

Caste, then Class: Redistribution and Representation in the Dravidian Model¹

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Abstract

Dravidian parties believe that changes to the economic structure will not lead to social justice if the upper/dominant castes continue to exclusively possess social capital. To them, and later, to the successive Dravidian party governments, economic justice was not possible without first ensuring social justice. This view was held by the stalwarts of the Dravidian movement such as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar henceforth), the subject of this engagement, and actualised by leaders such as C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, whose electoral politics was a means to empower subaltern groups in Tamil society. We contend that Periyar was the chief aggregator of the ideas put forth by earlier social justice ideologues, and an effective disseminator of the Dravidian political ethos among the masses, making his contribution comprehensive and unique. Through an analysis of the approach of Dravidian party governments towards affirmative action, administrative reform and legislation, and through comparisons of the performance of Tamil Nadu in terms of development indicators with other states, we reveal the profound influence of Periyarist thinking on the Dravidian movement and State praxis. The quest of the Dravidian movement for social justice did not just focus on class inequalities but on caste inequalities, which it saw as a propagator of class inequalities.

Keywords

Caste, Class, Dravidian Model, Tamil Nadu, Periyar, Welfare

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¹We borrow the phrase Dravidian Model from Kalaiyaran and Vijayabaskar (2021) in which, model signifies the functioning of a system wherein multiple variables be social, political or governance interact towards delivering systemic outcomes. They contend that mobilisation against caste inequality can yield both dignity and development.

Introduction

Analyses of the impact of prominent social activists tend to be delimited by the specific issues—caste and race inequality, gender discrimination, communalism—they fought. This issue-centric approach is illuminating *per se*, but can benefit immensely from examining movements in their entirety, i.e. recognising the multidimensional assaults on the prevailing social order. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar henceforth) as a social activist contributed to strengthening the social justice agenda in Tamil Nadu in a way that merits wider analysis incorporating the hitherto under-studied aspects of his activism. His radically reformist activism was firmly focused on recognition-redistribution-representation, the staples of any justice movement, but studies of his contribution have not paid sufficient attention to the economic component of the social justice gestalt: redistribution. The South Indian state of Tamil Nadu is known for the Dravidian Movement that married progressive affirmative action policy with a relentless struggle for greater autonomy for states within India's federal framework and, increasingly, it is recognised for its ability to democratise economic growth. This success entails not only redistributing the benefits of economic growth, but also pre-distribution of opportunities and resources that enable people to participate in the growth process.

Existing literature on Tamil Nadu pertaining to the scope of the article can be classified into two categories. One is of literature, including Ramaswamy S. (1997), Geetha V. & Rajadurai S.V. (1998), Subramanian N. (1999), Pandian M.S.S. (2007) Manoharan K.R. (2017), who elaborated and critically examined the role of prominent activists including Periyar. Later, they examined the role Dravidian parties played in changing social relations within 'caste society'. They highlighted the activism against systematic and graded discrimination emerging from caste as a lived practice, and the possibilities and limits of their approaches. Pandian, Ramaswamy, Subramanian and Manoharan differed in their evaluation of the potential and outcomes of the Dravidian-Tamil subaltern construct. While Subramanian contended that the movement could contain ethnic conflicts between seemingly hostile groups, he noted a differential impact on caste groups based on their relative ritual status and agility. Pandian traced the genealogy and possible futures of the non-Brahmin construct and Periyar's contributions. Ramaswamy typologised the different kinds of activists ranging from U.V. Swaminatha Iyer to C. Rajagopalachari and their contribution to political developments in Tamil Nadu. Geetha and Rajadurai discussed the contributions of anti-caste leaders from Iyothee Thass to Periyar towards forging non-Brahmin politics. Ramaswamy expressed concerns over Periyar's support for Tamil identity, while Pandian noted, within the non-Brahmin construct, concerns over conflicts between lower castes and the Dalits. Manoharan engaged with the limits of Periyarist understanding and explored the tensions between the universalism and particularism in his anti-caste discourse. However, all of them concurred on the vital role of Periyar in widening the anti-caste political repertoire across communities within the Dravidian-Tamil construct. At this juncture, we contend that Periyar is not necessarily

the figurehead of the Dravidian movement but the aggregator-in-chief of the ideas put forth by activists before him and a guiding light for the generations that followed. The other category of literature including Harriss-White (1996, 2013), Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) discussed the nature and quality of socioeconomic development in Tamil Nadu in the context of the changing political economy of the country and Tamil Nadu in particular. Harriss-White (1996) had argued that government policies and investments induced the formation of agro-industrial capital, which helped the subalterns find mobility. However, the development state induced different outcomes across communities. For instance, there is sub-par representation of Dalits in business sectors (Harriss-White et al., 2013). Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) provide an account of how Tamil Nadu (or the Dravidian Model) makes room for broad-based growth and development across communities, better than the rest of the country. However, they note that populist mobilisation within the State needs to reorient to address emerging complications in the social and economic realms. Though the above-discussed literature discusses the interplay between economic policies and their impact on social justice, it sees Dravidian parties and their policies as the vectors for such discussions. Our article traces the influence of Periyar and his ideas on the Dravidian parties' redistributive policies.

Social empowerment and economic mobility were non-negotiable goals of the Dravidian Movement, which held the clear-eyed understanding in public policy theory and praxis that the latter is impossible to achieve without the former. For instance, in his introduction to the serialised Tamil version of the Communist Manifesto he published in 1931 in his weekly magazine *Kudi Arasu* "Republic", Periyar considered the caste system the single biggest obstacle to communism in the Indian subcontinent. In a public meeting twelve years later, in 1943, he challenged his communist friends to recognise and annihilate the discriminatory caste system which distributes privileges to Brahmins and Shudras according to their status in the caste hierarchy before they aspired to introduce and expand communism. (Ramasamy E.V., 2005)

In other words, changing the economic structure will not have progressive outcomes if the Brahmins (and Banias) continue to wield the levers of social power. This in a nutshell is the worldview of the leaders of the Dravidian movement such as Annadurai and Karunanidhi, who took electoral politics as the route to empower subaltern groups in Tamil society. We present a careful analysis of their pragmatic policy-making approach, which can potentially reveal the profound influence of Periyarist thinking on the praxis that grew around the quest for social justice.

Over the years, it has become clear that, within the ambit of political conflict, struggles for recognition were taking precedence over struggles for redistribution (Fraser, 1997).

It was important not just to deal with class inequalities but deep-rooted caste concerns as well, for the latter disallowed the members of oppressed castes from accessing precious physical, social and cultural capital. Social justice politics, seen through the Periyarist lens, prioritises the critique of caste-based inequalities and Brahminism over economic inequalities.

Affirmative Action as an Effective Means to Redistribution alongside Representation

In his essay ‘New Times in Tamil Nadu’ Pandian (2011) notes that the politics of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [Dravidian (Land) Welfare Association] (DMK henceforth) was built around two principal ideological planks: caste-based social justice and Tamil identity. Such politics emerged as a critique of caste hierarchy and Brahminism, coupled with continuous improvisations in the reservation system for government jobs and seats in educational institutions for the lower castes. Since the 1950s, the communists in Tamil Nadu regularly criticised Periyar, Annadurai, and subsequently the DMK, for stressing on caste and not class. To the communists, it was evident that casteism survived because of class-based rule.

The president of the “Forum of Thought” best articulated the Periyar-led Dravidar Kazhagam’s [Dravidians’ Association] (D.K) disagreement with the communists:

It is unfortunate that communists believe Indian social problems can be solved by economic means. Indian society is a caste society and class conflicts are only secondary. The caste structure is forming a super layer over the new class structure. For example, in the newly established industrial colonies, the scavenger settlements are constructed separately from the rest. So the old caste society is being imposed on an industrial society. The class-minded trade unions, mostly led by communists, do not see this problem because their leadership is dominated by high caste people.²

These ideological underpinnings of Periyar, the DK, and DMK paved the way for some of the boldest and strongest affirmative action reforms seen in India. They sparked a debate that is still heatedly discussed in India. Even as the writers of the Indian Constitution generally agreed that graded and ascriptive inequality needed substantial redressal, they often differed on the methods to do so. Ajantha Subramanian (2019) noted that one of the major points of debate was around the appropriate constitutional language of social differentiation—specifically, whether caste should be accorded legal recognition. She notes that in refusing to accord the individual citizen primacy over the caste collective, opposing the coupling of caste with class criteria, and exceeding the 50 percent ceiling on reservation, Dravidian party governments³ disregarded the liberal norm of formal equality. It can be argued that the sustained resistance of Dravidian party governments against formal equality also led to a shift towards finding a balance between merit and affirmative action. Formal equality did not seem to hold as much importance as redressing historic social injustices. This can be seen in multiple reforms of successive chief ministers; Annadurai, Karunanidhi, MG Ramachandran (MGR), and Jayalalithaa.

²Meeting of the Rationalist Forum and Forum of Thought, Coimbatore, April 1972 as quoted in Charles Ryerson’s *Regionalism and Religion: The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism*.

³In the context of this article, by Dravidian party governments we mean the governments led by the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [All India Anna Dravidian (Land) Welfare Association] (AIADMK).

In 1970, the First Backward Classes Commission, commonly known as the Sattanathan Commission, constituted by the Karunanidhi-led DMK government, reported that the higher classes within the backward castes have been gaining disparate advantages from the quota system. In turn, this was hampering the aspirations of the smaller and more backward classes. In response, the Commission proposed in its report the creation of a separate administrative category for the most backward castes and a fixed quota for them.

In 1971, the reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) increased from 25 to 31 percent and the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs) from 16 to 18 percent. Later, the AIADMK, led by MGR toyed with the idea of reservations based on economic criteria, which the DMK vehemently challenged. The AIADMK was routed in the 1980 parliamentary election. The social justice discourse the DMK popularised, combined with competitive electoral compulsions, led MGR to raise the reservation quota for the OBCs to 50 percent.

In 1989, Karunanidhi returned to power and responded to the agitations by Vanniyars (a lower backward caste group) with a 20 percent reservation within the OBC quota for the most backward castes including denotified communities. In this way, he sought to check the disproportionate influence of a few dominant backward castes (Kalaiyarasan and Manoharan, 2018).

After a Supreme Court directive, the Tamil Nadu government constituted the Ambashankar Backward Classes Commission in 1982 to review the enumeration and classification of ‘socially and educationally backward’ groups. It found that 87 percent of the state population was eligible for reservation, based on which the government further expanded the list of backward classes to include lower-caste converts to Christianity and Islam, bringing the total to 69 percent—the highest in the country.

However, the most significant turning point was Karunanidhi wholeheartedly supporting the Prime Minister V.P. Singh coalition government in implementing the Mandal Commission’s recommendations. The Mandal Commission recommended 27 percent reservation for the OBCs in central government and public sector enterprises, raising the total reserved seats to 49.5 percent. This was immediately challenged in the Supreme Court leading to the landmark *Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India* judgement. Tamil Nadu’s political stance on reservation came through in two key arguments against the 1992 judgment. First, state counsel Siva Subramaniam forcefully argued against the exclusion of a “creamy layer” from the ambit of OBC reservation. He contended that it was “a mere ruse, a trick, to deprive the backward classes of the benefit of reservations.” Second, he said the 50 percent ceiling was arbitrary, especially in states like Tamil Nadu, where the enumerated Backward Caste population was over 80 percent. Subramaniam heralded Tamil Nadu as a model state with its long history of reservation dating back to 1921 and where the quota has steadily grown to 69 percent at the time. (Subramanian, 2019, p. 213). Here one can clearly identify the emphasis on education in the Dravidian Movement as a method to propagate its social justice and economic development goals. This emphasis has roots in a long legacy of innovation in affirmative action, starting with Periyar who set the precedent when he resigned from the Indian National Congress in 1925 after his resolution demanding caste-

based reservation in government institutions was disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress (Pandian, 2007, cited in Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar, 2021).

In 2007, the DMK also provided a 3.5 percent quota each, for Muslims and Christians within the OBC share of 30 percent. In 2009, Karunanidhi introduced the Tamil Nadu Arunthathiyars (Special Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions including Private Educational Institutions and of appointments or posts in the Services under the State within the Reservation for the Scheduled Castes) Act to ensure representation for the most marginalised among the SCs, providing them with a 3 percent sub-quota within the SC quota. In his seminal work, *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty (2020) has argued that redistributive measures have contributed immensely to reduce inequalities, especially caste-based privileges amongst oppressed castes.

Use of State Legislative Assembly and Parliament to Further Social Justice

In an interview on 16 February 1965, a correspondent of *Pravda*, the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, asked Karunanidhi about the goals of the DMK. Karunanidhi responded that the goals were social justice in society, rationalism in culture, socialism in economy, and democracy in politics. The route to achieve these goals, he said, was via the Parliament.⁴

The use of Parliament by the Dravidian chief ministers (Annadurai, Karunanidhi, MGR, Jayalalithaa) resulted in legislations that had social justice and economic justice effects. The DMK government amended the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, to ensure equal shares for women in ancestral property. The party introduced numerous schemes, including the Anjugam Ammaiyar Inter-caste Marriage Assistance Scheme and the Dr Dharmambal Ammaiyar Memorial Widow Remarriage Scheme, as incentives that undermine caste and gender hierarchies (Kalaiyarasan and Vijaybaaskar, 2021).

Karunanidhi's biographer A.S. Paneerselvam (2021) notes that in his first term as chief minister, Karunanidhi emerged as an important interventionist in the state legislature. His interventions on Hindi imposition, police reforms, the budget deficit and the attempt by the Union government to control items listed in the Concurrent List were powerful articulations, especially when demanding the Union to share power. They make their point by delving deep into constitutional provisions and the best practices that make a polity truly federal in character. His speeches provided an idea of social justice beyond caste-based reservation and targeted affirmative action. It was inclusive and implementable. Karunanidhi prioritised social reform over all others in his first stint as Chief Minister. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourer Fair Wages Act, 1969, was enacted to enforce the payment of fair wages to agricultural labourers in the Cauvery delta region and penalise landowners who exploited labourers. Another Act in the same year would ensure all tenancy rights and interests were maintained in the revenue records for the first time. In the following year, the Tamil Nadu Land

⁴Quoted from <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/m-karunanidhi-dravidian-sun-sets>

Reforms (Reduction of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1970, was passed to reduce disparities in landholdings by reducing the land ceiling limit from 30 standard acres to 15 standard acres (one acre is 0.4 hectare). These reforms matured in the form of a specialist university to develop agriculture, learning and research in the agricultural sciences through the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University Act, 1971. Seen together, his agrarian and land-related laws were the first bundle of administrative measures that targeted the development of rural Tamil Nadu.

In response to multiple demands from small construction worker unions in Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of work) Act was passed in 1982. This Act defined manual worker and principal employer and covered different groups of informal workers within the construction industry. It stipulated that workers, contractors, and subcontractors must register with the board. Today, there are 34 welfare boards in the state covering a range of occupations.

In 1994, the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Construction Workers) Welfare Scheme came into force. The benefits of this scheme include accident compensation, natural death compensation to survivors, funeral assistance, marriage assistance, maternity assistance, crèches for children of construction workers, education assistance for two children per family, assistance to buy spectacles and pension.

Welfare schemes and legislations such as these legally empowered many workers in the unorganised sector. Tamil Nadu also has welfare boards for transgenders and the differently-abled, a step towards creating a social security net for the extremely marginalised. Annika Wetlesen (2010) defines legal empowerment as a process in which the law is applied to increase the control people have over their lives and their extent of political participation. With regard to labor rights, collective organisation of the working poor increased opportunities for decent work, and social protection are key elements in the legal empowerment process.

Administrative Reform

Although detailed analyses of every administrative reform and its impact on the Dravidian movement are beyond this article's scope, a few reforms, though by no means exhaustive, stick out to illustrate the influence of Periyarist thinking on the praxis of the Dravidian movement. According to Ryerson (1988), Periyar held up a system of ethics that blended a 'scientific socialism' with a non-theistic interpretation of Tamil literary texts. The tincture of romantic nationalism that EVR brought to his message of radical socialism gave that socialism much of its appeal. This socialism carried forward by Dravidian governments was well reflected in administrative reforms that worked equally to improve the dignity of people, as much as their life chances. These reforms focused on ensuring the rights of oppressed castes and, overall, had a long-term programmatic commitment and generally sought to address caste-based biases as a method of economic empowerment.

Paneerselvam (2021), noted that the administrative reforms initiated by Karunanidhi had a profound impact and vastly improved the delivery capabilities of the state. One of the earlier and more critical reforms included the 1973 Administrative

Reforms Commission. It recommended that the existing part-time village officers be replaced by regular, transferable public servants who should form part of the revenue hierarchy. Based on this recommendation, in 1975, Karunanidhi promulgated an ordinance that abolished the system of hereditary village Karnam and headmen and replaced them with village officers recruited by the Tamil Nadu State Public Service Commission. This reform had implications from an economic and a social front. A hereditary village headman system allowed for the concentration of resources to few families and thereby a lot of the social capital.

During this tenure, Karunanidhi banned hand-pulled rickshaws and introduced cycle rickshaws instead, insisting that no man is beneath another to stand and pull a rickshaw. Tamil Nadu is the first state in post-independence India to introduce free mid-day meals for school children. The scheme, however, has its antecedents in the Justice Party rule in the Madras Presidency during the colonial period. The scheme acquired new life again under the chief ministership of K. Kamaraj, through the slogan of 'combating classroom hunger' in the 1950s (Rajivan, 2006). The programme retained children in schools and effectively reduced dropouts, especially those from a lower-caste and class background, and was further expanded from 1982 onwards by MGR.

The Dravidian model was not just to create social justice and welfare institutions but also for rapid industrialisation and economic growth. Paneerselvam again notes that accelerated industrial growth happened only with Karunanidhi's creation of the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) in 1971. SIPCOT was responsible for establishing industrial estates across the state and creating land banks that proved very useful when the Indian economy opened up in 1991. In 1999, Karunanidhi was also responsible for the IT boom in the state with the setting up the first TIDEL park,⁵ an information technology (IT) park in Chennai.

To improve social harmony and reduce caste-based discrimination, Karunanidhi introduced Samathuvapuram (Equality Village), a housing scheme where a village of 100 houses was to be created. Forty of these homes would be for Dalits, twenty-five for Backward Castes, twenty-five for Most Backward castes, and ten for other communities. Each village was to have one community hall and one burial ground. By 2001, over 145 Samathuvapurams were created across Tamil Nadu. Notably, despite such efforts, the scheme could not be scaled up owing to restive social tensions.

Tamil Nadu for long has been lauded to have one of the best healthcare systems in the country. Kalaiyaran and Vijaybaskar (2021) argue that the state's better outcomes in health and nutrition have been made possible by ensuring relatively more equitable access to public health services and ensuring better utilisation. Considering the mushrooming of large private hospitals across the state, the DMK government also launched the 'Kalaigarnar Kaapitu Thittam', also known as Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme, which provides health insurance. It was aimed at families living below the poverty line for life-saving treatment of up to Rs. 1 lakh.

⁵TIDEL is a joint venture between TIDCO (Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation) and ELCOT (Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu).

Given the DMK's experience of implementing a slew of social welfare policies and the relative success rates achieved in the state, the party's tryst with its variant of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme underlines the Periyarist praxis within their policymaking approach.

In March 2021, the President of the DMK made an electoral promise in their manifesto that every woman in the state would get Rs. 1000 as monthly income support. On the face of it, the monthly transfer constitutes over 13 percent of the average monthly spending of a rural household⁶ in the state (2017). More importantly, the monthly income support was conceived as 'urimai thogai' or a rightful entitlement, not a gift transfer or homemakers' wage. Also, women are addressed as 'kudumba thalaivi' or family heads and not 'illathu arasi'- homemakers. Such a conception radically expands the number of households covered and foregrounds the dignity of the beneficiaries. In his address on 7 March, M.K. Stalin promised that households that hold commodity ration cards are eligible to receive the monthly transfer. As of January 2020, there are 20,231,394 ration cards in Tamil Nadu of which 49,472 (0.2 percent) are non-commodity cards.⁷ The former Chief Economic Adviser of India, Arvind Subramanian, wrote in the Economic Survey of India, 2016, that a Universal Basic Income promotes many of a society's basic values that respect all individuals as free and equal. It promotes liberty because it is anti-paternalistic and opens up the possibility of flexibility in labour markets. It promotes equality by reducing poverty and efficiency by reducing waste in government transfers. The universal nature of the scheme makes it a lot more effective with lower leakages, as argued by scholars.⁸ The idea of this scheme is to guarantee a decent minimum income to women, which otherwise fails all tenets of justice.

Policy in Comparative Perspective

Dreze and Sen (2013) attribute the relative success of Tamil Nadu on various development indicators to a long history of collective action, which in turn resulted in political mobilisation amongst the oppressed castes. A policy paper published by the Centre of Government and Delivery of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change compared the economic trajectory of two Indian states: Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Titled 'Inclusive growth in Tamil Nadu: The role of political leadership and governance', the evidence-based paper pointed out that in 1960–61 these two states were not so different across several measures related to development. It further states that in 1960, the rural poverty rate in Tamil Nadu checked in at just below 70 percent, much higher than Uttar Pradesh's rate of 48 percent. However, after nearly five decades of Dravidian party regimes, often severely criticised, the situation is vastly different. According to the study, 'By the year 2005, Tamil Nadu's per capita income outpaced

⁶See p. 38 of https://www.nabard.org/auth/writereaddata/tender/1608180417NABARD-Repo-16_Web_P.pdf

⁷See https://cms.tn.gov.in/sites/default/files/documents/foodcp_e_pn_2020_21.pdf

⁸See <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-return-of-targeted-cash-transfers/article26155629.ece>

Uttar Pradesh by 128 per cent—a gap more than twice as big as it was in the early 1960s. And in 2009–10, Tamil Nadu’s rural poverty rate dropped to nearly half that of Uttar Pradesh (21.2 percent versus 39.4 percent), and its urban poverty rate was less than half of Uttar Pradesh’s (12.8 percent versus 31.7 percent)’ (Akileswaran, 2021).

It is even more prudent to compare Tamil Nadu with India’s largest economy, Maharashtra and Gujarat, whose supposed development model led to the rise of Narendra Modi and the BJP. A report published by the NITI AAYOG in association with the United Nations ranked states on where they stood compared to others on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tamil Nadu stands a tied second amongst all states in India in the composite SDG index, while Maharashtra stood at rank 9 and Gujarat at rank 10. Moreover, in SDG 1 (“No Poverty”), Tamil Nadu ranks first in India, whereas Gujarat stood at rank 16 and Maharashtra at rank 17 across all states in India.

In SDG 2, “Zero Hunger”, Tamil Nadu ranks 7 among all states and the highest amongst big states, whereas Gujarat and Maharashtra lie at the bottom of the table. Gujarat ranked 18 and Maharashtra at 20. Ensuring basic amenities and aspiring to provide equal opportunities to all by different Dravidian governments is seen by Tamil Nadu’s performance in SDG 4, “Quality Education”, Tamil Nadu ranked at 5 amongst all states whereas Maharashtra came in at 8 and Gujarat at rank 17 (NITI AAYOG, 2020). Moreover, an analysis by Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021: 19) found that Tamil Nadu has significantly reduced poverty across caste groups. For example, the gains SCs made in the rate of poverty reduction between 1993–94 and 2011–12 in Tamil Nadu is 43.1 percentage points, which are significantly higher than Gujarat at 34.3 percentage points.

If there is something called Periyarist gaze on Dravidian rule or economics, then it is marked by the democratisation of opportunities in a caste society and *then* ensuring basic amenities as entitlements alongside reducing economic disparities. An analysis of the affirmative-action reforms, administrative reforms and legislation are intended to show a Periyarist influence on Dravidian policies, which in turn acknowledges the efforts of the social justice ideologues that Periyar contributed to, furthered and democratised as he transformed the activism into a mass movement. While the leaders of the Dravidian parties’ governments have attributed their policies to Periyar, we do not fixate on a narrow causal argument between Periyar and Dravidian policies of social justice and economic development or a firm attribution of such outcomes to a favourable environment that the region enjoyed. While one could argue that states like Uttar Pradesh have fared so poorly because of factors other than lacking a Periyar-esque figure, we draw from Pandian (2007, p. 7) to argue that a deterministic approach based on just contexts and landscapes would trivialise people’s efforts. It would end with us disengaging from the praxis and movements led by activists and reformers like Periyar in Tamil Nadu.

Communism, Communists and Brahmins

In late 1931, Periyar was on a year-long tour of Europe, with an essential stop at the Soviet Union. Periyar contrasted his time in the Soviet Union with his time in Britain, France, Greece, and Germany. He noted that although they were “democratic nations, Russia alone has no unemployment. There are a few beggars, but all old or infirm, and the state supports them”. (Venkatachalapathy, 2017). The impact of the Soviet Union on Periyar was significant. Upon his return, Periyar asked the members of his self-respect movement to desist from using honorifics and urged them to use “Thozhar” or comrade instead. According to Venkatachalapathy (2017), Periyar popularised this usage, and the communists adopted it later.

Moreover, his fascination with communism and the Soviet Union extended to naming newborn children (a popular custom in Tamil Nadu where elders are asked to name children) “Russia” or “Moscow” or “Lenin”. However, Periyar soon began to see that communism or even an approach towards eradicating material/asset-based inequalities wouldn’t work because of caste’s primacy in Indian society. Contrasting with the Soviet Union, he said, “Since the Western countries did not have caste, they had to wage a class war before communism could be reached. Here, owing to the presence of caste, it is necessary to wage a caste war before achieving communism” (Periyar, 2009: 1647, as cited in Manoharan, 2019).

Later, Periyar gave numerous reasons for ending his friendship with the communists. He charged them, among other treacheries, with “secret attempts to convert Dravida Kazhagam branches into Communist Party units.” Yet the fundamental reason was the Brahmin preponderance in the Tamil Communist leadership and what the Kazhagam would have us believe to be its logical consequence, Tamil Communist subservience to North Indian domination (Harrison, 2015). Periyar asserted, “In a country where there are no common rights, communism would only strengthen those who have been enjoying greater rights,” adding that abolishing the privilege of Brahmins and the upper castes would result in going half the way towards the communist ideal (Periyar, 2009: 1647, as cited in Manoharan, 2019).

The communists could not mount a sustained critique on Periyar’s thoughts beyond the notion that he didn’t extend his seemingly material conception of religion to see the relationship between the methods of production and social, cultural and political values (Sivaraman, 2013, 109). The breakaway of the Dravidian movement from communism also stemmed from the critique that the communist movement in Tamil Nadu only looked upon the need for material equality and class relations. It failed to look into the themes of memory, identity, myths and superstitions, something that the Justice Party, DK and its offshoots have addressed to varying extents. Sivaraman herself notes that the communists did not adopt a clear policy on Periyar based on study or analysis. (Sivaraman, 2013, p. 116). The welfare state brought forth by successive Dravidian governments since 1969 focused on inclusive growth, i.e. social justice coupled with economic development. The Dravidian movement clearly did not just focus on class as an essential factor for mobilisation but focused on caste inequalities as a propagator of class inequalities.

Harrison (2015) reports the following comment by Periyar in an interview on December 14, 1952. “The Communists have their office at a foreign place, Bombay or Delhi, and they are just as interested in exploiting our country as any of the other foreign-controlled parties. Besides, most of the Communists leaders are Brahman. Ramamurthi is a ‘pucca Brahman’.” What Periyar meant by Brahman / Brahmin got clearer with time and the politics propagated by his lieutenants Annadurai and Karunanidhi.

Even B.R. Ambedkar shared Periyar’s scepticism of the Indian communists. To quote from Volume 17 of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Writing and Speeches, “The communist party was originally in the hands of some Brahmin boys-Dange and others. They have been trying to win over the Maratha community and the Scheduled castes. But they have made no headway in Maharashtra. Why? Because they are mostly a bunch of Brahmin boys. The Russians made a great mistake in entrusting the communist movement in India to them. Either the Russians didn’t want communism in India-they wanted only drummer boys-or they didn’t understand”.⁹ Both Periyar and Ambedkar shared a similar scepticism of Indian communists while also believing that communism did indeed have a role in bringing about social justice in India. The sustained criticism continued to be that communism didn’t consider caste inequalities because the communist leadership consisted of proletariat upper-caste men.

The Dalit Critique of the Dravidian Movement

There has been sustained criticism from scholars such as Hugo Gorringer (2011a), Rajangam S (2011), Karthikeyan Damodaran (2018), among others, that caste continues to be at the centre of politics in Tamil Nadu not despite but because of the Dravidian parties (Damodaran et al., 2012) with the claim that the Non-Brahmin movement was precisely that, a non-brahmin movement, not an “anti-brahmin” movement. Having wrested control from the Brahmins, the intermediate castes monopolised power in return (Damodaran, 2012).

Subramanian (2002, p. 126) argued that Dravidian parties ‘increased political participation, aided the representation of the emergent strata, enriched civic life, and thus strengthened pluralist democracy’. Social pluralism, he explains, refers to the proliferation of autonomous associational forms that are tied neither to the state nor to each other. However, as Gorringer (2011b) noted, this social pluralism has not been inclusive of Dalit aspirations and that there has been a “Dravidian” read lower castes hegemony over Tamil politics. This critique goes back to the early political days of the Dravidian Movement, where, by stressing language rather than class, the DMK (and later the AIADMK) attempted to create an imagined community of Tamils and avoid acting upon its politically sensitive election pledges on land reform, dowry and caste.

Sustained violence against Dalits by lower-caste groups like the Vanniyars and Thevars have cast a shadow over Dravidian notions of justice. However, anti-caste leaders like Thol Thirumavalavan of the VCK have pointed out that the Dravidian movement and the Panthers movement fostered economic, educational, developmental and political assertions by the Dalits that have led to intermediate castes falling back

⁹BAWS Vol-17, Part-1, Page 406, Dr B.R Ambedkar

on brute caste pride as a weapon to defend their dominant status.¹⁰ Thirumavalavan has gone so far as to say that he views Periyar in the same light as Ambedkar (Gorringer, 2017, p. 38). The case of Devendra Kula Vellalars,¹¹ hitherto called the ‘Pallars’, have also engaged with Periyar in their claims to recognition and redistribution, albeit differently from that of the fellow Dalit caste groups like Paraiyars. Gross (2017, pp. 176, 292, 381) argued that while Periyar’s influence on contemporary Devendra politics was mixed, prominent leaders invoked his ideology and regarded him to be the pioneer of the anti-caste and subaltern movement. Not discounting the brutalities that members of the lower castes inflict on the Dalits, she argues, the relative economic decline of the lower and land-owning castes has (vis-à-vis the Dalits, who now have access to education and resources), unsettled the previously dominant caste groups. The social relations that were once well-defined are now complicated and in flux. At the same time, Manoharan (2019: 289) highlighted the politics of containment versus that of appeasement practised by the DMK and the AIADMK respectively in their approach towards Thevars and their attempts towards establishing dominance.

To borrow Nancy Fraser’s framework (Fraser et al., 2004), we should think about welfare politics not only in terms of who gets what but also who gets to interpret people’s needs. The politics and legacy of Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement have allowed for political claims-making in terms of group identity. However, Periyarist thought on Self-Respect and Dignity has also vested in people a claim to be full partners in social interactions.

Karthik K.R.V. and Ajaz Ashraf (2019) show the relative upward economic mobility that SCs in Tamil Nadu have had thanks to multiple socialist welfare policies compared to states like Uttar Pradesh. In analysing the Intergroup Average Annual Per Capita Income in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu by looking at the Indian Human Development Survey 2011–12, they found that the average per capita income of SCs in Uttar Pradesh was Rs. 11,762/-, while in Tamil Nadu, it was Rs. 28,109/-. The Dravidian movement succeeded in aggregating a range of social groups marked by class, caste, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity by establishing a chain of equivalence across these groups and communicating a political logic of difference vis-à-vis elite nationalism and caste elites (Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar, 2021, p. 43). Amit Ahuja (2019) noted that multiple socio-cultural movements have led to the broad basing and mainstreaming of Dalit grievances in states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra as against states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, it is worth noting that the quality of participation of Dalits through electoral politics has continued to remain limited, with the number of ministerial positions given to Dalits low and the portfolios assigned to Dalits often not prominent. At the same time, the aspirations of Dalits has been marked by periods of considerable support like the sub-categorised quotas for lower Dalits or apathetic silences and worse use of state machinery to reinforce discrimination and dominance.

¹⁰See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Dalits-targeted-for-their-upward-economic-mobility-leaders/article15617026.ece>

¹¹Devendra Kula Vellalar is a group of castes formerly referred to as Pallars. They were a part of the list of Scheduled Castes that were predominantly agricultural workers in southern Tamil Nadu. After years of assertion to be referred to as the Devendra Kula Vellalar that signifies their ‘sons of soil’ and ‘primal agricultural clan’ status as against Pallars—a word that has become a discriminatory slur in common Tamil parlance.

Notwithstanding the chequered impact of the Dravidian policies on social and economic fronts within the state, the current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, MK Stalin, announced an All India Federation for Social Justice¹² in his Republic Day address in 2022. The idea hints at the importance of political pragmatism in finding allies in the quest for social and economic justice in the larger Indian context, a practice that Periyar consciously undertook, which explains his camaraderie with multiple activists fighting for various causes. Periyar had vociferously defended independent Dalit politics. He believed that separate social-political organisations for untouchable castes were necessary and was opposed to intermediate castes seeking a position of pride within the *system of Brahminism* (Manoharan, 2020: 8). Similarly, Manoharan also argued that Periyar did not want to assume leadership of the Dalits and sought to be a comrade in their fight for self-empowerment with the idea of fighting not for the equality of castes but the removal of caste as an identity-marker, an Ambedkarite approach. Such an understanding becomes a lot more compelling today when the state witnesses restive conflicts between lower castes or Dalits. As a response, tall anti-caste leaders like Thol Thirumavalavan of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi continue to locate answers in the Periyarist thought and approach.

In sum, notwithstanding the Dravidian parties' mixed success, the Periyarist gaze at social justice is a continuous instinctual-subalternising mechanism that foregrounds social justice as a precursor to economic justice in the quest for making an equitable society. While one of the markers of social justice—caste—is being continuously dealt with, questions of gender are gathering momentum with time. The redressal of the concerns raised by women and people from the LGBTQIA+ community, while simultaneously addressing the newer complexities within the caste matrix that complicate class inequalities, will test the limits and possibilities of the sustenance and comprehensiveness of the Dravidian political mobilisation.

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¹²See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tn-cm-stalin-to-launch-all-india-federation-for-social-justice/article38328183.ece>

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