaiko's role in the People's Welfare Front playing spoilsport to the political alternative, in turn, affected the prospects of the Left and the VCK. The overwhelming importance given to the DMDK was the core issue of the PWF that had a stream of leaders for articulating regional interests, social problems and political change. The over-projection of the DMDK and its inadequate potential and the minimal role of MDMK led to the doom of the alternative front.

In 2016, the MDMK was the party that had the potential to bring about a change in Tamil Nadu politics, something that it termed 'Mission Possible'. Although the MDMK was routed, it achieved a strategic victory by engineering the defeat of the DMK and stopping the march of M.K. Stalin. However, the election has hugely dented the political accountability of Vaiko. The severe criticism against Vaiko was that he used the platform to defeat DMK and Stalin instead of sowing seed for a non-DMK/AIADMK party.

It has been said that women voters brought the Jayalithaa-led AIADMK to power. The symbol 'two leaves' associated with MGR has also been cited as a reason for the AIADMK's victory. However, the same factors did not help the party in the 1996 and 2006 Assembly elections and in the 1998, 1999, 2004, and 2009 parliamentary elections. Even doling out of freebies make a greater impact against other important issues like prohibition, electricity, agriculture and 'honour' killings. The social/caste consolidation ruled out all the issues.

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