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# 1991 Tamil Nadu Elections—Issues, Strategies and Performance

R Manivannan

*This paper analyses Tamil Nadu politics through the prism of the 1991 elections against the background of the political tradition of the state, the social dynamics of politics, and people's orientation to political and social change. It is only against such a background that actors and actions can be located and the significance of the vote in the 1991 elections analysed.*

THE meaning of vote in the 1991 elections in Tamil Nadu can be studied only in its relational context; it does not have any absolute significance. A hypothetical question often raised concerns the possible outcome of the elections had Rajiv Gandhi not been assassinated. It should, however, be pointed out that the poll prospect of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-Congress(I) combine appeared good even before the assassination; it was widely felt that the alliance had all the chances of obtaining a clear majority. There were clear indications of the resurgence of populist politics in the state for the first time since the demise of the charismatic AIADMK leader, M G Ramachandran. There was every likelihood of a repeat performance of the 1977 state elections, this time under the leadership of Jayalalitha. However, there was no sign of a wave rising against the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, although popular annoyance at its misrule was undoubtedly becoming clearer as the elections approached. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi simply turned the developing antipathy into an outright rejection of the DMK.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse Tamil Nadu politics through the prism of the 1991 elections in the state against the background of the political tradition of the state, the social dynamics of politics, and people's orientation to political and social change. It is only against this background that actors and actions can be located and the significance of the vote in the 1991 Tamil Nadu elections analysed.

## BACKGROUND

Tamil Nadu politics has undergone three major phases since 1947: the Congress era (1947-67), the rise of Dravidian politics since 1967, and the emergence of populist politics since 1972 as a consequence of the decline in the Dravidian movement. Tamil Nadu politics is now passing through a more authentic transition.

The distinctiveness of the party system during the first two phases may be explained in terms of the social, economic, cultural and linguistic identities of political parties. Traditional, social and economic cleavages meant a sharp polarisation of Tamil society into caste and class formations. The land-

ed class and the upper castes have often formed a loose coalition striving for common political objectives. They constituted the traditional political base of the Congress party. The Dravidian movement, on the other hand, drew its early sustenance from the predominantly poor, lower castes, who emerged as a counterforce to the old order in social, economic as well as cultural-linguistic terms.<sup>1</sup> The growth of the Dravidian movement was, in fact, a response to the growing disillusionment amongst the masses against the prevailing power structure, consisting of the dominant Brahmin elites and the traditional landed class who formed the mainstay of the Congress party.

In addition, the perception that Tamil Nadu had been reduced to the status of a constituency in the new nation-state and that the state had become merely an arena for implementing national politics and programmes rather than an autonomous centre of growth with its own cultural identity gave a boost to the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) movement and later led the rise of DMK party. As Roy argues, "When the impulses for stimulating and activating vital economic and political forces get concentrated at the apex of the system, local and regional communities languish and lose their salience for community living. With the breakdown of local communities, identity referents are shifted to categories such as caste, language, religion and region."<sup>2</sup> The DK and DMK parties at this juncture chose to project issues of language and culture as bulwarks of identity-formation in the political and social dynamics of the state.

The evolution of the party system in Tamil Nadu in 1967 had its roots in the pre-independence reform movement in the erstwhile Madras presidency. In 1944, the Justice Party made common cause with the self-respect movement to form the Dravida Kazhagam (DK). The DK stood for the welfare of non-Brahmins, abolition of casteism and untouchability and advocated social reforms. But it refrained from contesting elections. After 1947, the policy of abstaining from elections and the lack of internal democracy within the DK was repeatedly challenged by C N Annadurai (Anna) and his young supporters. The contradictions within the DK now became unmanageable and its survival as a single

united forum for the Dravidian movement became untenable. Anna soon broke away and founded the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in September 1949.<sup>3</sup>

The first decade after independence witnessed the DMK undergoing a major transition to a more moderate stance. It no longer pursued the goal of a separate, independent Dravidian republic and the first general election of 1951-52 was, in fact, the last occasion of its insistence on the demand for Dravidanadu, when it had promised its support to only those candidates who agreed to support this demand.<sup>4</sup> The developments that took place during this period brought about a great reorientation in the DMK's tactics and strategies. Most importantly, the reorganisation of states on linguistic principles and the rise of non-Brahmin Congress chief minister, K Kamaraj, who replaced C Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) in 1954 were great catalysts in this reorientation. The DMK now turned towards more important issues within the broader framework of Indian union and its underlying federal structure. The language policy and plan allocations made by the union government went a long way in shaping the DMK's political profile.

During this transitional phase, its earlier commitment to a separate Dravidanadu was employed only for propaganda purposes. For practical reasons, the party was ready to enter mainstream politics. In 1956, at the DMK's Trichy convention, a proposal was moved by the DMK leadership that the party should participate in elections. 56,942 delegates voted in favour of it as against 4,203 who opposed it. The Chinese aggression on India in 1962 further reinforced this process. Soon the issue of centre-state relations became the main plank around which the DMK organised its programme of mass mobilisation and political articulation.

In the mean time, the characteristic feud in the Congress had reached a climax in the 'Kamaraj-Rajaji' conflict resulting in the defeat of the Congress party in the corporation elections of 1958. This was followed by the shock victory of the DMK which secured a total of 50 assembly seats in the 1962 state elections and the subsequent shock defeat of the Congress in the Thiruvannamalai bye-election in 1963. These shock electoral verdicts signalled the growing demoralisation

within the Congress party as well as the mood of the people of Tamil Nadu. Kamaraj soon bowed out of the chief minister's office under a plan devised by him—the 'Kamaraj Plan'.

The death of Nehru also gave cause for concern about the impending crisis of party and political leadership in the country. This echoed more deeply in the southern states because leaders from the south took prominent part in the formation of the 'Syndicate' in 1969. Acute shortage of rice and inept handling of the crisis by the Bhaktavatchalam ministry along with anti-Hindi agitation sealed the future of the Congress party in the state. The DMK was now ready to launch its final assault on the Congress. It ultimately succeeded in routing the Congress in the 1967 elections with a convincing plurality of votes. Thus the evolution of the party system since 1967 is linked to historical developments in Tamil Nadu.

As an extension of the DK movement the DMK had sufficient opportunity to build up a well-tuned cadre-based organisational network of local activists. Its indepth organisation ensured that its authority would not be challenged like that of the Congress.<sup>5</sup> Central to this authority was the performance by the leadership of the task of resolving crisis if it developed in the party. However, its earlier differences with Periyar (E V Ramasamy Nayakkar) led DK movement over the issue of electoral participation and the sudden death of Anna shortly after assuming the leadership of the DMK government in 1967 encouraged personality politics. The party was in dire need of a leader capable of carrying the mantle of Dravidian identity and rallying the cadre and the masses around its banner. But shrewdness prevailed over sobriety in the resolution of the leadership crisis. M Karunanidhi emerged as the leader of the party and became the chief minister after outrunning his nearest contender, V R Nedunchezhiyan.

Karunanidhi had, in fact, enjoyed the reputation of being both a trusted lieutenant of C N Annadurai and a brave general during the DMK struggle. However, he was never regarded as a successor to Annadurai both as the leader of DMK party and as the chief minister since he lacked a charismatic personality. There was a persistent need for the party to rely on the populist appeal of M G Ramachandran (MGR), matinee idol of the Tamil masses, who wielded in his own right considerable sway over the masses and served as the dynamo of the propaganda machinery of DMK. M Karunanidhi and MGR were often at loggerheads and when their differences became irreconcilable, the DMK split. MGR, who was then holding the key post of party treasurer, was finally shown the way out by Karunanidhi.

The establishment of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972 with MGR as its leader spelt yet

another transition in Tamil Nadu politics. The transition signified the shift in emphasis from pragmatic politics to the politics of mass idolatry. It must, however, be emphasised that the personality factor did not emerge all of a sudden in state politics after 1972; it coincided with the founding of the DMK in 1949. The thinning of ranks of the party leadership, the decline of political ideology and the erosion of the social base of the Dravidian movement prepared the ground for the rise of a charismatic personality.

The 1967 state elections led to a sharp disjunction between the national and regional parties emanating from their differences on a proper approach to the state's problems. True, there were more than two parties in the state. But the real contest for power was between two parties after the emergence of AIADMK in 1972. In order to appropriate its import, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the regional parties and the Congress(I) after Indira Gandhi assumed power at the centre, on the one hand, and the attitude of the left parties towards regional parties, on the other. The characterisation of the state politics as a multi-party system did not have much meaning until the 1989 state assembly elections.

After its defeat in the 1967 elections, the Congress party in the state was affected by dissidence and the situation worsened further because of the split in the dominant party in 1969.<sup>6</sup> The party lost its élan and appeal after the loss of power and it contested elections as a ritual rather than with any hope of recovering its lost ground. The party also failed electorally at the state, district and panchayat levels. Its traditional power bases were in shambles and its network of grassroots activists were no longer visible in different organisational sectors. Yet the party still retained the support of traditional loyalists who continued to identify themselves with the party. The immediate alternatives before the Congress(I) were either to regain hegemonic status as the leading force in state politics or to align itself with one or the other of the dominant regional parties.

With the erosion of its mass base, and the growing incoherence of its organisational apparatus and the lack of a committed band of cadres, the Congress(I) soon found itself to be a party full of leaders without cadres. It was unable to match the DMK and, later, the AIADMK in enthusing the people and mobilising their support. The DMK and the AIADMK were somewhat evenly matched and accounted for roughly two-thirds of the electorate between them, while the Congress(I) accounted for only a fifth. The choice before the Congress leadership was to recognise the change in the balance of forces and to reconcile itself to securing alignments to aid its continued rule at the centre. However, since 1967, the dynamics of electoral competition and, hence, the

nature of electoral campaigns for the parliamentary elections had changed radically from that for the assembly elections in the non-Congress ruled states.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of a national electorate and the visible decline of the party's base with each parliamentary election made the task of political mobilisation crucial but difficult for the Congress(I) in these states. The strategy of recruiting power structures in the state and entering into electoral alliances became necessary for the Congress(I) to retain its power at the centre. The possibility of adapting to open coalitional politics became real only after the rise of a new leadership in the Congress(I) in 1984. The Congress party under Rajiv Gandhi charted out a strategy of coalitional politics involving a tacit subordination of its long-term objective of returning to power in the state. The party and its leadership were, however, beginning to grasp the implications of the tumultuous transition that awaited the gradual withdrawal of MGR from active political life due to his failing health. The changing political orientation of the masses, especially of the new generation of voters who were far removed from the bitter phase of agitational politics caused no mean anxiety to the new leadership in the Congress(I).

The long illness of MGR and his inability to perform his official functions left the state to be administered largely by the bureaucracy and power brokers in the government. The centre under Rajiv Gandhi did not deem it prudent, both pragmatically and constitutionally, to intervene and put the political process back on even keel. In addition to the possibility of adverse political consequences due to the intervention by the centre, the Congress(I) also took into account the need of MGR's support for the centre's role in Sri Lankan affairs. Besides geo-political and diplomatic considerations, another impelling factor was the centre's recognition of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stemming from the survival instinct of the ruling Congress(I) at the centre and its ally, the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu.<sup>8</sup> The LTTE had earlier enjoyed a favourable equation with the centre because of LTTE chief Velupillai Pirabhakaran's proximity to the former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M G Ramachandran. This equation was borne out during the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord on July 29, 1987 by the manner in which the Indian government sought the approval of the LTTE for the accord. But the Congress(I) at the centre could not help the accord from being affected by political fluctuations in the state after the death of MGR, who had managed to sustain public opinion in favour of the accord. The centre's decision in 1988 to confer posthumously the nation's highest civilian award 'Bharat Ratna' on MGR indicated the ruling party's eagerness to neutralise in the state the rising tide of op-

position to the accord and the activities of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. It was also aimed at carving out a larger operational space for the Congress(I) as it was gearing up to contest the next state elections.

During this period of transition, the Congress had maintained a studied silence over its alliance with the dominant splinter of the AIADMK group led by Jayalalitha. The party conducted a window rehearsal to go it alone in the next state election. The state came under an extended spell of president's rule and various populist measures and voter appeasement through enormous tax concessions were carried out meticulously. The Congress high command turned, without further delay, to resolving internal contradictions within the Tamil Nadu Congress and to attending to the long-felt need for revitalisation of the party machinery. The trusted member of the central coterie, G K Moopanar, was soon relieved of his responsibilities at the party headquarters in New Delhi and was given charge of the party leadership in Tamil Nadu. These window-dressings and the populist budget that was presented in 1988 soon after the imposition of president's rule in the state and the mass contact sought to be established by Rajiv Gandhi through his frequent visits to Tamil Nadu could not remove one major stumbling block to the electoral success of the Congress(I), i.e., the role of the centre in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

It is useful to note here the failure of the Congress(I) and the AIADMK splinter led by Jayalalitha to arrive at an electoral understanding. The differences between the two revolved around the traditional 'MGR Formula'<sup>9</sup> over the sharing of seats in the assembly and parliamentary elections. Differences on this count remained irreconcilable because of the lack of personal equation between the state Congress leadership and Jayalalitha. The ground realities seemed favourable for the Congress(I) and, therefore, it chose to enter the electoral arena alone for the first time after 1967 in what turned out to be a crucial four-cornered contest.

The DMK, on the other hand, had carefully been keeping alive and fuelling the anti-accord sentiment in the state. The DMK president, M Karunanidhi, observed a widely publicised fast in February 1988 to protest against the centre's handling of the ethnic situation in Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup> The party was seemingly gaining a new hold in the state by exploiting the people's sympathy for the Tamils in Sri Lanka and was even prepared to fight elections in this count. The opposition parties mainly the Janata Dal, Telugu Desam and the BJP had joined the DMK in challenging the basis of the accord and its effect on the future of Tamils in the island nation.

It was against this background that the 1989 elections for the state assembly were

fought in Tamil Nadu. During the long years of its hibernation the DMK party was unable to match the charismatic appeal of the AIADMK leader, M G Ramachandran. The DMK's role as opposition was restricted to protest politics. The enigma of personality outwitted pragmatic politics. It was only during the middle of the 1980s that the DMK began to acquire relevance as an alternative to AIADMK. This was due to the worsening ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the huge influx of Tamil refugees into the state. After the death of MGR, the silent disapproval of the people at the centre's handling of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka and rising ethnic sentiments helped the DMK to sway the voters in its favour in the 1989 state elections. The split in the AIADMK after MGR's death and the subsequent confusion over the issue of succession were, of course, also contributory factors.

The DMK was soon to experience the discomfort stemming from the electoral arithmetic of the 1989 state elections which gave it only a thin vote, but an absolute majority of seats. The successive unifications of splinter groups in the AIADMK and its later reorganisation into a single political unit under the leadership of Jayalalitha, the restoration of the 'MGR formula' as a ground for the Congress(I)-AIADMK alliance and the remarkable success of the alliance in the November 1989 general elections further added to the worries of the DMK.<sup>11</sup> The urge for survival gripped the DMK government because of the formation of a minority National Front government at the centre. This development gave rise to a parallel fear psychosis in the DMK government (an ally of the National Front) in Tamil Nadu. The urge to survive sparked off a series of personal battles substituting political conflicts. The DMK soon began to squander its mandate to govern in its anxiety to retain power. The cult of personality became inseparable from politics.

Needless to say the survival instinct of the DMK government was sharpened by the LTTE factor in Tamil Nadu. After the withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka and during the renewed combat operations conducted by the Sri Lankan army in the north and east, the LTTE needed some respite to recoup its fighting morale after a long arduous stand against the IPKF. Intrusion and the establishment of bases in the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu became less difficult with a friendly administration in saddle in the state which also happened to be the ally of the National Front government at the centre. These bases became fully operational as they began to accommodate both the retreating cadres in the face of renewed ground attack by the Sri Lankan army (duly backed by air cover) and as a launching pad for the LTTE's assaults. The naval blockade imposed by the Sri Lankan authorities in the north and east of Sri Lanka seas forced the LTTE's military and intelligence wings to

move and spread in easily accessible coastal parts of Tamil Nadu. These bases were soon converted into fresh pipelines for the two-way flow of arms and ammunitions and the supply of essential commodities including petrol, crude oil and other consumer goods.

After evading the Coast Guards the LTTE virtually found no resistance within the Indian territory not only because of its fire power and supremacy in any duel with the police in the state but also because of the hospitable environment. The police in the coastal districts was terror-stricken, but no adequate support from the state administration was forthcoming, nor did it do anything to boost the morale of the police either. But what disturbed the state government was the emergence of the LTTE's writ in few towns and villages in coastal Tamil Nadu facing the north of Sri Lanka; the abduction of Indian fishermen, and the killing of 13 Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) cadres in Madras city. The National Front government hesitantly intervened to ask the DMK government to take serious note of the implications of the growing LTTE role and movement in the state. But it was too late for the DMK government to retrieve the situation because it had already conceded too much liberty to the LTTE outfit in Tamil Nadu. The rebellion in LTTE prison camps further highlighted the apathy of the DMK administration.

The DMK after long hibernation found itself out of tune with its professed ability to provide an able and effective administration. It continued to carry on the populist mantle of the earlier AIADMK government and had no option but to rely on populist policies and programmes for its own survival. The new initiatives it took did not trickle down effectively either. Both the DMK government and party were becoming increasingly lax in mass contact. The DMK as a strong cadre-based organisation became extremely vulnerable to the withering away of its earlier network. The party organisation and power structure came to be identified with loyalists both inside and outside the government. Thus the party organisation, as the main lever of political mobilisation, became severely undermined after its return to power in February 1989. There also emerged a new power centre from the backstage in the meteoric rise of K Stalin, son of M Karunanidhi. This was a tumultuous transition for the party, senior leaders as well as for its traditional cadres. The approval for succession was sought in the 'Salem Conference' of the party and the discontented nod that was expressed was considered as a democratic sanction. Thus the leadership crisis was resolved by keeping it in the family, a tradition that was considered alien to the Dravidian movement.

The politics of vandalism had also gone beyond the ritual of rigging in elections; the transition from settling personal, factional and inter-party feuds to connivance in

vendetta to settle scores (for example, the March 28, 1989 incident in the assembly and the black flag episode in Vellore) is too stark to go unnoticed. The DMK, on its return to power, had found to its dismay that it could no longer launch political initiatives about which it had boasted two decades ago. The National Front government's announcement of implementing the operational recommendations of Mandal Commission helped revive the sagging morale of the DMK. However, it was not enough to ensure the survival of the NF government at the centre and its ally, DMK, in Tamil Nadu. The political exhaustion of the DMK and the inevitability of Jayalalitha's rise in the state politics combined to reduce the politics of Tamil Nadu into a zero-sum game of power.

#### WOMEN METAPHOR

One of the political issues raised by the Dravidian movement was the status of women and culture in Tamil society. It was men who alone had fought political battles in Tamil society and tradition had been fought by the menfolk. The Dravidian movement had once promised to build a radical society in which social hierarchy would be less oppressive, the relationship between men and women would reflect equality. The DMK, as an extension of the Dravida Kazhagam (DK), had at one time emphasised the need to enhance the dignity and self-respect of women. There were, however, obstacles to carrying out this radical agenda. The traditional view of men, women and their relationship in Tamil society accorded respect to women only within the bounds of the family.<sup>12</sup> This in itself was a major obstacle. On top of this, the DMK, almost an all-male party, consists of cadres who consider themselves warriors fighting political battles. It has been difficult for them to reconcile themselves to the emergence of Jayalalitha as a new woman cast in the mould of Tamil poet Bharati and more particularly as a political successor to the mantle of the charismatic leader like MGR. Since his reluctant retirement from Tamil cinema, MGR's projection of the mother metaphor began to blur and due to his age and debilitating illness he was losing his hold on the womenfolk. One of his well-conceived strategies was to introduce Jayalalitha into politics as the propaganda secretary of the party in 1982, the year of 'Bharati Centenary Year' celebrations. The 'new woman' in the Bharati tradition had thus arrived on the centre-stage of Tamil Nadu politics.

The DMK party, on the other hand, had tried to project Jayalalitha as a woman without legitimate procreative possibilities and hence a woman gone awry. On the contrary, Jayalalitha had evoked memories of 'sati' and claimed her status as a Tamil mother and projected herself as the symbol of the mother community.<sup>13</sup> The assembly

incident had evoked enormous sympathy in her favour and, in demanding justice, she swiftly portrayed her own humiliation as the humiliation of the entire women community. In the early days after the death of her mentor, she was disrespectful to her senior party colleagues and was averse like her own leader to democratic process within the party. But she never relinquished her feminine qualities. She chose to play the woman symbol as a matter of political convenience in order to survive in the male dominated politics of the state. Through it she hoped to ensure, if possible, the transformation of the environing social world.

While M G Ramachandran's entry into politics had signified a shift in emphasis from pragmatic politics to mass idolatry, Jayalalitha tried to introduce a blend of both in her campaign against the DMK and the government run by it. The lessons of 1989 elections<sup>14</sup> and the new status of her party as the largest opposition in the state legislature presented a good prospect for the future. She exhibited greater political maturity and endurance when she reunited the warring factions and subdued her opponents in the party. She sought to bring about greater cohesion amongst party leaders and cadres.

Jayalalitha represents a generational change in Tamil Nadu politics. She is no doubt younger, more charismatic, ruthless and less bound by conventions of the Dravidian movement. Unlike her mentor, she does not represent the traditional hinterland of rural Tamil Nadu; instead, she inherited it as a bastion of her mentor's heritage. After winning the rural heartland, she began cultivating a new constituency amongst the educated and technocratic middle class in the urban and semi-urban centres. She also gradually built a new support structure around industrialists and the middle class intelligentsia. In all this, her approach to politics and modernisation were indeed very crucial. In all she did, she remained conscious of her mentor but endeavoured to become her own. This is evident from her campaigning during the 1991 elections. Instead of relying on her allies, she herself covered<sup>15</sup> and made a very careful and selective use of the memory of her mentor. The careful scrutiny and selection of candidates, meticulous care in the preparation of campaign materials, such as, posters, publicity literature, media advertisements and production of audio and video tapes and, more importantly, the selection of the party symbol—all these confirm her political maturity and self-confidence.

#### ELECTION ISSUE

Soon after the fall of the National Front government in October 1990 the fears and doubts about the survival of the DMK government were displaced by the certainty of its dismissal. As a consequence, all the issues that had surfaced much earlier to the

actual dismissal of the DMK government and the imposition of the president's rule became alive. The announcement of state elections along with the impending parliamentary elections sharpened these issues. The AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance placed two major issues before the Tamil Nadu electorate.

First, the alliance attributed the increasing lapse in the maintenance of law and order to the growth of LTTE's strength and hold in coastal Tamil Nadu. It charged the LTTE with converting the state into an extended base for its activities and network amongst the anti-social elements, particularly smugglers, in the coastal belt. The main ground on which the dismissal of the DMK government was sought was its indifference to these developments and its tolerance to the menace of 'gun culture' in the state.

Secondly, the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance also submitted to the president a memorandum of corruption charges against the DMK government.<sup>16</sup> The charges included nepotism shown in the granite business; land acquisition in Tanjore district; graphite industry in Sivagangai; appointment and promotion of sympathetic officials to high offices in the state and district administration and the recomposition of the state Public Service Commission (TNPSC) in favour of the ruling DMK party.

The DMK-led alliance, on the other hand, presented two major issues to the Tamil Nadu electorate. First, the DMK chief, M Karunanidhi, criticised the centre for the misuse of Article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss the duly elected state government. He argued that it was only due to the influence of Congress(I)-AIADMK alliance on the Chandrasekhar-led minority BJP government at the centre that his two-year old government was dismissed. It was also pointed out that it was not the DMK but the AIADMK-Congress(I) combine which had earlier provided patronage to the LTTE. Secondly, the DMK party asked for another opportunity to govern so that it can carry on its socio-economic programmes initiated during its brief tenure in power.

But how did the electorate, to whom contending political groups appealed for support, react and respond?<sup>17</sup> On the question of the dismissal of the DMK government, the electorate was nearly evenly divided in its opinion—44 per cent as against 46 per cent of the sample found the dismissal justifiable. Nearly 61 per cent of the respondents attributed the dismissal of the DMK government to the Jayalalitha-Congress(I) pressure on the Chandrasekhar-led minority government at the centre. The reason why a large number of the respondents considered the dismissal as unjustified is due, perhaps, to the fact that the DMK was able to generate sympathy in the peoples' mind in the wake of its dismissal from power. The party still retained the support of the minorities (particularly the

Muslims), backward castes and the scheduled castes. While these groups did not actively support the DMK, they remained sympathetic to the DMK and the National Front coalition. The Mandal factor and the fall of NF government had the effect of reinforcing the traditional base of the DMK. However, this sympathy could not have been translated into votes because of the growing tide of Jayalalitha's popularity and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. These two factors rendered inconsequential caste, class and religion in the voters' decision.

In the opinion of only 29 per cent of the respondents was the nexus between DMK-LTTE the most important reason for the dismissal of the DMK government. And yet, on the whole, the electorate was concerned about the deterioration of law and order in the state. In fact, as high as 47 per cent of respondents considered violence, law and order in the state as the major issue in the elections. The general apathy of the administration towards the intrusion and activities of the LTTE in the state, and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, though had taken place during the president's rule, generated a lot of anger against the DMK and turned into the rejection of the party in the elections.

The Congress(I)-AIADMK emphasis on corruption in the DMK government was not at all unexpected considering the fact that the electorate was already aware of its earlier record during its rule between 1967 and 1975. It is not corruption *per se* but its scale, depth and extent that hold people's attention. It is therefore not surprising that even less than 15 per cent of the respondents considered corruption a major issue, while only 9 per cent of the sample admitted inefficiency as an important issue. However, it had a powerful impact on the electorate. The acute shortage of water in several districts and the failure of the government to implement developmental programmes showed the government in poor light. When the DMK campaigners pleaded for another term to fulfil its earlier promises, they had to bear the brunt of public wrath, especially in places like Vellore, traditionally considered a DMK stronghold. There were loud protests against the failure of the local authorities to maintain regular supply of drinking water. The usual reaction of the people was: "we do not want to hear about your government's [DMK's] achievements, we need water and transport".<sup>18</sup>

In reviewing the policies and performance of the DMK government, 39 per cent of the respondents expressed strong disapproval, while 24 per cent gave their qualified approval. Only 21 per cent restricted largely to the northern parts of Tamil Nadu, the traditional stronghold of DMK, strongly approved the DMK policies and performance, although many in the sample conceded that two years is not adequate to measure the performance of any government. It is interesting

to note that while the moderate approval of the DMK's policies and performance was restricted to northern parts of the state, the disapproval was evenly spread throughout the state.

As was mentioned earlier, the dynamics of electoral competition and hence the nature of the campaign in the parliamentary elections and assembly elections are not always similar, particularly with non-Congress(I) government in saddle.<sup>19</sup> But the 1991 parliamentary elections and assembly elections in Tamil Nadu exhibited a lot of similarity in the perspective of the voters. The crisis of stable governance at the centre and the LTTE had the same impact on the voters. It is interesting that while the Congress(I) evinces a low level of party identification on the part of the electorate, it enjoys the maximum level of support among the national parties mainly due to its relevance for issues that enter the voters' consciousness. There are, of course, other related factors that help Congress in mobilising support. First, there is the amorphous mass of voters who are available for mobilisation by the Congress(I), during every parliamentary election since 1972. Secondly, when the Congress(I) joins either of the regional parties to form an alliance for direct contest, particularly in parliamentary constituencies, it helps the Congress(I) in gaining and retaining power at the centre. The amorphous character of the national electorate, it must be emphasised, increased since the rise of Rajiv Gandhi as the leader of the Congress(I).<sup>20</sup> Thus the convergence, in favour of Congress(I), of electorate with regional party identifications based on regional interests and political alignments based on national interests makes an interesting study on its own.

The nature of the political system and the party system at the national level became the major concern of the electorate in the parliamentary elections. The phenomenon of coalitional politics remained a central element of this concern. Note, for example, that as many as 77 per cent of the respondents observed that coalitional politics cannot be successful due to the prevailing conditions in Indian politics. The experience of 1977, along with developments during 1989-91, had the effect of deepening their suspicion of coalition government and served to strengthen their observation. The rest of the respondents felt that the coalitional experiment must be encouraged only as a prelude to the major transition in Indian politics, i.e., towards a more genuine representational process required of a federal polity. It is interesting to note that these respondents clearly identify themselves with the national opposition. The Congress(I) has been pursuing a dual strategy in regard to the growth of coalitional politics as a natural process in a situation of a multi-party competition. These revolve around its strategies to prevent, first of all, such a development leading to

an alternative of coalitional system taking place and, secondly, the projection of itself as a bastion of stability as a counter-strategy to the coalitional politics. The impact of this strategy can be directly traced in the opinion of the electorate. Despite a low level of party identification, as many as 53 per cent of the respondents consider the Congress(I) as the single party that can provide a stable government at the centre.

What do the respondents think of the BJP as an independent contestant for power at the centre as well as a strong force reflecting a transition in the political system and the party system at the national level. It is interesting to note that 28 per cent indicate strong approval of BJP's entry as an independent contestant rather than as a member of any coalition, while 34 per cent disapprove it. Interestingly, the criterion of both approval and disapproval stemmed from a common perception: its socio-religious identity. Those who considered the BJP only in political terms have also referred to its socio-religious policies, in particular to the party's professed commitment to construct a temple on the disputed site. One of the respondents said that the construction of temple is only a symbolic assertion of the majority. Therefore, in a game of numbers on which democracy rests, the role attribution to BJP remains essentially political. However, difference on this point show because of the differential pattern of party identification amongst the electorate. Interestingly, the party identification of BJP amongst the electorate has been the highest among the national parties. But this was basically a social recognition of a political party whose socio-religious policies with personal and emotional appeal, such as religion, facilitate collective social action. Note, for example, that as high a figure as 66 per cent of the respondents objected to the construction of temple on the disputed site. However, the Ayodhya crisis managed to divide the electorate. This was particularly notable in Kanyakumari district where communal tensions have prevailed in recent years. The consolidation of Christian votes in the state in favour of Congress(I) and the Muslims in favour of Janata Dal-led National Front coalition has largely been attributed to the religious sentiments aroused by the BJP through its campaign for the construction of temple in Ayodhya.

The National Front government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations had broadly generated a positively inclined electorate in Tamil Nadu. The state, along with other southern states, had clearly taken a lead in the area of protective discrimination<sup>21</sup> by reserving a high percentage of positions in both the educational and employment sectors of the government. The rise and growth of social consciousness among the backward classes in the late 19th century and, in fact, the rise of DK movement in the middle of this



century can be attributed to its commitment to do away with the oppressive caste hierarchy in society. Despite the decline of the movement since the 1960s, its early social ideology struck a deep root in the psyche of the people in Tamil Nadu. The backward classes and other deprived castes were consciously cultivated by the DK, and later by the DMK, against the dominant landed castes and elite Brahmin community which constituted as the traditional political base of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu.

The DMK party has also been able to increase its hold and influence on the lower and backward castes since its rise to power in 1967. The ground realities therefore had remained receptive to the Mandal Commission recommendations with an adequate mass response being generated at the political level. However, the effect had not travelled beyond the appreciation of a social policy and its potency in contributing towards a transition in the social order at the national level. This was due mainly to the crisis of instability at the centre that had choked political articulation of the backwards and could be on its course again with the help of an explosive social initiative. About 45 per cent of the respondents supported the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. It is interesting to note that 33 per cent out of the total of 29 respondents who demanded moderation in the implementation of the recommendations belonged to forward castes. The influence on the electorate of the Mandal Commission had further declined due to the emergent crisis of instability at the centre. Though its motive had remained suspect in the electorate's mind, the failure of the National Front government to give effect to the mandate of the people and its role in contributing to the crisis of instability, had acquired significance. Thus the squandering of another mandate by the opposition since 1977 and the communal stance of the BJP helped the Congress(I) to gain more support from the electorate in Tamil Nadu.

#### PERFORMANCE OF PARTIES

We now turn to a brief review of the electoral performance of the political parties in order to provide meaning to the study. The AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance won all the 39 Lok Sabha seats and bagged 224 of the 232 seats in the assembly representing a stunning 97 per cent success rate.<sup>22</sup> The DMK-led alliance had managed to secure only six seats in the assembly and drew a blank in the parliamentary elections. The DMK had a narrow success in a solitary constituency when M Karunanidhi won by a small margin of 890 votes in Harbour constituency in Madras city, the traditional stronghold of the DMK. It was from here that the DMK president had won the 1989 assembly elections with a comfortable margin of 31,991 votes. The DMK allies—the CPI, the

CPI(M) and the Janata Dal—had won a seat each in the new assembly. The splinter group, the Anna Puratchi Thalaivar Tamizhaga Munnetra Kazhagam (APTMTK), that broke away from the AIADMK before the elections, won two seats.<sup>23</sup> The DMK had tacitly committed its earlier influence in Srivilliputhur constituency in favour of an independent candidate, R Thamarakkani, despite its pronounced preference for its ally, the CPI. However, the success of the two candidates belonging to the splinter group from the AIADMK may have been due largely to their influence which they cultivated during their tenure in office, consolidation of political base and a successful exploitation of the traditional socio-economic background.

The solitary success of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) through its important leader, S Ramachandran in Panruti constituency, can also be attributed to his independent political status and base than his party's influence (the party had fielded candidates for all the 234 assembly constituencies and failed to win except in one). The role and relevance of PMK, a caste-based political party, may be appreciated in the context of the electoral strategy pursued by the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance and the DMK-NF combine respectively. This party functions as a caste based organisation representing the interests of the Vanniyar community concentrated largely in the so-called Vanniyar belt consisting of the North Arcot, South Arcot, Chengai Anna, Salem, and Dharmapuri districts and a few pockets in Trichy district as well. Its spread is particularly concentrated in the northern parts of the state which has also been the traditional stronghold of the DMK party. The emergence of PMK meant cutting into the electoral base of the DMK. In fact, the Congress(I)'s earlier sanction of PMK's violent struggles and protest demonstrations during the presidential rule in the state in 1988 and the PMK's persistent confrontation with the DMK government since February 1989 were all aimed at drawing away the Vanniyar vote from the DMK. The PMK did finally succeed in creating a wedge in the traditional stronghold of DMK. The pre-election survey indicated that the 2 per cent of the respondents who moved away from DMK to PMK belong to Vanniyar community.

However, this party's performance in the elections was far below to its earlier expectation. The assassination factor and the superior electoral strategy pursued by the AIADMK-Congress(I) had clearly outwitted the caste and community plank of this party. But it was the DMK, however, which was the loser. The PMK had polled impressively in Dharmapuri, Mangalore (SC), Sholinghur, Bhuvanagiri and Anaicut. It also emerged as a major divider of DMK vote in these assembly constituencies. In fact, the party found itself in the second place in Kattumannarkoil (SC), Taramanga-

lam, Edapadi, Andimadam, Jayankondam, Harur (SC), Omalur, Vriddhachalam, Mudukulathur, Pennagaram and Mettur. Also, it managed to push the DMK, in particular, in five constituencies and its allies in the rest of six. However, the case of Bargur was a matter of political strategy for the DMK party. The AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance, on the other hand, adopted a shrewd electoral strategy against the PMK. Their first task was to consolidate votes of the other castes against the PMK and secondly, to recover the traditional loyalty of a section of Vanniyars to MGR. The pro-Congress(I) leaning of the rural population had become crucial and further gained ground as a result of assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. However, the urban voters belonging to Vanniyar community were not swayed by the party's caste appeal and mostly voted on the basis of their individual party preference and traditional party orientation.

The margin of AIADMK-Congress(I) victory have been more than impressive and, in a large number of assembly constituencies, the lead was well over 40,000 votes. In as many as 196 assembly constituencies, the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance polled more than half of the valid votes. This proportion was more than 60 per cent in 55 constituencies.<sup>24</sup> The preference of the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance in the parliamentary elections was not restricted only to its complete sweep of all the parliamentary constituencies but its depth was equally staggering. The Nagapattinam (SC) constituency showed the lowest margin of its victory with only 25,716 votes against a formidable candidate, S Selvarasu (CPI). This constituency has also been the traditional stronghold of the communists in the state. Otherwise, in as many as 18 parliamentary constituencies the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance had established a lead of 2,00,000 and more votes (including Tiruchengode with a three lakh and above margin) and the other 20 constituencies were won over with a comfortable margin of a lakh and above.

The sympathy wave may be considered as a crucial factor but the gradual erosion in the electoral base of the DMK party also deserves our attention. The pre-election survey had indicated that 14 per cent of the respondents who had earlier voted for DMK in the 1989 assembly elections, now indicate their preference for the AIADMK. The Congress(I) had also managed to increase its support base by 9 per cent since the last parliamentary elections. The DMK had also lost 3 per cent of the respondents for an open preference. Thus the impact of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination was quite formidable on the elections. The AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance also had a clear edge over its rival in respect of influence on the new and first time voters. They are largely swayed in whatever direction the electoral wind blows and vote with the majority. It is useful to note here that during the period between

January 1989 and November 1991 there was a 4.5 percentage point swing away from the electoral base of the DMK-led front. The AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance during the same period recorded an increase of nearly 5.5 percentage points. In fact, the AIADMK-Congress(I) fortified its position by nearly 3 percentage additional points between November 1989 and June 1991. The DMK-led alliance, on the other hand, suffered a loss of about 4 percentage points.<sup>23</sup> For example, Thanjavur district, a traditional stronghold of the DMK, failed to win even a single seat in the new assembly. In North Arcot district, the DMK votes fell by 2,000 to 17,000 votes in 10 out of 21 assembly constituencies.

Thus, the crisis of instability at the centre and the deteriorating law and order situation in the state, caused by the intrusion and activities of the LTTE, jointly gave rise to a common perspective among the electorate in favour of the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance. The early culmination of a widespread social resentment against the excesses committed by the ruling party members, acts as uncharacteristic as the March 28, 1989 incidents in the assembly stained the image of the DMK party and government. As a result, the phenomenon of Jayalalitha moved from strength to strength and had no occasion to look back. The DMK was then thwarted by political developments taking place on the initiative of Jayalalitha. The DMK, on its return to power after a long period of hibernation, had failed to demonstrate its professed administrative capability and the frequent interference by the party cadres in the governmental functioning became an open knowledge. The DMK government also suffered from the burden of shouldering the populist policies of the earlier AIADMK government led by M G Ramachandran and found it irresistible not to launch its own populist programmes. But the measure of administrative response and the party cadre commitment were not forthcoming. The time had also not been on its side and the surmounting of the crisis of instability at the centre simply inundated it. The social initiatives did not trickle down as anticipated by the DMK-National Front coalition. The state government's policy of introducing cheap liquor provided a political weapon in the hands of Jayalalitha, who turned the disapproval of the large women electorate in the lower and middle income family groups into a vote against the DMK government.

The DMK was aware and remained conscious throughout its brief tenure that it was the problem of Tamils in Sri Lanka that had helped the party to make a comeback after a gap of 13 years. Though its return to power became possible only after the death of M G Ramachandran, the party was keenly aware of its potential in an emotive issue like the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka, into a political issue. However, its objective, could

not be fully articulated. In its zeal for power the party had failed to grasp the full significance of the resourcefulness of a liberation movement as 'Eelam', especially in as receptive and hospitable a socio-linguistic terrain as Tamil Nadu. However, its welcome worn out and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, though politically divisive, changed the political atmosphere in Tamil Nadu with anguish and high emotions. In the electoral battle that subsequently took place tolled the death-knell of the DMK.

### Notes

['Simple Random Sampling' method was used in the field survey that was done during May-June 1991. The survey was carried out in Madras, Madurai, Nagarkoil-Kanyakumari, Sripurumpettur, Thenkasi and Vellore (including its rural segments) constituencies in Tamil Nadu. I am indebted to Ramashray Roy, who with meticulous care went through the manuscript and gave encouraging comments. I wish to thank my colleague Tapan Basu for his valuable comments on the draft. I am also grateful to Susheela Kaushik who very kindly introduced me to 'Election Studies'. I acknowledge with gratitude the co-operation and assistance so courteously given by my friends.]

- 1 Rajaram, R and K Nagaraj (1991), 'A Good Beginning: On the Campaign Trail with M Karunanidhi' *Frontline*, Vol 8, No 11, May 25-June 7.
- 2 Roy, Ramashray (1988), 'Social Diversity, Modernisation and National Integration: A Theoretical Perspective', *Indian Journal of Social Science*, Vol 1, No 3, pp 297-312.
- 3 Venkatesan, V (1991), 'DMK Faces an Identity Crisis', *The Times of India*, July 5.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Kothari, Rajni (1961), 'Party System—Form and Substance in Indian Politics-V', *The Economic Weekly*, June 3.
- 6 Singh, M P (1980), *Split in a Predominant Party: The Indian National Congress in 1969*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.
- 7 Sheth, D L (1989), '1989 Elections: A Wave or a Reprimand?' *Indian Express*, November 19.
- 8 For a detailed discussion on the Tamil Nadu factor, see my earlier booklet on *Shadows of a Long War: Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka*, published by Paritosh Kumar and R Manivannan, Delhi, November 1988, pp 32-37.
- 9 The 'MGR Formula' consists of sharing of two-third of the assembly seats by the AIADMK and the remaining one-third by the Congress(I). In the parliamentary elections, it was established, that the Congress(I) would contest two-third of the seats and the remaining one-third reserved for the AIADMK.
- 10 See, DMK President M Karunanidhi's interview to *Frontline*, March 5-18, 1988, pp 98-101.
- 11 It is also reported that there was a secret deal between the AIADMK and the Congress about the future of DMK government in case the Congress(I) returned to power at the centre.

- 12 Lakshmi, C S (1990), 'Mother, Mother Community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXV, No 42 and 43, October 20-27, pp WS72-WS83.

13 Ibid.

- 14 The scenario of split votes favouring the DMK; the factional politics of the AIADMK; the failure of the AIADMK (Jayalalitha)-Congress(I) to arrive at an electoral accord and the crisis of having to contest on a new election symbol.

- 15 Until the last week before the elections when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated.

- 16 See, *Tughlak*, Tamil Fortnightly, Vol XXII, No 1, January 15, 1991.

- 17 What follows is based on the opinions of the electorate and observations made during the study.

- 18 See, *The Times of India*, May 13, 1991.

- 19 Sheth, D L (1989), '1989 Elections: A Wave or a Reprimand?' *Indian Express*, November 19.

- 20 The confidence of the Congress(I) can be measured in the context of its decision to contest the 1989 assembly elections on its own rather than relying on the strength of splinter AIADMK (Jayalalitha) group after the negotiations for an electoral accord had failed.

- 21 Radhakrishnan, P (1990), 'Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu: 1872-1988', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXV, No 10, March 10, pp 509-20.

- 22 In the Lok Sabha elections the AIADMK won 11 seats and the Congress(I) won 28 seats, thus making a complete sweep of the parliamentary seats in the state. In the assembly elections, the AIADMK won 158 of the 162 seats it contested and the Congress(I) won 60 of the 64 seats it contested. The by-elections for four assembly constituencies was held in August 1991. The DMK managed to secure two seats in Madras city (Harbour and Egmore) and the AIADMK increased its strength in the assembly from 158 to 160 through its success in Kanghyam and Karur constituencies.

- 23 Arantangi and Sattur assembly constituencies represented by its founder-leaders S Thirunavukkarasu and K K S S R Ramachandran.

- 24 Nagaraj, K (1991), 'DMK: Swamped by Sympathy Wave', *Frontline*, Vol 8, No 13, June 22-July 5, pp 121-23.

- 25 Ibid.

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