

May 27, 2021

The Fault Lines in Tamil Nadu that the DMK Now Has to Confront

By: Kalaiyarasan A.M. Vijayabaskar

The DMK faces new challenges in expanding social justice alongside economic modernisation: internal fault lines have emerged in the form of cracks in the Dravidian coalition of lower castes and there are external ones such as reduced autonomy for states.

As anticipated, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led alliance has come to power in Tamil Nadu after winning 159 out of the 234 seats in the state assembly. Many within the party had expected it to repeat its 2019 sweep in the Lok Sabha elections. The All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), despite having been in power for a decade and losing its long-time leader J. Jayalalithaa, managed to retain a good share of its vote base.

The AIADMK government was often seen to compromise the interests of the state because of pressure from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with which it had allied. The DMK's election campaign had, therefore, emphasised the loss of the state's dignity and autonomy because of the AIADMK-BJP alliance and promised a return to the Dravidian ethos that had earlier informed the state's development. Apart from welfare, the DMK's election manifesto emphasised reforms in governance of service delivery, and growth across sectors, agriculture in particular.

The DMK's victory has come at a time when Tamil Nadu is faced with a series of challenges. While some are internal, emerging from chinks in the state's relatively better development outcomes and in its political trajectory, others have been aggravated by external challenges such as the shifts in federal relations and the changes in the global accumulation regimes. The state's distinct evolution in fact foregrounds the importance of federal relations in shaping development outcomes in subnational regions. In this essay, we map the challenges lying ahead, taking into account the processes that have accounted for the state's relatively inclusive development path so far.

Tamil Nadu has been able to simultaneously deliver on both growth and development fronts by more effectively negotiating such policy shifts [since the 1990s].

Though there have been subnational differences in development in India for long, they have gained particular traction since the 1990s. Economic reforms initiated in the early 1990s sought to transfer the responsibility of resource mobilisation for growth to state governments, even as liberalisation measures allowed for a greater marketisation of the process of resource allocation. Tamil Nadu is a state that has been able to simultaneously deliver on both growth and development fronts by more effectively negotiating such policy shifts. The political mobilisation of lower castes by the Dravidian movement around a demand for social justice proved to be critical to this process of ensuring a comparatively egalitarian development.

Mobilisation for development

The Dravidian movement since the 1920s had been a populist mobilisation against concentration of economic and social power in caste elites. It built a multi-caste coalition from a heterogeneous group of backward castes and scheduled castes around a Dravidian-Tamil identity. Importantly, this identity was not based on an exclusivist ethnicity or language, but around a demand for social justice and against caste hierarchies. The movement articulated a demand for 'social justice' primarily through equalising opportunities in the modern sector and through broad-basing access to health and education. While Dravidian mobilisation thus built a successful coalition of lower castes, the electoral successes of the movement managed to institutionalise populist development in the state.

Contrary to popular narratives that Tamil Nadu's excessive attention to welfarism has denied the possibility of long-term development, the state has ensured relatively better outcomes in both growth and human development. There is a consensus that education and health policies in India have historically been biased in favour of elites — favouring higher education at the expense of mass education and curative care as against primary and preventive health care. Tamil Nadu bucked this trend through a policy that began with a focus on primary education before making a gradual shift in emphasis towards higher education. In higher education, the state used affirmative action policies to broad-base entry. This was constantly reworked to address differences within backward castes and Dalits to democratise formation of capabilities. Similarly, investments in public health infrastructure, democratisation of the social profile of

health personnel, innovative public drug procurement policies, and policies to retain professionals in the public health system ensured more inclusive access to healthcare. Tamil Nadu reduced out-of-pocket expenditure on health and education of households to one of the lowest in the country. The state had in the early 1970s formed a state planning commission to drive such autonomous interventions.

While Dravidian mobilisation [...] built a successful coalition of lower castes, the electoral successes of the movement managed to institutionalise populist development in the state.

The investments in human development complemented measures to expand the modern sectors. To undermine the caste-based division of labour, the Dravidian political ethos emphasised both expansion and broad-based entry into the modern sectors. This translated into a slew of measures that ensured not only a dynamic manufacturing and service economy, but also a relatively inclusive one. For example, Tamil Nadu has a higher share of lower caste entrepreneurs compared to Maharashtra and Gujarat. In fact, one out of every four Dalit small and medium enterprises (the category employing 20-99 workers) in the country is located in the state.

Further, lower castes have been able to move out of caste-inscribed occupations such as agricultural labour much more than in other states. In the urban areas, the share of wages in organised manufacturing is higher than in other economically dynamic states like Gujarat and Maharashtra. Levels of contractualisation of the work force too are lower. In parallel, political mobilisation and longstanding welfare interventions such as provision of subsidised food through the public distribution system (PDS) have undermined hierarchical labour relations in rural areas and also helped increase the reserve price for labour. This has been aided by the advances made in human capital formation. The relatively higher wages in the state could be offset by access to the better quality of labour inputs for competitive accumulation. In many ways, Tamil Nadu thus serves as a counterpoint to the caste elite-led economism of Gujarat — and now Uttar Pradesh — that negates the need for expanding human capabilities or democratising social relations.

Tamil Nadu is, however, now at a critical juncture. The DMK faces a set of constraints it must overcome in order to sustain or expand substantive democracy through development. Some are internal to the logic of populist mobilisation of a heterogenous set of lower caste groups. But the challenges are critically linked to ongoing changes in federal relations, shifts in pan-Indian political trajectories, and the emerging limits of economic modernisation. Together, these have led to the emergence of fault lines within the Dravidian bloc. While some are intra-caste, many are inter-caste: between Dalits and backward castes and between different backward castes. These differences are, to begin with, tied to issues of uneven access to the modern sectors.

Education and employment

Partly due to the growing privatisation of education and partly due to poor regulation of standards, there is an unevenness in the access to and quality of education in Tamil Nadu. Relatively poor learning outcomes among school children as well as a growing preference for private schools, not only among socio-economic elites but even among marginalised social groups, are visible. Further, rural, lower-income, Dalit girls are more likely to be in government schools compared to other social groups. This segmentation of primary education is further compounded by trends in higher education.

Though the state has managed to ensure that almost 50% of children finishing school can enter tertiary education, the returns to such investments in higher education are uncertain. The poor quality of higher education in several institutions accompanied by declining employment elasticity in both manufacturing and high-end services make it difficult for several sections of lower caste youth (both backward caste and Scheduled Caste) to secure ‘decent’ employment.

It is well recognised that labour market inequities are globally becoming a major source of social inequality. In India, with the rise of premium labour market segments in high-end services, an emerging challenge is access to the English language. Given the emphasis in high-end services on spoken English and soft skills that are now mostly associated with social elites, knowledge of this language has come to mark a new divide. Despite possessing formal technical qualifications, many job-seekers from lower caste households in rural Tamil Nadu lack these skills. In fact, nearly 30% of male graduates from rural areas are under the ‘neither in employment nor in education’ category, suggesting that education does not guarantee quality employment.

In many ways, Tamil Nadu [...] serves as a counterpoint to the caste elite-led economism of Gujarat and now Uttar Pradesh that negates the need for expanding human capabilities or democratising social relations.

This is further compounded by the growing privatisation of university education, technical education in particular. Many from low caste households invest considerable amounts, often funded through loans, to study in private colleges. Tamil Nadu in fact accounts for more

than one-fifth of all educational loans provided in the country by public sector banks. While differences in access to quality education and employment are driven by a nexus of caste, class, and spatial locations; anxieties often find expression in resentment among youth from backward castes in rural areas against the limited but locally visible mobility of segments of Dalits. This translates into a fault line between Dalits and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Second, the segmentation in the labour market due to an inability to acquire English language speaking skills has led to a renewed pride in Tamil identity that is, however, devoid of the anti-caste content of Dravidian-Tamil mobilisations of the past. This has led to another fault line in the axis of political mobilisation.

Dalits and OBCs

In the run up to the elections, Edappadi Palanisamy, the then chief minister, donned a green turban in the numerous elections ads of the AIADMK. The message was clear. EPS, as he was called, was projecting himself as a leader of farmers and as a son of the soil. Hailing from the landed Kongu Vellala Gounder caste, a backward caste, he could easily mobilise his identity by appealing not just to his caste but also to several other backward castes whose traditional land-based livelihoods have been undermined by a relative decline in agrarian incomes in the state. In addition, the AIADMK also wooed the Vanniars, a numerically large backward caste, by instituting a separate quota for them within the ‘Most Backward Classes’ (MBCs) quota. While this strategy helped the AIADMK retain most of its seats in the western belt of the state where the Kongu Vellalas are numerically strong, the extent to which this paved the way for consolidation of backward castes in northern Tamil Nadu where Vanniars are numerous is not clear. However, the relative stagnation in agricultural incomes and the far from satisfactory entry into non-agrarian sectors may be working towards a firming of caste identities among the backward castes, often in opposition to the Dalits.

Dravidian versus Tamil

An interesting outcome in the recent election is the increase in the vote share of the Tamil nationalist Naam Tamizhar Katchi (NTK), to 6% from 1.1% in the last elections in 2016. Though its antecedents can be traced to the 1950s, the NTK became visible following the genocide of Sri Lankan Tamils in 2009 when Seeman, the leader of NTK, accused the DMK of failing to prevent the killings. He attributed this failure to the dominance of Telugu leaders in the Dravidian movement. The NTK foregrounds ‘Tamilness’ by appeals to a ‘pure Tamil’ identity through caste lineage and attributes slippages in development to what it sees as Dravidian rule dominated by ‘non-Tamils’. Importantly, it mobilises around a strong appeal to return to ‘Tamil’ nativist traditions in domains like agriculture, traditional crafts, and cultural practices.

While we do not have concrete data, observations on social media and interactions with political observers in the state suggest that the NTK draws support substantially from backward caste youth in small towns and rural areas who often fail to gain a permanent foothold in the modern economy despite obtaining a university education. Given the NTK’s appeal to revive traditional farming and water conservation systems, it appears to attract youth in particular from castes that depended on land-based livelihoods in the past as it invokes a nostalgia for the rural and preservation of ‘Tamil’ traditions. This also feeds into another divide within the Dravidian coalition of lower castes because of the emergence of political elites among the lower castes who are engaged in of rent-seeking through resource extraction.

Resource extraction, Tamil assertion and environmentalism

Though not unique to the state, the emergence of cronyism in rent-seeking sectors opens new axes of economic inequalities. The control over extractive rent-thick sectors like mining and real estate, largely by virtue of proximity to political elites, drives this source of inequality. Resentment against such resource extraction and attendant environmental damage is often combined with a growing concern about similar damage caused by use of modern production technologies. At times, this is also tied to a politics embedded in Tamil nativism and a call to revive such traditions. This has spawned a slew of organic farming movements and efforts to preserve traditional seed varieties. But if Dravidian social justice is tied to inclusive modernisation, this nativist ecological turn cannot be easily addressed within the current development paradigm. While the turn to organic farming clearly contributes to the politics of biodiversity and ecology, it is disquietingly silent on the implications for social justice.

Importantly, this call for a return to a pristine ecological past is also silent on the gender and caste relations within which such ‘pasts’ are embedded. It runs the risk of being easily incorporated into the Hindu right wing’s attempts to constitute a Hindu-Tamil identity. The extent to which Dravidian political labour can circumvent this fusion of Tamil right-wing assertion and the Hindu right-wing mobilisation remains to be seen.

Religiosity and atheism

Another important fault line emerges from the increasing explicit religiosity amongst the lower castes. Although the DMK is committed to secularism and has an ideological position against Vedic Hinduism that upholds caste hierarchies, the party has not adequately responded so far to this shift amongst the lower castes. The BJP has, therefore, sought to attack the DMK as being ‘anti-Hindu’. In the past, the Dravidian movement had skilfully addressed the gap between an anti-Vedic Hindu ideological position and the religiosity of the subaltern public by working closely with spiritual leaders, particularly those associated with the Tamil Saivite tradition. This tradition responded to modernity by evolving an egalitarian faith that questioned caste hierarchies. The well-known political collaboration between Periyar and the Saivite leader Kundrakudi Adigal to uphold an anti-caste Tamil identity is an apt illustration. Though a few radical groups roped in such leaders in the recent elections to counter the BJP’s appeal to a Hindu-Tamil identity, the DMK thus far has not been able to adequately re-orient its ideological offence against Brahminical Hinduism.

In the election manifesto, the DMK promised a number of initiatives to improve the governance of temples and to link this to its vision of social justice by appointing priests from lower castes. It also promises to set up an international centre for Vallalar, a 19th century saint who professed the equality of all beings. It, however, remains to be seen how the party can combine its anti-caste vision with an appeal to the neo-religiosity among its constituent castes.

Apart from the threat of pan-Indian majoritarian mobilisation, the internal fault lines and challenges are compounded by, and in many ways reinforced by, a set of factors external to the subnational domain.

Centralisation of power and state autonomy

Given the limits posed by a pan-Indian polity and judiciary, there are constraints on the extent to which rights-based interventions, particularly concerning affirmative action, can be carried out on a subnational terrain. The verdict by the Supreme Court to have a common entrance test for medical colleges that bypasses state-specific reservation criteria, and its ruling that state governments can no longer decide which castes can be classified as backward, are typical examples of such limitations.

|| The DMK’s election manifesto promises a lot in terms of reviving growth, but the extent to which such growth can be socially inclusive is a matter of concern.

Through a series of decisions, the central government too has sought to wrest control over several policy domains. The New Education Policy, for example, seeks to undermine the power of state governments to frame education policies. The introduction of GST constrains the resource mobilisation efforts of state governments. Changes to labour laws weaken the ability to sustain the relative gains labour enjoys in Tamil Nadu. Recent policies on agricultural marketing and the centralised approach taken to tackle the pandemic are other such instances. Further, the growing asymmetry in federal relations in terms of both resource transfers as well as powers to chart autonomous development pathways not only reduces access to resources to invest in human development, but more importantly, constrains the ability of state governments to respond to popular demands.

In other words, there is less space for subnational governments to respond to localised demands and mobilisations. This is compounded by the limits posed by the logic of economic modernisation, particularly within the current global accumulation regime.

Limits to inclusive modernisation

Tamil Nadu, despite having the largest share of its workforce in manufacturing among most states (19.5% in 2017-18, compared with the all-India average of 11.7%) and a sustained economic dynamism, has not been able to increase the share of employment in manufacturing. Nor, as we indicated earlier, has it been able to absorb the increasing number of educated youth among the lower castes on ‘decent’ terms. Recent interpretations of modern development suggest that this has in fact a longer history. Even in early-modern Europe — the template for theories of economic modernisation — surplus populations dismembered from land could never be entirely transformed into necessary labour for capital.

The DMK’s election manifesto promises a lot in terms of reviving growth. But the extent to which such growth can be socially inclusive is a matter of concern, especially so in a state where social justice is conceived primarily in terms of expanding opportunities in the expanding modern sectors. On a similar note, greater integration with global markets in particular generates further constraints. In line with global trends, the share of wages in value added in manufacturing in Tamil Nadu has been falling (though it is still higher than other states). Labour markets are increasingly insecure. Though the level of contractualisation is lower in the state, the need to attract private investments is likely to constrain the possibility of offering secure employment, or for that matter the possibility of

introducing affirmative action policies in the private sector. While this feeds into the Tamil nationalist call for reviving ‘traditional practices’, the exhaustion of the possibilities of social inclusion by expanding the terrain of the modern limits the scope of policy intervention.

As a result, the politics of redistribution that sustained the Dravidian bloc is increasingly becoming difficult. Welfarist interventions are targeted at specific groups and are not always meant to transform the social relations. This has fed into unevenness across the lower caste groups.

Coming together

The accumulated fault lines were evident in the assembly elections, which saw the coming together of three fundamentalisms to challenge the ethos of Dravidian mobilisation: the religious fundamentalism of the BJP; the language fundamentalism of the Tamil nationalists, epitomised by the NTK; and the caste fundamentalism of sections of backward caste groups who are anxious about Dalit mobility.

|| [T]he politics of redistribution that sustained the Dravidian bloc is becoming increasingly difficult.

The BJP seeks to build a Hinduised Tamil identity. They are aided by caste-specific assertions by some of the lower castes who valorise their caste identity by invoking a mythical glorious past. The BJP's moderate electoral success — albeit in coalition with the AIADMK — and the gains in vote share by the NTK, are suggestive of the working of the three strands of attacks against Dravidian mobilisation.

The DMK's victory, therefore, comes at a critical juncture in Tamil Nadu's development trajectory. The retaining of power by the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and the Left Front in Kerala, however, opens up a possibility of reorienting centre-state relations through collaborative claims for restoring the policy autonomy of subnational governments. Demands for greater state rights have to coalesce with efforts to address the emerging fault lines within the Dravidian coalition in order to sustain and expand the state's developmental ethos.