

# Muthuramalinga Thevar and Dravidian Politics – An Overview

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**Abstract-** Muthuramalinga Thevar, also known as Thevar, is revered as a God among Tamil Nadu's Mukkulathor community, many of whom are Dravidian parties, and his image can be found alongside those of Periyar, Anna, and Karunanidhi. The description of M.K. Karunanidhi's relationship to Tamil literary heritage and his mobilization of it within political discourse, the translation of it into a 'usable cultural template,' and the later institutionalization of it through state power are all significant markers of the history of the Tamil public sphere and the influence of the evocation of antiquity within it in the twentieth century. Meanwhile, despite their tremendous socio-economic influence, the Thevars had limited access to education and jobs. At the same time, they continued to call for their decriminalization, despite the fact that they were still listed as castes in the British Criminal Tribes Act. This study presented an overview of Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar and his political journey with Dravidian parties.

**Index Terms-** Dravidian Politics, Muthuramalinga Thevar, Tamil, Tamil Nadu, socio-economic influence

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Dravidian movement in British India began with the creation of the Justice Party by T. M. Nair and P. Thiyagaraya Chetty on November 20, 1916, in Victoria Memorial Hall in Madras, as a result of a series of non-Brahmin conferences and gatherings in the presidency. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the communal separation between Brahmins and non-Brahmins developed in the presidency, owing to caste prejudices and disproportionate Brahminical representation in government offices.<sup>1</sup> The formation of the Justice Party signified the conclusion of various attempts to form an organization that would represent non-Brahmins in the Madras Presidency. The Brahmin or Non-Brahmin Divide was the background of this movement. In India's social order, the Brahmins in Madras Presidency held a higher rank. By the 1850s, Tamil and Telugu Brahmins, who

accounted for only 3.2 percent of the population, had begun to expand their political clout by filling the majority of the positions available to Indian men at the time. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they dominated administrative services and newly developed urban professions. The rise of the Brahmins was aided by their superior literacy and English language proficiency. At the turn of the twentieth century, the political, social, and economic differences between Brahmins and non-Brahmins grew more obvious. Annie Besant and her Home Rule for India campaign accentuated this breach even more. The table below depicts the distribution of various jobs across different caste groups in the Madras Presidency in 1912.

## II. ORIGIN OF DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

The Dravidian Movement may be traced back to the late nineteenth century, with the articulation of linguistic identity and self-affirmation for individuals who spoke Dravidian languages and resided in the colonial Madras Presidency in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>2</sup> While speakers of other Dravidian languages were also participants and leaders, the various leaders/groups/publications/campaigns that made up this movement were mostly associated with Tamil.<sup>3</sup> From the 1920s onwards, the movement and principle of politics were consolidated in the personhood and work of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, also known as Periyar (meaning elder). However, it has always included and continues to include a wide range of political organizations, opinions, and objectives. The phrase "Dravidian Movement" is a useful approach to characterize the underlying language identity construction that has remained at the core of public politics in Tamil Nadu since the late 19th century, as represented by a few major leaders and their organizations/parties.

The South Indian Liberal Federation (often referred to as the Justice Party, after the party's mouthpiece journal called Justice) and the Self-Respect Movement were predominantly represented in earlier versions of the Dravidian Movement, from the 1920s through the 1940s. Both had Periyar as their leader, as well as a

big collection of dynamic philosophers, writers, and orators, many of whom were women. From the 1940s onwards, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Federation)<sup>4</sup>, or the DMK, quickly eclipsed these political groupings. Women's engagement in politics was declining at the time the DMK was founded.

### III. THE DMK AND EMERGENT CULTURAL NATIONALISM

During these years, the DMK built a vast organizational infrastructure. The choice to run for office was a major element in compelling the party to streamline its bureaucracy and refocus its functional priorities from changing attitudes to developing and maintaining political commitment and organizational adherence. During this radical phase, the DMK underwent ideological and organizational changes that were tied to the party's increased support base and occurred while the party was increasing support among lower-caste non-Brahmins. In 1956, the DMK made a formal and public decision to run for office. This decision was made at a party meeting in Madras City, which drew over 50,000 people.<sup>5</sup> The issue of electoral involvement was put to a vote of the assembled rank-and-file members, who overwhelmingly endorsed it.

The "Vanniya double-cross" and events surrounding the three-corner agitation had already paved the way for grassroots support for a transformation from a movement to a political party. The only argument used by the rank and file against voting was that it would lead to the loss of radical ideas. That assumption had been rejected and later questioned by Annadurai and other key officials. Annadurai envisioned a condition where democratic majoritarian politics may be a viable option. In the sense that universal manhood suffrage has enhanced backwards-caste and lower-class political involvement, the political field was rapidly expanding. Furthermore, the ranks of the educated classes were constantly rising. Even though Annadurai was a member of the Dravida Kazhagam, he remained hopeful about the possibility of significant social reform through democratic political competition. It was also briefly suggested that Dravida Nadu may be established by parliamentary means—by gaining a majority in the Assembly and then demanding secession. The political context following 1954 was also influential in moulding public views on election participation. E. V. Ramasami had begun to back the "Kamaraj" Congress, giving the Congress' claims of social change validity. The Congress party had also committed itself to a "socialist" design of society at the 1955 Avadi session. The Congress could (and hence claim) that they, too, are working toward a caste- and class-free society.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, ideological and organizational shifts inside the Congress party affected the political climate in which the DMK operated. However, the DMK's choice to run in the 1957 elections cannot be explained solely by changes within Congress. At the time, the election race appeared to have a chance of succeeding. Those who were hesitant to follow Periyar E. V. Ramasami's lead

in supporting the Congress, as well as those who had previously supported independent candidates of Dravidian leaning, might support the DMK right away. Following the 1952 elections, members of the Legislative Assembly who shared the Dravidian movement's ideological goals founded the Dravida Assembly party. Up until 1954, E. V. Ramasami supported and advised this group of legislators, and it was a major vehicle for the presentation of these beliefs in the Assembly. By 1954, however, the Dravida Parliamentary party had developed major schisms and did not know in which direction to move further. In that year, the Dravida Parliamentary Party announced that it will contest for election under its own name in the future. E. V. Ramasami objected since the DK had already begun secretly supporting the "Kamaraj" Congress. The Dravida Parliamentary party suffered without E. V. Ramasami's supervision and backing, and it was even suggested that members of the Dravida Parliamentary party join Congress and then ally with both E. V. Ramasami and the "Kamaraj" Congress.

The DMK's main political concern was how to deal strategically with the Congress party's strong position. When Kamaraj assessed the political situation in Madras state in the mid-1950s, he must have been pretty optimistic. The Dravidian movement was split, with the DK supporting the "Kamaraj Congress" and the DMK untested in elections. The majority of the DMK's supporters (and leaders) were in their early twenties. (Some politicians even made jokes about the DMK's "rag-tail army of infants.") The only part of the state where Kamaraj did not have support was in the extreme southeastern Muukoolathur regions, where Mutharamalinga Thevar's Forward Bloc ruled, and even there, Congress was gaining ground among ex-Untouchables. Despite the fact that numerous prominent Congress officials were dissatisfied with DK support and openly attacked the DK as communal, Kamaraj kept a firm grip on the party.<sup>7</sup>

E. V. Ramasami resumed his propaganda efforts for radical social transformation after the DK split in 1949. Indeed, several government files from the 1950s express greater concern about his activities than the DMK's. DK's protests remained dramatic and abrasive. E. V. Ramasami continued to play the Ramayana with Ravana as the protagonist and Rama and Sita as "despicable characters."<sup>8</sup> Temple idols were shattered, and a huge number of Untouchables were brought into temples. E. V. Ramasami held numerous public gatherings where he excoriated the Brahmins, Brahminism, and Hindu rituals and religion in front of thousands and thousands of people. DK protests against hotels (or restaurants) that used the term "Brahmin" on external signs were extremely successful. These agitations, as well as those against North Indian businessmen, were joined by the DMK. Consequently, even though a sizable portion of the Dravida Kazhagam had defected to the DMK in the early 1950s, it was unclear whether DK influence would wane.

The DMK could seek to garner, or at least compete for, support from individuals with a Dravidian ideological perspective by forming a political party. Continuing as an interest group allowed E. V. Ramasami's DK, as well as a number of independent candidates, to profit from the Dravidian movement's propaganda

efforts in the election. The DMK's challenges in joining politics were all too clear to rank-and-file political supporters as well as party leaders. In the setting of Madras' complex political conundrums in the 1950s, the choice to contest in elections was made. It was also based on Annadurai's belief in electoral rivalry as a legitimate means of achieving radical movement aims.

#### IV. THE 1957 ELECTION

The DMK did not fare well in the 1957 elections, winning only 15 of the 120 seats up for grabs. It's hard to assess how much E. V. Ramasami's support for the Kamaraj Congress in 1957 aided the Congress. It is true that his support for Congress in 1954 was credited with helping him win a number of by-elections. However, regardless of how much E. V. Ramasami contributed, the Congress' win in the 1957 elections was decisive. Congress significantly strengthened its position in almost all districts between 1952 and 1957.<sup>9</sup>

The actions of Muthuramalinga Thevar's Forward Bloc are likely to blame for the drop in seats won by Congress in Tirunelveli and Ramnad (the only districts where the number of seats decreased). With fourteen members in the Legislative Assembly, the Communist Party of India (CPI) dropped from second to third place (behind the DMK). The Tanjore was where the CPI lost the majority of its seats. The Self-Respect movement has always had a significant base of support among the Adi-Dravida and has done a lot of organizing there. The support of E. V. Ramasami for Congress could have been significant here, if not elsewhere. Although many people were surprised by the Communist Party's loss in the 1957 election, it was linked to the Dravidian movement's success in defining the ideological tone for Madras politics. Many young individuals who were previously drawn to the Communist Party switched to the DMK. E. V. Ramasami and Annadurai both called for economic equality and criticized the Communists for failing to promote atheism and radical social revolution.

By 1957, the Janasakthi, a Communist publication, stated after the election that the DMK had been extremely effective in persuading Tamils, particularly the youth, that it (the DMK) was the only party truly concerned about their welfare.<sup>10</sup> The Communists ran a campaign against "anti-national" interests in the 1957 elections, knowing that they were up against both Congress and the DMK. The DMK, on the other hand, had already begun to establish itself in what would have been a highly lucrative constituency for the Communist party at the time: educated youth. The Communist Party never got a firm foothold in Madras politics after 1957, and class analysis was overshadowed by the conflict's Brahmin-non-Brahmin interpretation. The DMK stated in a Murosoli issue that it would join the Communist Party and change its name to the Dravidian Communist Party if the Communist Party agreed to add Dravidian to its name.

Although it's difficult to say how much support the DMK stole from the Communists, it's evident that the DMK won in 1957 by defeating both independent candidates and the CPI. North and South Arcot (Vanniya Kula Kshatriya strongholds) and the cities

were DMK strongholds in this election. This pattern reflects the DMK's concentrated propaganda operations in the Vanniya areas in 1952. It also represented the DMK's emotional appeal in play, literature, and film; the Dravidian ideology's captivating nature, as well as the emphasis on language, history, and culture, were all vital in mobilising the urban lower middle class. The DMK aimed to create a strong mass base among urban youth, the lower middle classes, and the backward castes.

#### V. LATER ERA OF DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

Later in the Dravidian movement's history, it evolved into a regional political movement. In Tamil Nadu, political groups such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam arose (AIADMK). Dravidian parties are a collection of regional political parties in Tamil Nadu that link their origins and ideas either directly or indirectly to Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's Dravidian movement. Dravidian parties have long been connected with the Dravidian community, and its principal purpose was to promote social equality and abolish North India's dominance over Tamil Nadu's politics and economics (a south Indian state). Although the majority of Dravidian parties are offshoots of Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), there are a few others in Tamil Nadu that are not directly related to DK. Despite this, both the former and latter are called Dravidian parties due to their shared values and objectives.<sup>11</sup>

C. N. Annadurai, who served as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1967 to 1969, formed and led the DMK (as Secretary-General) from 1949 to 1969 until his death on 3 February 1969. In 1967, under the leadership of C. N. Annadurai, the DMK became the first party other than the Indian National Congress to win state-level elections in India with a clear majority on its own. From 1969 until his death on August 7, 2018, M. Karunanidhi was the first President of the DMK, succeeding C. N. Annadurai. He also served as Chief Minister for five non-consecutive periods, two of which the Central government ousted him. He also served as Chief Minister for five non-consecutive periods, two of which the Central government ousted him. M. Karunanidhi's son M. K. Stalin, who served as Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 2009 to 2011, currently leads the DMK.<sup>12</sup> After Karunanidhi's death, Stalin was elected as the party's Executive Leader in 2017 and subsequently unanimously elected as the party's president by the DMK's General Body in 2018. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is a Dravidian political party that follows C. N. Annadurai and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's social-democratic and social justice ideas. It was created in 1949 by C. N. Annadurai as a breakaway section from Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's Dravidar Kazhagam (known as Justice Party till 1944).

M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) launched the AIADMK as a breakaway wing of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) on October 17, 1972 (DMK). J. Jayalalithaa, the AIADMK's leader from 1989 to 5 December 2016, served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on six occasions. The party has received majority

votes in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly seven times, making it the state's most successful political party. Until her death in 2016, J. Jayalalitha was known as the "Mother of AIADMK" and was extremely popular among Tamils.

## VI. MUTHURAMALINGA THEVAR AND DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

The Mudukulathur conflict dates back to the early 1950s.<sup>13</sup> People of oppressed castes had begun to challenge the 'Thevars' – the honorific term used to describe those of the three castes that made up the collective category of 'Mukkulathur,' literally meaning 'three castes,' and comprising the Maravar, Kallar, and Agamudaiyar castes – whose power had been unchallenged until now. The Maravar Mukkulathur caste was the leading Mukkulathur caste in Mudukulathur. From the early twentieth century forward, this group and its leader, Muthuramalinga Thevar, had uncontrolled authority over land and hence were at the pinnacle of society's economic and socio-political pyramid. Under the British administration, Non-Thevar castes gained access to education and work, including other Non-Brahmin, Non-Dalits such as the Nadars, and Dalit castes such as the Pallars.<sup>14</sup> It was further affected by post-independence India's electoral politics. Nadars and Dalits joined the Congress party in the 1950s, the Nadars through their fellow cast member and Congress leader Kamaraj, and the Pallars through the Depressed Classes Youth League.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, despite their tremendous socioeconomic influence, the Thevars had limited access to education and jobs. At the same time, they continued to call for their decriminalization, despite the fact that they were still listed as castes in the British Criminal Tribes Act.<sup>16</sup>

Muthuramalinga Thevar became the Tamil Nadu leader of the All India Forward Bloc, which had socialist credentials, in the 1950s after affiliating with many significant political factions in the state, including the Congress and Dravidian organizations. This was once an offshoot of the Congress, but following India's independence, it became an independent party. None of the other organizations, he claimed, backed the cause of 'his people,' referring to the Thevars.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1950s, caste confrontations between the Nadars and Pallars on one hand and the Thevars on the other were common and were exacerbated by Congress expanding their political base and votes in subsequent elections.

In 1957, a local government agency in the area convened a meeting to address caste violence in the area. This conference was attended by Mr Immanuel Gnanasekaran, an educated young man and Pallar caste leader, as well as Muthuramalinga Thevar (or Thevar for short) and Nadar caste delegates. Thevar, on the other hand, believed he was also a Pallar representative. It's vital to note that the Pallars were indeed owned by the Thevars whose property they worked on, according to caste order. Mr Immanuel Gnanasekaran was not allowed to sit in a chair for the entire

meeting, much less sign the peace pact. Individuals from lower castes were not permitted to sit in front of Thevars. Nonetheless, Thevar was irritated by his presence in the chamber, which he interpreted as the Pallars being given an equal seat at the table. He chastised his cast-mates for 'allowing' him to be treated so badly. Mr Immanuel Gnanasekaran was assassinated in public the next day by a bunch of Thevar caste members. Thevars massacred Pallars as a result of this, resulting in even more violence.<sup>18</sup>

Thevars, Pallars, the police, and the Congress government engaged in a complex set of legal, semi-legal, governmental, and illegal proceedings that reflected the complex relationship of subjugation and striving for self-affirmation that existed at the time between the Thevars, Pallars, the police, and the Congress government. K.A. Ravikumar, a Dalit scholar, has meticulously researched this. When the DMK came to power under Anna's leadership, several Thevars were prosecuted for their heinous actions, but they were all cleared and released. Furthermore, the 45th anniversary of Mr Immanuel Gnanasekaran's murder was commemorated in 2002 in the midst of yet another horrible incidence of caste violence in another town, Paramakudi.<sup>19</sup>

The Mudukulathur riots are important in the search for Tamil-Thammai. One of the first acts of the DMK government after taking office was the release of the cruel murderers from the Thevar caste involved in this crime. The Mukkulathur were the backbone of political power for Dravidian parties in the time after the 1950s, according to research on caste dynamics in electoral politics. This trend may be traced back to the 1950s, as the Mukkulathur were once part of the Dravidian Movement's Non-Brahmin, Non-Dalit support base.<sup>20</sup> However, the Mudukulathur episode, its aftermath, and the ongoing veneration of Muthuramalinga Thevar are indications of Dravidian politics' Mukkulathur base.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Muthuramalinga Thevar, also known as Thevar, is revered as a god among Tamil Nadu's Mukkulathur communities, many of whom are Dravidian party members, and his portrait may be found alongside those of Periyar, Anna, and Karunanidhi. The tone and texture of caste relations and violence in post-independence Tamil Nadu were determined by this occurrence and its lingering legacy.

The DMK, together with coalition partners, won its first election in Tamil Nadu in February 1967, and Anna was elected Chief Minister of the state. In December 1968, a terrible massacre of 44 Dalits, predominantly women and children, occurred in Thanjavur's Keezhvenmani village.<sup>22</sup> Multiple sources immediately after and since have well documented this episode. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that this massacre, in which Dalits were burned alive by Thevar landowners, was the culmination of a much longer history of agrarian crisis, the brunt of which was borne disproportionately by Dalits who worked the land in addition to facing everyday caste violence. The episode is recognized as a rallying point for Dalits across the state, as a turning point in the Communist Party of India (Marxist support) for Dalit communities in that district, and as a watershed moment in the kallars' impunity under the newly formed DMK



government.<sup>23</sup> The DMK watched as the Thevar kallars of Keezhvenmani were absolved of their crimes because they were 'gentlemen landowners' who were unlikely to conduct such crimes directly, shortly after those charged in the Mudukulathur massacre were released. This incident is frequently recalled by current leaders and regular members of Tamil Nadu Communist parties as to the turning point in their commitment to Communism, as they no longer saw Dravidian politics as representing Tamil people. It was pivotal in the creation of extreme Communist politics in Tamil Nadu, which believed in taking up arms and was based among the state's agrarian poor.<sup>24</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

Tamil politics is dominated by Dravidian parties, and the state's continued untouchability and caste prejudice is an indictment of their governance. Dalit movements emerged in opposition to Dravidianism and as an alternative, but have been moulded by their political setting. A Dalit-Left partnership could be one way out of the current Dalit political deadlock. Dravidian ideology did not believe that the culturally oppressed would always win or that social transformation will always occur as a result of the system's inherent structural logic. The DMK is no exception when it comes to defending Thevar interests and deploying the police against the Devendrar. Muthuramalinga Thevar played a pivotal role. Muthuramalinga Thevar became the leader of the All India Forward Bloc, a socialist group, in Tamil Nadu in the 1950s, after affiliating with a number of key political factions in the state, including the Congress and Dravidian parties. This was previously an affiliate of the Congress but became an independent party upon India's independence. He asserted that none of the other organizations supported the cause of 'his people,' alluding to the Thevars. Caste clashes between the Nadars and Pallars on the one hand and the Thevars on the other were widespread during the 1950s and were aggravated by the Congress growing their political base and votes in future elections.

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