Much depends on the DMK and the AIADMK holding their outright dominance in the Lok Sabha polls in Tamil Nadu.

As election fever tightens its grip on India, most recently the focus has been on the alliance prospects of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress, as these two parties go about building bridges with powerful State-level parties. Nowhere else has this process been more complex and historically significant as in Tamil Nadu, the land of the erstwhile Dravidian movement.

Indeed, the two standard-bearers of this movement, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have over decades had mixed feelings about ‘national parties’, which draw their strength from the ambit of New Delhi. These feelings have ranged from outright hostility to openness to forming alliances with the latter.

In its heyday, the ruling political ideology in Tamil Nadu was dominated by anti-Delhi, anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindi sentiment. The agenda of the State’s leaders remained firmly fixed on questions of State autonomy, promoting the Tamil language, and retaining a sense of distinct ethnic Tamil identity in the face of domineering impulses of a politically centralising government in New Delhi.

As the legatee of ‘Periyar’ E.V. Ramasamy and C.N. Annadurai, the late M. Karunanidhi, president of the DMK until his passing in August 2018, was very much the product of this school of Dravidianism.

Under him the DMK consolidated its base through the guiding principle of what academic Narendra Subramanian described as “assertive populism,” or bringing small propertied groups and small-scale traders of assorted middle castes under the umbrella of resurgent Dravidianist policymaking.

More accommodating
Nevertheless, the sharp edge of this socio-political movement was gradually blunted, especially during the final few decades of the 20th century, as Dravidianism came face to face with the federalist authority of the Government of India, which would not brook any talk of secessionism or autonomy beyond the minimal space permitted within the framework of constitutional principles.

A second factor that reshaped the terrain of Tamil ethnic nationalism was the electoral success of the AIADMK from 1977 onward. Under M.G. Ramachandran, and later Jayalalithaa, this party promoted a different style of patronage distribution, which has come to be recognised as “benevolent populism”, driven by an all-powerful leader worshipped as a veritable political god. The party also stitched together a broader inter-caste coalition as the base for its campaign strategies, and arguably that heralded its successes through the turn of the century and beyond.

As this second wave of Dravidian politics took hold, fuelled in equal measure by leaders using cinema culture to spread party propaganda, and the distribution of mass welfare goods to secure basic living standards of the poorest demographic cohorts, Tamil Nadu’s polity evolved almost to the point of being an enlightened State. It seemed to have found that ideal policy mix, balancing economic growth priorities and industrialisation with the redistribution of the fruits of progress, including through the pioneering Noon Meal Scheme that simultaneously improved nutritional, educational and inter-caste harmony outcomes.

Yet it is all too well known that a dark, cancerous shadow crept across this landscape even as these remarkable progressive goals were achieved. Political leaders, for years swathed by the adulation of the masses and their party cadre, turned into robber-barons and unleashed an unstoppable culture of corruption — everything from grand larceny, loot and thuggery, to petty bribe-taking and venality on a micro-transactional scale. Tamil Nadu repeatedly found mention as a poor performer in multilateral bodies reporting on transparency, accountability and corruption levels. Industries fled the State over the years, preferring the efficient regulatory climates of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka or other parts of India.

**On fragmentation**

As this generalised social reality of runaway rent-seeking gained deeper roots across the State under alternating governments of the AIADMK and DMK through the 1990s and beyond, a plethora of smaller breakaway parties emerged to the forefront within this matrix of patronage distribution, including the Paattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Tamil Maanila Congress, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), Pudiya Tamizhagam, Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam and others. Some, such as the PMK and VCK, represented the aspirations of specific caste groups. Others, such as the TMC, were based on the supporter-base popularity and political networks of individual leaders, in this case G.K. Moopanar, formerly of the Congress.
As Andrew Wyatt and C. Manikandan recently explained, “Small parties might ‘lose’ by failing to join governments in their home State, but they can claim to ‘win’ when they join a national coalition government.” This was indeed the story of Tamil Nadu’s many smaller parties, some of which lived with the odd contradiction of being **viscerally** hostile to Dravidianism and its offshoots yet proclaimed that they were committed to serving the needs of the Tamil people as such.

This mode of fragmented power coexisting with outright dominance by the two major Dravidian parties continued right until 2016-18, the phase that marked the passing of Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi and thus the end of charismatic leadership of the AIADMK and the DMK, respectively. These leaders had for decades held the reins of the party organisation tight, left little space for genuine leadership to flourish in the lower **rungs** of the cadre, and concentrated their efforts on extracting political rents from the system, either for personal gain or for distribution of **largesse** that could secure even more access to official power.

**A collective future**

Their passage has marked a more radical inflection point in the long arc of Dravidian politics than most might imagine. The most obvious signs of political **implosion** became evident in the immediate aftermath of Jayalalithaa’s death: first, former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam rebelled against the ‘main’ faction of the party being controlled by the infamous V.K. Sasikala clan, only to return to the fold alongside current Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami after Sasikala was jailed in the disproportionate assets case. Next Sasikala’s nephew T.T.V. Dhinakaran led a clutch of MLAs into a separate party, the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam.

Now the entire AIADMK machinery is throwing its weight behind the BJP, perhaps calculating that their potential loss of organisational capability and popularity with voters, stemming from the absence of the “Amma” factor, might be offset by sheer money **muscle** that the deep-pocketed Hindutva party could bring to the table. For now, they appear to have parked to one side any unsettling questions about how a Dravidian-philosophy-based party could align itself with a saffron-rooted, north-India-based, upper-caste-favouring political entity. Indeed, in this regard they are adopting the very same opportunism that Jayalalithaa displayed in 1998 and 2004, when political **expediency** easily trumped ideological coherence.

The DMK has similarly been floating into uncharted waters since the demise of Karunanidhi, although it had a definitive succession plan in place. The problem for this party is that its new boss, M.K. Stalin, has not yet delivered a State-level election victory — where his father succeeded and ascended the Chief Ministerial throne five times — and to that **extent** he remains an untested quantity politically. Some have also argued that he has failed to live up to his father’s **formidable** reputation as the Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly. However, unlike the AIADMK, which may be beholden to the BJP’s financial firepower or its threats of using law enforcement agencies to do its bidding, the DMK has a more balanced relationship with the Congress and other alliance partners.
If these weaknesses within both alliances get manifested in election results in the coming months, then it could lead to a split verdict for Tamil Nadu in the Lok Sabha. This would go against the grain of the State frequently and overwhelmingly voting one of the two major Dravidian parties into power. It would also suggest that the leadership vacuum that has recently emerged has sucked the oxygen out of State politics. Only if a new crop of leadership or different parties fills this space before the Assembly election of 2021 does the State stand a chance of resuming its progressive march toward the universal betterment of its people.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (Polity)*

1. **Ambit** (noun): The scope, extent, or bounds of something. (सीमा)

**Synonyms:** Range, Limit, Border, Boundary, Scope, Extension

**Antonyms:** Limitlessness, Freedom, Infinity, Perpetuity, Vastness

**Example:** Apart from these, however, he was heavily engaged in teaching and writing outside of his normal ambit.

2. **Heyday** (noun): The period of a person's or thing's greatest success, popularity, activity, or vigour. (उमंग का समय)

**Synonyms:** Prime Time, Culmination, Pinnacle, Zenith

**Antonyms:** Low Point, Nadir, Bottom

**Example:** This all changed by the time opera reached its heyday.

3. **Legatee** (noun): A person who receives a legacy. (बसीयत करने वाला)

**Synonyms:** Proprietor, Seigneur, Landowner
**Antonyms**: Leaser, Renter

**Example**: The hostess pertinently remarked that she, as eldest son, might surely rank among the millionaire’s legatees.

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4. **Swathe** (verb): Wrap in several layers of fabric. (लपेटना)

**Synonyms**: Swaddle, Cover, Wrap, Bind

**Antonyms**: Uncover, Unveil, Unwrap, Expose, Reveal

**Example**: The monsoon showers are here again to **swathe** the State in a watery blanket.

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5. **Larceny** (noun): Theft of personal property. (चोरी)

**Synonyms**: Burglary, Pilfering, Robbery, Purloin, Flich

**Example**: The most prevalent property crimes are **larceny**, theft, burglary, and robbery.

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6. **Plethora** (noun): A large or excessive amount of something. (बहुतायत)

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Synonyms: Overabundance, Plenty, Profusion, Surplus, Superfluity, Glut

Antonyms: Lack, Need, Scarcity, Rarity, Little, Few

Example: Libraries have a plethora of books and movies to choose from.

7. Largesse (noun): Generosity in bestowing money or gifts upon others. (दानशीलता, उदारता)

Synonyms: Donation, Philanthropy, Benevolence, Generosity, Leniency

Antonyms: Unkindness, Avarice, Greed, Malice, Corruptness, Debasement

Example: Thanks to the largesse of the airline caterers, they have lived like kings ever since.

8. Expediency (noun): The quality of being convenient and practical despite possibly being improper or immoral; convenience. (कार्यसाधकता, मुनाफा)

Synonyms: Practicality, Expedience, Expedient, Contrivance

Antonyms: Impracticality, Impossibility, Inapplicability, Uselessness, Worthlessness

Example: He could never be induced to suit his action to the political expediency of the moment.
9. **Overwhelmingly** (adverb): To a very great degree or with a great majority.

**Synonyms**: Profuse, Immense, Enormous, Formidable, Stupendous

**Antonyms**: Mildly, Gently, Non-Violently, Quietly

**Example**: People overwhelmingly believed the future would be better, and they were right.

10. **Secession** (noun): The action of withdrawing formally from membership of a federation or body, especially a political state.

**Synonyms**: Breakaway, Dissension, Separation, Disunion

**Antonyms**: Contract, Agreement, Annexure, Bond, Appendage

**Example**: The interval of secession was perhaps the happiest in his life.
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