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Dravidian Dominance Faces Communal Challenges in Tamil Nadu



P. RAMAJAYAM



Cutouts of Congress President Rahul Gandhi, General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi, DMK president MK Stalin and other leaders are seen at an election campaign rally, during the ongoing general elections, in Krishnagiri district, Friday, April 12, 2019. Photo: PTI/Shailendra Bhojak

Tamil Nadu heads for a watershed election when it goes to the polls on April 18, 2019. For the first time since independence the State has been through a campaign for a general election without the towering presence of a political leader. At the end of this campaign, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led Secular Progressive Alliance, which includes the Indian National Congress (INC), the two main Left parties, and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), is riding on popular resentment against an alliance comprising the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which are in power in the State and the Centre, and other State parties.

In this analysis, P. Ramajayam, Assistant Professor, Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, looks at the 2019 election in the context of how the two regional parties – the AIADMK and the DMK – have taken the Dravidian ideological markers, social justice, rights of States, power sharing at the Union, the relationship between the state and religion, to name a few, into governance and its impact on the socio-political structure of Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu heads for a watershed election when it goes to the polls on April 18, 2019, to elect 39 representatives for the 17th Lok Sabha and one from the neighbouring Union Territory, Puducherry. (Note: Election to one constituency in Tamil Nadu has been rescinded. Voting will take place only in 38 parliamentary constituencies on April 18.) For the first time since independence, the State has been through a campaign for a general election without the towering presence of a political leader – be it the likes of Chakravarthi Rajagoplachari or K. Kamaraj, leaders from the Congress movement who commanded a national presence, or after regional parties occupied centre-stage in the State, C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran, or Jayalalithaa, leaders of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its splinter, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Only three political formations have held power in Tamil Nadu since independence – initially the Congress, and since 1967 either the DMK or the AIADMK.

At the end of this campaign, the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance is riding on popular resentment against the BJP and the AIADMK, which are in power in the Centre and the State. The twin anti-incumbencies in the State against the BJP and

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the AIADMK, are a result of a series of failings: failure in exempting Tamil Nadu from the controversial NEET examination for medical education, Jallikkattu, Cauvery Water Dispute

judgement, the unemployment crisis, demonetisation, cow vigilantism and lynching in other States, the implementation of the Goods and Service Tax, strikes by transport and Government employees, issues relating to safety of women, the internal crisis in the ruling AIADMK, and anti-Hindi sentiments are about to recall the past Dravidian politics against the BJP government at the centre, making Prime Minister Narendra Modi the most unpopular leader in the State.



The Congress President Rahul Gandhi at an election rally held Krishngiri, Tamil Nadu, on April 12, 2019. Photo: N.Bashkaran/The Hindu

While these issues are expected to carry the DMK-Congress coalition across the finish line successfully, the politics in the southern State is also going through a transformatory phase in the absence of leaders who have proved their mass appeal through electoral sweeps. Three main factors have the potential to shape this transformation: 1. the State's better socio-economic indices which push the political narrative beyond development indices to raise questions as to which social groups have gained from the progress, 2. the extent to which the two Dravidian parties have co-opted the assorted caste, and sub-caste groupings, the Dalits, and the minorities in terms of power sharing, and 3. the slow, but steady and long infusion of the Hindu religious right narrative into Dravidian politics.

This article looks at the present election in the context of how the two regional parties – the AIADMK and the DMK – incorporated Dravidian ideological markers, social justice, rights of States, power sharing at the Union, the relationship between the state and religion, to name a few, into governance and its impact on the socio-political structure of Tamil Nadu. It traces the differences between the AIADMK and the DMK, a sense of disenchantment among Dalits and sections of backward castes who feel left out from power sharing, the tenuous position of the minorities and the Left parties, and points out how the Hindu religious right, represented by the BJP, seeks to gain a toehold in the State's politics.

The electoral dominance of the ruling AIADMK and the DMK makes India's southernmost State a politically bipolar one in which national parties can, at best, ride on the shoulders of either of these two parties for a small number of seats in the Lok Sabha. Critical to this total hold over State politics was the presence of strong leaders who could both move the masses and exercise control over the levers of power in New Delhi. Two leaders who did this with élan, with differing styles of operation, were the late Chief Minister Jayalalithaa and the late former Chief Minister, Karunanidhi. Tamil Nadu's watershed moment, thus, is a direct consequence of the demise of both these leaders within a span of a year or so, leaving their parties pitted against each other without their prime vote-seekers at a general election for the first time. What is particularly crucial in the context of a Lok Sabha election is that the late DMK president, Karunanidhi, and the late

AIADMK general secretary, Jayalalithaa, again in their own way, catapulted Dravidian politics from a southern political outback to the core of national politics in the past two decades. The AIADMK, which was the first of the two parties to join a national cabinet, and the DMK, which has held cabinet positions in three different ideological cabinet formations, paved the way for other regional parties to move from peripheral politics to the centre.

This role of Tamil Nadu's regional parties had a direct bearing on the composition of central governments especially since 1990, with the formation of the National Front government at the Centre. The DMK played a key role in shaping coalition governments in New Delhi and, thereby, offered new strength to regional parties to participate in national coalitions. From 1996, national politics revolved around a few regional parties among which the DMK had a major role in the formation of governments by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) from 1999 to 2004, and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance-I & II from 2004 to 2014. After 2014, the political landscape underwent a change with slogans projecting a Prime Minister as the centrepiece of national politics and the Union government.

Although the 'Modi wave' swept through most States, Tamil Nadu stood distinct and formidable. Credit should go to the Dravidian parties that never allowed religious identity to be stoked as a decider of electoral fortunes. The role of minorities, both Muslims and Christians (who constitute around

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12 per cent of the population) and their spatial and temporal problems, was incorporated within the framework of Dravidian politics of representation. However, this fine balance was affected after the emergence of Hindutva politics. The politics in the State over the years is evident from the declining representation of minorities in the State and central legislatures. Unlike in the past, minority representation is now being compartmentalised, to an extent, within political parties representing their interests. In this political context, the rise of Hindutva politics has indeed affected its inclusive politics since 1991, albeit subtly.

This is where the loss of long-time leaders by the principal Dravidian parties makes the political affairs in the State vulnerable on all the fronts, particularly and most dangerously, in the face of the BJP's style of intimidating cultural politics. The entrenched caste issues in political, social, and economic arenas did not recognise religious identity as a tool in Dravidian politics as it claimed to be the guardian of the socially oppressed and the religious minorities. Recent developments in the Dravidian politics of Tamil Nadu point to a situation in which the ruling AIADMK is under stress and has succumbed to pressures from the BJP on matters of policy and governance. The current political climate in Tamil Nadu, therefore, reveals an uncertain note on the Dravidian politics.

For over a decade, the 'political alternative to Dravidian parties' discourse has been taking place during campaigns for both parliamentary and Assembly Elections. This time, however, this rhetoric was a missing element. The BJP, which was vociferous over the past few years that it would usher in a "Dravidian free Tamizhagam" forged an alliance with the AIADMK, and other parties which had a similar call, such as the Paataali Makkal Katch (PMK).

As 2014 was an embarrassment for the BJP, this time around, the party smells an opportunity to get a toehold in Tamil Nadu by trapping the AIADMK as its easy prey. It was the AIADMK, led by the late Jayalalithaa, that opened the State's political gates for the BJP in 1998 against the DMK. It has now become an unavoidable alliance partner, helping the party to make inroads into the 'middle class of the dominant OBCs', who gained upwardly mobile through the OBC reservations.

There has been a public perception that DMK would not allow any dominant castes to decide its political future. The party has been building a wide spectrum of alliances taking the dominant castes and Dalit outfits into its fold during every election. This led to the perception that it supports the Dalits in north and south Tamil Nadu and the dominant castes in the coastal and western regions of the State.

The DMK clearly espoused a neutral position on the matter of Hindu religion, but this has been portrayed, time and again, as a 'pro-minorities and anti-Hindu' stand. It can be inferred that the DMK has been striking a balance on the dominant castes

issue and, to a large extent, compromised distributing the cabinet positions by not allocating Ministerial positions proportionate with caste population and political participation. Questions are often raised as to why was it only the DMK that was responsible for Dalit political empowerment. This is because the DMK was the party that challenged the dominance of the Brahmins in politics, economy, culture, and governing institutions and, hence, should distribute a fair share to keep the social base intact.

On the other hand, led by a highly centralised leadership nature, the AIADMK's pro-poor (of all castes) image sufficiently helped the party on the issues of Dalit empowerment and uplift in the political sphere. At the same time, the 'micro-management' strategy adopted by the AIADMK at the booth level in electoral politics has widened the gulf between pro-poor policies and rights and silenced the culture of democratic discourse on social justice, secular values, and welfare policies.

History, however, remains standing evidence that the late Karunanidhi, barring a few occasions, had been a very strong critique of Hindu religion and its cultural politics. He was one of the radical disciples of Periyar, while the AIADMK had never enjoyed the same extent of support from Periyar. So, it is apparent that the political opposition by the AIADMK would be diagonally opposite to the DMK and that the former has been maintaining a soft tone on the anti-caste supremacist origins of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu to satisfy the dominant castes and their hegemony in the cultural sphere.

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to religion. During the AIADMK regime between 1977 and 1989, Tamil Nadu had witnessed many individual religious mutts/ashrams and god men from or socially

dominant castes such as Mudaliar and Vanniyar carrying the names of non-Brahmin gods and goddesses. The spiritual cultural practice has been taught as healing touch to have faith in the God and grand festivals were organised to appropriate the Hindu

culture and tradition. This trend did not get assimilated with Hindu-Brahminism, but claimed the Hindu status outside the Brahminical social order.

Religion started moving from periphery to alter the power centre after 1980s during the late Chief Minister and AIADMK founder, M.G. Ramachandran's period: the *Meenakshipuram* religious conversion in 1981, *Mandaikkadu Bhagavathi Amman* Temple Car festival clashes in 1982, then it was followed by his successor, Jayalalithaa, during her tenure: extending support to *Kar Seva*, participating in *Maha Maham* at Kumbakonam, banning animal sacrifice, and at last the subsequently withdrawn anti-conversion Bill in 2003. She burnt her finger by touching very sensitive issues of religious politics.

These factors led to Muslims and Christians asserting themselves as minorities against the AIADMK, as a result of which the party, in alliance with the BJP, was routed in the 2004 general election. This defeat of the AIADMK resulted in its strong social base -the dominant backward castes of the State's southernmost districts of Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Kanniyakumari, moving towards the BJP. Historically these southern districts were not entirely unfavourable to the national parties, which made this transition easier. Since then the electoral support by the minorities has been to the Dravidian party which does not align with the BJP. The ideological core of Dravidian politics, thus, served as a blockade to the politics of secularism versus communalism in Tamil Nadu, until now.

In General Election 2019, the main contestants in Tamil Nadu are the DMK and the AIADMK, both in alliance with national parties: the former with the Congress, the latter with the BJP. Though the regional parties are the leaders of the alliances in the State, in the case of the AIADMK, it is the BJP that orchestrated the alliance, and operates it. This undercurrent, therefore, makes it a fight between BJP-driven forces versus the rest.

It is also important to factor in T.T.V. Dinakaran's Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam contesting in alliance with a budding Muslim political outfit, SDPI, to construct the image that this splinter of the AIADMK is a secular force, balancing the vote bank with minorities and 'safeguarding the true spirit of the parent party

[led by the Chief Minister, E. Palaniswami (EPS) and O, Panneerselvam (OPS)] from communalism as it is in alliance with BJP.



Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami during an exclusive interview to The Hindu at his residence in Salem in Tamil Nadu on April 09, 2019. Photo: E.Lakshmi Narayanan / The Hindu

After the death of Jayalalithaa, the AIADMK's organisational weakness brought out the crisis in leadership, taking the late Chief Minister's aide, Sasikala (and one whom she had more than once disowned in the past, only to subsequently take her back into her household), to the top slot of the party as its general secretary. A subsequent rift and 'revolt' by the then Chief Minister, Panneerselvam, resulted in a vertical fracture carrying all the theatrics and skulduggery of realpolitik – MLAs commandeered to a secluded resort on the outskirts of Chennai, mutual acrimony and name-calling, etc.. The conviction of Sasikala in a Disproportional Assets case and her subsequent incarceration in a jail in Bengaluru were the prelude to a larger role to be played by the BJP.

As it already tested the communal violence in 1998 serial bomb blast, the private industrial leaders and their business relationship with the Mumbai, Nagpur, and

labour migration from northern States are used as tool to foreground Hindutva politics by organising extravagant public festivities to mark *Durga Pooja*, *Vinayakar Chaturthi*, and *Deepavali*. The neo-capitalist class and entrepreneurial communities in Western Kongu region are increasingly becoming non-ideological or apolitical, which is to the advantage of the BJP by invisibilising the Dravidian politics of social justice. Another important factor that BJP generally applies everywhere is to complicate religious issues in Muslim-dominated pockets. One such centre is Coimbatore city, being the hub of textiles, automobiles, and poultry. The city's economic prosperity tends to push socialist principles away from the labour welfare framework. The Left parties, which were strong over a period of time, find themselves devoid of political space after the emergence of the neo-liberal economy as trade unions had no role to play in mobilising labour as a political force to combat social problems.

Intensifying the anti-Dravidian discourse: manufacturing dissent

Ideological differences between the Left, the Congress and the Dravidian parties have often turned out as anti-Dravidian political discourse, which produced the AIADMK under the late M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) using his celluloid popularity and organisational out reach of fan clubs. This was the first threat faced by Dravidian ideology. Later the MGR rule (1977-1987) had many flaws and perpetuated attacks on State government employees, farmers, the socially marginalised, and the minorities, who were silenced by the populist schemes. It is important to analyse MGR's rule in fostering an anti-Dravidian sentiment among the educated middle class and the creation of many caste based outfits across Tamil Nadu. The DMK stood against the proclamation of the state of Emergency in 1975, facing the worst political oppression from the ruling Congress. The AIADMK supported the Congress and the subsequent electoral defeat for DMK had altered the Dravidian political discourse as false consciousness which had no support of social base. M.G. Ramachandran's mass appeal shifted the issues to livelihood crisis to oppress the Dravidian ideological debates within and outside the Assembly. The demise of M.G. Ramachandran, the subsequent split in the AIADMK, and the emergence of Jayalalithaa as the political leader of the reunited Dravidian party weakened the discourse further by using the Sri Lankan Tamils issue as her political ploy to disarm

the DMK on the issues of Tamil cultural and ethnic nationalism, which were issues inherently supported by the both the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin intellectuals and ideologues.

As the core strategy of the Left parties, Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Katchi (VCK) and the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) for the general elections to the Lok Sabha (2014) and the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (2016), isolating the DMK became the first step even though it seems to be an unwanted attempt.

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Interestingly, the AIADMK has been spared for no reason even though it ruled Tamil Nadu for longer time than its predecessor, the DMK. The DMK’s claim over the legacy of social justice, linguistic identity politics, federalism, Union-State relationship, State autonomy, pioneering social programmes are not representing as its testimony.

It is also important to note that Dravidian parties have crossed three generations and the current degeneration in its politics can be traced back to its loss of ‘self-identity’ by depending heavily on the caste equations, which influence each and every aspect of politics, administration, and governance.

TN + Pondicherry Party Alliance Seat Sharing:

DMK Alliance Seats	Parliamentary Constituencies	AIADMK Alliance Seats	Parliamentary Constituencies
DMK– 20	Chennai (North), Chennai (Central), Chennai (South), Sriperumpudur, Arakkonam, Vellore, Kancheepuram(SC), Dharmapuri, Salem, Cuddalore, Kallakurichi, Tiruvannamalai, Thanjavur, Mayiladuthurai,	AIADMK-20	Thiruvallur (SC), Chennai (South), Kancheepuram (SC), Arakkonam, Arani, Krishnagiri, Salem, Namakkal, Karur, Erode, Tiruppur, Pollachi, Perambalur, Tiruvannamalai, Mayiladuthurai, Chidambaram (SC),

	Dindigul, Pollachi, The Nilgiris (SC), Tenkasi (SC), Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi		Pollachi, Nagapattinam (SC), Madurai, The Nilgiris (SC), Theni, Tirunelveli
Cong – 10	Thiruvallur (SC), Arani, Krishnagiri, Karur, Theni, Tiruchirappalli, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Pondicherry, Kanniyakumari,	BJP – 5	Coimbatore, Sivaganga, Ramanathapuram, Thoothukudi, Kanniyakumari
CPI – 2	Tiruppur, Nagapattinam (SC)	PMK – 7	Chennai (Central), Arakkonam, Sriperumpudur, Dharmapuri, Villupuram (SC), Cuddalore, Dindigul
CPM – 2	Madurai, Coimbatore	DMDK - 4	Chennai (North), Kallakurichi, Tiruchirappalli, Virudhunagar
IUML - 1	Ramanathapuram	PT - 1	Tenkasi (SC)
VCK – 2	Chidambaram (SC) Villupuram (SC)	NJP - 1	Vellore
MDMK-1	Erode	AINRC - 1	Pondicherry
IJK - 1	Perambalur	TMC-1	Thanjavur
KMDK - 1	Namakkal	-----	-----
TOTAL – 40			

DMK Alliance	Parliamentary Constituencies		AIADMK Alliance	Parliamentary Constituencies	
Party	General	SC	Party	General	SC
DMK – 20	17	3	AIADMK – 20	15	5
Cong – 10	9	1	BJP – 5	5	0
CPI – 2	1	1	PMK – 7	6	1
CPM – 2	2	0	DMDK - 4	4	0
VCK – 2	0	2	PT - 1	0	1

AIADMK-BJP's Strategy: Polarisation and provocation rather than performance

Double anti-incumbency afflicts the AIADMK and the BJP, which face an enormous amount of opposition, agitation, and criticism by the public against both parties. The absence of the Modi wave in 2014 and the return of the AIADMK to power for a second term in 2016 are to be viewed in different contexts. For the voter in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK pro right-wing politics from its formation by M.G. Ramachandran appears to be a more convenient choice, and both commanded mass appeal: when both the leaders were ill, *poojas*, and other rituals were performed for their recovery, which was unprecedented. The AIADMK under Jayalalithaa also displayed its own variation of a balancing act. For example, on the one hand Jayalalithaa organised a *Maha Maham* and on the other hand arrested the seer, Jayendra Saraswathi of *Kanchi Mutt*, for whom she once had high regard in a criminal case.



**Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a public meeting in Coimbatore on April 9, 2019.
Photo: J. Manoharan / The Hindu Tamil**

As a Dravidian Party giving more importance to the local cultural festivals AIADMK openly encouraged the cultural politics ignoring Periyar's rationalism and Dravidian Movement as the parent organisation. This kind of cultural politics of dominant castes is been appropriated by the religious forces claiming advantage for BJP.

From another angle, parties representing minorities and Dalits are forces to reckon with in determining the electoral outcome in the State. The DMK's vote share among the Dalits and the minority parties took a major hit after its pre-poll alliance with the BJP in the 1999 parliamentary and 2001 assembly elections. In this regard, no Dravidian party would be interested to have any chance of pre-poll alliance with BJP. Simultaneously, BJP is also trying its level best to find its footprints in the Dravidian marshland by pulling the caste based parties into its fold including a segment of Dalits. After having broadband caste alliance in the 2014 parliamentary election, BJP could not cope with the constituent alliance partners who joined in the chorus of 'Modi wave'. Since Modi wave had no effect in Tamil Nadu, soon the caste based political parties realised the need to to come back to Dravidian pavilion.

The politics of polarisation of caste and religion of the BJP is being put into practice. In Tamil Nadu this is done by breaking the Brahmin - non-Brahmin binary and

The politics of polarisation of caste and religion of the BJP is being put into practice in Tamil Nadu by breaking the Brahmin - non-Brahmin binary and exposing the caste hierarchy among the non-Brahmins.

exposing the caste hierarchy among the non-Brahmins. The AIADMK mobilised castes such as Vanniyar, Mudaliyar, Gounder, Thevar, Nadar, Udayar, and Mutharaiyar who represent most of the Parliamentary

and Assembly constituencies and occupy important portfolios; Minorities and subaltern castes such as Paraiyar, Devendrakula Velalar, and Arunthathiyars, were given the least importance in the cultural as well as political sphere. This formula could guide the BJP to reach out to the dominant castes through cultural politics. Simultaneously the call of Hindutva is also increasingly invoked. These may affect the Dravidian politics of the State. To operationalise and reach-out to the dominant backward and subalterns castes, though the BJP is not well organised party in Tamil Nadu, it has fielded candidates in Coimbatore (a Gounder dominant Kongu Region), Sivaganga, Ramanathapuram (a caste sensitive region at south, where Muslims population is the highest in the State at 13 per cent, and stronghold of Thevar community and the district where U. Muthuramalinga Thevar was born), Thoothukudi and Kanniyakumari which are known as flash points for communal clashes, are also other constituencies where the BJP is contesting.

To bring the Dalits into its fold, the BJP president, Amit Shah, attended a meeting organised by the Devendrakula Velalar in Madurai. A section of Devendrakula Velalar community has now been campaigning against their caste identity and want to be excluded from the list of Scheduled Caste and demand inclusion in the list of Most Backward Caste, so as to throw away the tag of untouchability and Dalit identity, with an influence of Hindu religion. The AIADMK government has now passed the order to identify and understand the issue of considering Devendrakula Velalar's plea. The other dominant castes such as Pillai, Mudaliar and Gounder have raised objection that '*Velalar*' is meant for only few castes who engaged in agriculture treating it as title, and reject claims by the Devendrakula Velalar over the title.

The Dravidian movement led by Periyar, who wanted his followers to remove caste title as an important act of doing away with caste oppression and maintaining equality in the public institution/sphere, succeeded for more than seven decades, Now, however, the caste tag is being re-invoked as neo-caste identity politics is a setback to the Dravidian movement.

DMK – Congress: Need to rearticulate secularism within minority and Dalit political perspectives

The 2019 General Election has thrown up an ideological challenge to DMK in its electoral battle against the AIADMK-BJP combine. Periyar has been a point of target by the BJP for long time and his statues were vandalised in many places in the recent past. Periyar is seen as an unchallengeable political ideological leader and reason for the continuity of Dravidian parties ruling the State, despite many ideological compromises. In order to provoke the DMK and the Dalit parties, and as a means to galvanise numbers to counter the Dravidian politics in cultural sphere, the BJP and its Hindutva outfits kept attacking Periyar through the social media and misrepresented the rights of minorities among the youth and section of educated, sections of which are frustrated with Dravidian politics, policies, and governance.

The Dravidian parties have been in association with Muslims ever since the Non-Brahmin movement started. The social-political understanding between the leaders and cadres are quite mutually respected and Muslims contribution to the Tamil, Language, Literature and

Academic Research is well recognised. Before the rise of Hindutva politics, Tamil Muslims did not take their

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religiosity and religious identity with such sensitivity because regard for Tamil ethnic identity was predominant among Muslims in Tamil Nadu. The DMK and its leaders were criticised by the BJP and others that DMK did not recognise '*Deepavali*' as a Hindu festival but participated in '*Iftar*' and '*Christmas*'. M.K. Stalin taking a neutral position on the day he assumed the charge of the president of DMK, categorically mentioned that the party would neither oppose cadres who have faith in God nor support them. He also shot back in a public meeting

that ‘if his party leaders and cadres are not Hindus, then who else are they?’ As majority of the Tamil belong to Hindu religion. This reply too drew criticism that Stalin was trying to appease the majority for vote bank politics unlike his father, Karunanidhi.



The DMK president, M.K. Stalin, campaigning for the Congress candidate S. Thirunavukarasar in Tiruchi Lok Sabha constituency. Photo: M_Moorthy / The Hindu

Minority politics in Tamil Nadu is quite sensitive and its long term association with both the Dravidian parties continues to hold even both the AIADMK and the DMK had an alliance with BJP. The Dravidian political discourse still found contemporary relevance at a time when Hindutva political discourse haunts minorities. The Dalit perspective of the Dravidian politics is that the social justice delivered to them is not reflective of its real strength. The exclusive Dalit parties came into existence during AIADMK regime in mid 1980s due to the extraordinary role played by the dominant backward castes in redistributing state power and economic resources which resulted in continuous violence in the late 1980s and 1990s. After 1991 Jayalalithaa gave the same overwhelming importance to the dominant backward castes made the Dalits realise the other side of Dravidian politics, which has been excluding them to satisfy the dominant castes banking upon its economy and social consolidation as vote bank

politics. During Jayalalithaa's first term (1991-1996), backward caste consolidation completed a full cycle and during her second term (2001-2006), religious minorities came under attack and she went on to pass the Anti-conversion Bill in the Assembly, which in turn consolidated the religious minorities and defeated AIADMK in 2004 General Election and 2006 Assembly election. Though the political divide started on religious grounds at the level of alliances from 1998 onwards, it has now reached a level of altering the political map of Tamil Nadu by reinforcing the Hindu hierarchical socio-political culture exploiting the same non-Brahmin social groups using the representative democracy as a weapon to seize the political diversity.

DMDK and PMK: Ambiguity and the odd man out

Since its emergence in 2004, the DMDK turned out to be the party to be watched even after losing its considerable vote share in subsequent elections from 2009. By the time it was jolted to reality in 2016, the DMDK had punched more than its weight. The DMDK is self-contradictory in its position that it does not have any clear-cut political ideology, programme, policy, and understanding of State politics except its ability to extract a hard bargaining from the major Dravidian parties.

The biggest crisis looming large in the Tamil Nadu politics is that it has gradually becoming de-ideological thanks to the pulls and pressures of electoral politics. As 'development' is the key factor for boosting the image of the party in the State and among the public, political platforms which were discussing development linked it up with corruption and nepotism. But Tamil Nadu has already proved that the social development of economically poor is more important than physical infrastructure development of the State by defeating the DMK in the 2001 and 2011 Assembly elections despite DMK bringing in high volumes of investment to the State. The recent eight-lane mega highway between Salem and Chennai proposed by the State government would have affected the very livelihood of the small land holding farmers in eight districts and in most of these districts, the Vanniyar community is the numerically stronger one. This road project was opposed by all the parties and many environmentalists and civil society, except the AIADMK and the BJP.

In the past, the Paataali Makkal Katchi (PMK), for its part, has been very critical about the AIADMK and its policies. In the 2016 Assembly election, it chose to go it

alone, and swore to its cadres that it would never ally with either the DMK or the AIADMK. Now, with the shift in its position its cadres are in an embarrassing situation to justify their alliance with AIADMK-BJP and DMDK. It was with BJP in 2014 parliamentary election, that the PMK won the Dharmapuri Lok Sabha seat, considered as fortress of the Vanniyar community and the PMK. Prior to the election, the inter-caste marriage of Dalit and Vanniyar girl followed by murder of a Dalit boy in the name of 'honour killing' was capitalised to revamp the PMK in the region. It also mobilised the all other dominant Backward Castes against the Dalits across the State to combat the inter-caste marriage.



The BJP State president, Tamilisai Soundararajan, who is contesting from Thoothukudi.
Photo : N. Rajesh

In 2014, BJP led an alliance of caste-based parties, which naturally fits into its anti-Dravidian political ideology. But the shocking reality was the same Vanniyar community defeated Dr. Anbumani Ramadass in the subsequent Assembly Election held in 2016 in Pennagaram constituency which has been heartland of PMK. This shift is to be seen as a clear indication that the PMK's supremacy over the Vanniyar community seems to be on the decline at its core base. It is being deserted by the working cadres who feel that their loyalty to the caste has been taken for granted and

their disadvantaged position has not seen any real transformation. Given the PMK's shifting alliance from one Dravidian party to another, the cadre face humiliation from the alliance partners which makes them politically demotivated. Moreover, leadership crisis, their politics in both the DMK and the PMK which are more inclined to have alliance with BJP in order to strike cordial ties with state and central politics along with decent power share, have made these two parties soft targets, and can be transferred gradually to BJP in the long run.

It is time for all parties, which came through the legacy of social reform movement of Periyar, to realise for whom this hardcore voting mass serves as base even after undergoing the humiliating honour killings and denial of basic civil rights. In that respect, though the BJP is still far away from any tangible electoral inroads, it is also time for the two Dravidian parties which rule the State since 1967 to not take the electorate for granted.

The question, naturally, is: what ails Dravidian parties? What makes the Tamil community to allow other political forces to play into its political turf, where OBCs

Tokenism has disenchanted those who continue to be oppressed and, at a broader level, lowers the political commitment and participation of socially excluded caste groups in the Dravidian parties.

overwhelming representation in State government? The spread of the youth of Tamil Nadu into all the employment, education particularly and after

liberalization, privatization in the process of globalization; health, Information Technology, media, All India Services, lucrative international jobs are possible for the current generation across communities because of the Dravidian movement and its ideology of social justice. The present ailments of the Dravidian parties are none because of the current educated generation of backward castes, which tasted most of the benefits of reservation now negates reservation, treating it as stigma. In television debates on reservation or social justice, the current generation conveniently argues against reservation after enjoying its core benefits. The meaning and objective of social justice is only in practice by accommodating, representing the 'exclusive' dominant backward castes, not for other weaker sections even within OBCs.

This is the point of departure for the non-represented and underrepresented sections of the backward castes and Dalits to opt out and join and nurture the parties against

the Dravidian ideology. However, it is important to also emphasise that not all Dalits and minorities have moved out of Dravidian parties even though they were not represented duly in the cabinet on par with other backward castes. Even if there were something, it would be the low profile ministerial or executive positions. Such tokenism has disenchanted those who continue to be oppressed and, at a broader level, lowers the political commitment to, and participation of, socially excluded caste groups in the Dravidian parties.

Dalit Parties under compulsion

When we compare Tamil Nadu with North Indian State-level politics, Dalit and minority representation is still largely token. In contrast, in other parts of the country and in nearby southern States, whichever party comes to power, Dalit leaders are given due share in power. In other words, despite social discrimination, political equality is observed. However, Tamil Nadu has not been sensitive to this issue of power sharing largely owing to the extraordinary influence of the backward and intermediate castes over the State's politics and economy.

The objective of representation for Dalits and minorities in constitutional bodies is to emancipate the oppressed and discriminated to achieve political equality where social change can be driven through state power. These are the key issues that Dravidian parties neglected by not addressing on the one hand; the inseparable bond of Dalits with Dravidian parties, and on the other hand, through populist policies conditioned Dalits not to raise voice against the ruling class. Instead, its demand for power and representation their struggles were dismissed and diverted with inter-caste politics. The overlapping of representation among the Dalit communities Paraiyar, Devendrakula Velalar and Arunthathiyars widens the gap among each other on every front.

The presence of the BJP in the State's politics has posed many challenges to Dravidian politics; it has to deal with sub caste issues also very seriously. In the stream of alternative politics, finding space for Dalits in the mainstream have experienced worse of the politics of caste consolidation and economic power.

It is an undeniable truth that the two principal Dravidian parties have detracted long back from the legacy of Periyar and his social reform politics. This move, directed by personal rivalries, political pressures, the opening of political spaces for sections of the oppressed for whom social mobility remains elusive, the reluctance on the part of dominant castes to share power with others further down the social order, have come as challenges to the Dravidian parties. In the case of the Left parties, the changing mode of economic activities marked by changing employment terms, declines in manufacturing and the loss of bargaining power by Trade Unions under the new economic order pose a test to their ground-level functioning. However, with the creeping influence of religious nationalism, it is time for Tamil Nadu's Secular Progressive Alliance in which the DMK, the Congress, the Left Parties, and the VCK are prominent members, to realise where they have erred to have given the space for the proponents of Hindutva to search for a toehold in Tamil Nadu.

[**P. Ramajayam** is Assistant Professor in Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli. He also currently holds the additional position of Principal in charge, Bharathidasan University Constituent Arts and Science College, Nannilam, Tiruvarur District, Tamil Nadu. He can be contacted at akilram11@gmail.com].

Note:

1. Election to the Vellore Parliamentary Constituency in Tamil Nadu was rescinded by the President of India based on a recommendation made by the Election Commission of India on grounds of misuse of money in elections. [All India Radio: <http://www.newsonair.com/News?title=EC-cancels-polling-in-Vellore-constituency-on-grounds-of-misuse-of-money&id=362338>].

This article was updated on April 18 to correct a typographical error. The late M.G. Ramachandran was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1987.