

The Emergence of Dravidian Politics: A Historical Analysis of Social Justice Movements

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Abstract:

The Dravidian movement is one of the most remarkable socio-political changes that took place in modern Indian history. The movement began in the early twentieth century in the Madras Presidency and opposed Brahminical dominance and demanded social justice, linguistic autonomy, and political representation of non-Brahmin groups. The paper is divided into the historical development of the Dravidian politics, starting with the establishment of the Justice Party in 1916, up to the Self-Respect Movement and the political groupings. The discussion of the effect of the movement on the policies of reservation, electoral democracy, and social change in Tamil Nadu reveals how the ideology of the Dravidians institutionalized the ideals of social justice in the constitutional government.

Keywords: Dravidian movement, social justice, Self-Respect movement, Justice Party, Tamil Nadu politics, Reservation policy, Periyar, anti-Brahmin movement, non-Brahmin movement.

1. Introduction

A political situation in modern Tamil Nadu is impossible to explain without referring to the Dravidian movement that essentially reshaped the socio-political situation in South India. This movement, though, started as a rationalist, anti-caste, and anti-Brahmin movement in the early twentieth century and was a reaction to the perceived Brahminical dominance in the sphere of education, occupation, and political representation in the Madras Presidency (Pandian, 2007). The movement did not just concern itself with political free-play, but also deep-rooted social reforms, language nationalism, and institutionalization of affirmative action policies that are still taking center stage in the governance structure of Tamil Nadu.

It is not just an important movement because of its political success, but rather a complete defiance of the societal order that existed in Hindu society. The movement, as scholars have observed, was a programmed attempt to reclassify Tamil identity as not being Brahminical-Sanskriti, but rather a different Dravidian cultural heritage and language tradition (Ramaswamy, 1997). The present paper reviews the history of Dravidian politics, identifying its initial mobilization, its major ideological principles, and its long-term consequences on the political economy and the social organization of Tamil Nadu.

2. Historical Background and Origins

2.1. The Pre-Independence Context

The Dravidian movement is traced to the late nineteenth century, when communal differences between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins first started taking shape in the Madras Presidency. By the early twentieth century, Brahmins had reached over-representation in government jobs and in educational institutions despite their only 3.2 percent of the people making up (Irschick, 1969). This was an area of focus in the mobilization of the non-Brahmin, especially when Western education became more available, and most were monopolized by the Brahmin community.

The Dravidian ideology received intellectual grounding from some personalities who included Iyothee Thass, who founded the South Indian Buddhist Association in 1910, and introduced the term Adi Dravida to refer to the native pre-Aryan peoples of South India (Aloysius, 1998). This racial-cultural framework, which was shaped by the colonial anthropological theories that differentiated the Aryan and Dravidians, formed the basis of ideological mobilization in future politics against the domination of Brahmins.

2.2. The Justice Party: Political Foundation of the Movement

C. Natesa Mudaliar, T.M. Nair, and P. Theagaraya Chetty founded the South Indian Liberal Federation, also commonly referred to as the Justice Party, on November 20, 1916, at Victoria Memorial Hall in Madras (Washbrook, 1976). The formation of the party was the culmination of a series of non-Brahmin conferences and meetings, which aimed to discuss the systematic underrepresentation of the non-Brahmin groups in the government. The party was named after the newspaper named Justice through which it was able to spread its ideology.

The Justice Party had a considerable degree of electoral success, and it won the first legislative council elections conducted under the Government of India Act, 1919, and ultimately formed the government. The party stayed in power between 1920 and 1926 and 1930 and 1937, whereby it employed innovative reservation policies. The reservation was introduced in 1921 by a Government Order passed by Chief Minister Akaram Subbaroyalu Reddy; 44 percent of the positions were allocated to Non-Brahmin Hindus, 16 percent to each of the Brahmins, Muslims, Christians, and Anglo-Indians, and 8 percent to the Scheduled Castes (Baker, 1976).

Table 1- Justice Party Electoral Performance in Madras Presidency (1920-1937)

Election Year	Seats Won	Government Formed	Chief Minister
1920	63	Yes	A. Subbarayalu Reddiar
1923	45	Yes	P. Theagaraya Chetty
1926	21	No	-
1930	28	Yes	P. Munuswamy Naidu
1937	19	No	-

Note. Data compiled from Irschick (1969) and Baker (1976).

2.3. The Self-Respect Movement: Radicalization of Social Reform

Periyar or E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973) became the most memorable personality of the Dravidian movement when he became disappointed with the Indian National Congress. Periyar resigned in 1925, having joined Congress in 1919 and having been involved in the Vaikom Satyagraha. He was of the view that Congress was only serving the interests of Brahmins (Diehl, 1977). In 1925-1926, he initiated the Self-Respect Movement that marked a radical shift to the fairly moderate stance of the Justice Party towards social reform.

The ideology of the Self-Respect Movement included atheism, rationalism, women's emancipation, and the total abolishment of caste. His position was infamously stated by Periyar, who said that he had no god, religion, no Gandhi, no Congress, and no Brahmins (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). The movement injected in place of the Brahminical monopoly of life-cycle rituals the so-called Self-Respect Marriages that were non-Brahminical and involved no Brahmin priests or even religious ceremonies. Feminist changes were also an early move by the movement, as it represented the widow remarriage arrangement, the rights of women to property, and their rights to control their reproductive organs.

In 1938, the Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement officially amalgamated, and in 1944, the amalgamated group was renamed Dravidaar Kazhagam (DK). This was also the time when the need for a separate Dravidian nation emerged. Periyar held the Dravida Nadu Conference in 1939 with a slogan of Dravida Nadu for Dravidians. The movement saw an autonomous federation of Tamil, Telugu,

Malayalam-speaking speaking and Kannada-speaking regions, and the demand would later be lowered in light of the political realities that had to be faced after independence (Barnett, 1976).

3. Political Transformation: From Social Movement to Electoral Politics

3.1. The Emergence of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

C.N. Annadurai founded the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) on September 17, 1949, after having parted ways with the Dravidar Kazhagam because of ideological differences between the two. DMK saw the Dravidian movement change its charisma into an electoral political party instead of a social reform organization (Subramanian, 1999). The DMK adjusted its views on religion, even though retaining much of its original Dravidian ideology, and the call to a separate Dravidian state, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the subsequent amendment of the constitution banning secessionist agendas.

The election to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly in 1967 was the turning point in Indian political history. The DMK was the first non-Congress party to secure a majority of its own in a state-level election, and this marked an end to the reign of Congress in Tamil Nadu. Annadurai was elected to the chief minister position and served him until he died in 1969, when M. Karunanidhi took over his position as party president. No other party than the DMK or its offshoot, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) has ruled Tamil Nadu since 1967, which shows the full institutionalization of the Dravidian politics in the state (Wyatt, 2013).

Table 2- *Dravidian Parties' Electoral Performance in Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections (1967-2021)*

Year	DMK Seats	AIADMK Seats	Winning Party	Chief Minister
1967	138	-	DMK	C.N. Annadurai
1977	48	130	AIADMK	M.G. Ramachandran
1989	150	27	DMK	M. Karunanidhi
1996	173	4	DMK	M. Karunanidhi
2006	99	61	DMK	M. Karunanidhi
2011	23	150	AIADMK	J. Jayalalithaa
2016	89	134	AIADMK	J. Jayalalithaa
2021	133	66	DMK	M.K. Stalin

Note. AIADMK was formed in 1972. Data compiled from the Election Commission of India records.

4. Social Justice and Reservation Policy

4.1. Evolution of Affirmative Action in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu's reservation policy is one of the most extensive affirmative action initiatives in the world, with the government achieving 69% reservation in government jobs and higher education, and that is the highest in India. The development of the policy has been marked by the ongoing broadening of social justice policies in the successive Dravidian governments. Reservation was set under the Communal Government Order of 1927 that came about through the activities of Periyar and the Justice Party, but was first overruled by courts following independence (Dirks, 2001).

In 1969, the Karunanidhi government created the First Backward Classes Commission of Tamil Nadu under A.N. Sattanathan, which proposed the idea of the so-called creamy layer and suggested sub-categorization of backward classes. According to these proposals, the DMK government raised the quota reserved for Backward Classes to 31 percent and those for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to 18 percent, making the total quota 49 percent. The AIADMK government, led by M.G. Ramachandran, further enhanced the Backward Class reservation up to 50% in 1980 to increase the overall reservation to 68% (Radhakrishnan, 1996).

Table 3- Evolution of Reservation Policy in Tamil Nadu (1927-1994)

Year	BC/OBC (%)	SC/ST (%)	Total (%)
1927	44 (Non-Brahmin)	8	52*
1951	25	16	41
1971	31	18	49
1980	50	18	68
1989	50 (30 BC + 20 MBC)	18	68
1990	50 (30 BC + 20 MBC)	19 (18 SC + 1 ST)	69
1994	50	19	69 (Protected)

Note. *Included allocations for other communities. BC = Backward Classes; MBC = Most Backward Classes; SC = Scheduled Castes; ST = Scheduled Tribes. Data compiled from Tamil Nadu government records.

In the year 1990, the Karunanidhi administration divided the ST quota by 1 percent and made the overall quota 69 percent. The policy of Tamil Nadu was challenged in court when the Supreme Court in 1992 limited the reservation to 50 per cent with an Indra Sawhney judgment. Nonetheless, with the leadership of Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State) Act, 1993, was included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution through the 76th Constitutional Amendment in 1994, and hence it has been safeguarded against judicial review (Galanter, 2002).

Table 4- Current Reservation Structure in Tamil Nadu (2024)

Category	Reservation (%)	Sub-quotas
Backward Classes (BC)	26.5	-
Backward Classes (Muslims)	3.5	-
Most Backward Classes (MBC) & Denotified Communities	20	7% DNT
Scheduled Castes (SC)	18	3% Arunthathiyars
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	1	-
Total Reservation	69	-

Note. DNT = Denotified Tribes. Data from the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes and Most Backward Classes Welfare Department.

5. Critical Analysis and Contemporary Debates

The legacy of the Dravidian movement is still disputed among scholars. Although supporters attribute the movement to democratizing the Tamil society, allowing social mobility among the hitherto marginalized groups, and the formation of strong welfare organizations, opponents suggest that the institutionalization of the movement has ushered in the new caste elites in the guise of Dravidian secularism (Harriss, 2002). The change between radical anti-caste movements into practical electoral politics has been described as a transition to graded inequality, in which anti-Brahmin ideology is maintained and hierarchical advantage enforced by new hegemonic intermediate castes.

It has been noted by scholars that although the Dravidian parties have been successful in ousting Brahmin hegemony, the rewards of social justice policies have been monopolized by the numerically dominant backward castes, including Vanniyars, Thevars, and Gounders, and Dalits, and the majority of the backward castes are still overrepresented in the leadership and in state power structures (Viswanathan, 2005). These intra-backward class tensions were illustrated through the 2021 Vanniyar reservation

controversy that attempted to give an internal reservation of 10.5% to Vanniyars to the MBC quota, but was nullified by the Supreme Court.

However, the human development indicators of Tamil Nadu are always at the top in India. According to the scholars, this is because of the all-round reservation and welfare policies that had been implemented in the state under the Dravidian regimes. K. Kamaraj started the mid-day meal scheme, and the scheme, since then, under successive Dravidian governments, has been the example that others have followed throughout the nation. The performance of the state in the field of literacy, healthcare, and poverty reduction implies that the state institutions formed as a result of the Dravidian movement have provided the visible developmental benefits, though the initial radical vision of caste annihilation has not been met yet (Drèze and Sen, 2013).

6. Conclusion

The Dravidian movement is one of the most significant social and political changes that took place in contemporary Indian history. Since its beginnings in the anti-Brahmin mobilization during the beginning of the twentieth century in the form of the Justice Party and the Self-Respect Movement, it emerged to be a major political party that was at the helm of ruling Tamil Nadu since 1967. The principal ideological promises of the movement to social justice, linguistic identity, and affirmative action have been codified in the constitutional system of the state, most significantly, the 69 percent policy of reservation, which is safeguarded in the Ninth Schedule.

The history of Dravidian politics shows the potential as well as the constraints of identity politics organization in a democratic system. Although the movement was able to counter Brahminical hegemony and increase political representation of the non-Brahmin communities, the shift in social movement to electoral politics has demanded some compromises that have eroded its original radical program. The inequalities rooted in the caste system persist despite years of affirmative action, which may be the reason why formal political inclusion is essential but is not sufficient as a means to produce a substantive social equality.

The future scholarship will have to grapple with the difficult legacies of the Dravidian movement, on the one hand, realizing its democratizing successes, and on the other, creating new hierarchical versions. In the modern context of economic progress, federalism and social integration of Tamil Nadu, the ideas expressed by the founders of the movement remain relevant in the political rhetoric and the political agenda, and this fact speaks volumes of the timeless importance of an impressive historical phenomenon.

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