THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

August 4, 2026

The Boy-Man Who Beat the Dravidian Model

By: V. Geetha

Vijay's carefully constructed boy-man image made him a point of intersection for different kinds of voter discontents in Tamil Nadu, explaining why the DMK lost in the state.

One of the highlights of the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu that brought the Tamizhaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) to power in May 2026 was the role played by children. Several parents and siblings took to social media to marvel in hushed tones about how the children in their homes pushed them to vote for C. Joseph Vijay.

The nature of the chief minister's appeal to children is intriguing.

> Vijay became the man of the hour, not only because of his charismatic appeal but also because he represented the shock and possibility of the contingent moment in history.

A recent study by A. Divya suggests that this is because the actor-turned-political leader presents himself as a perpetual boy in and through carefully choreographed songs. His dance movements, puppet-like, comic, and impish, Divya argues, spark recognition and adoration in his young audience. It seems to me that this image of Vijay as a boy-man is central to the politics of charisma that I would like to understand and interrogate. I do not only mean that it is the reason for his charisma, but also that it spoke to a range of citizen anxieties, fears, and concerns.

Why did a mix of persons vote for Vijay and the TVK? And equally why did the incumbent Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) lost the election, in spite of a reasonably good governance record? As I see it, Vijay became a point of intersection of various pathways of discontent and angst. He became the man of the hour, not only because of his charismatic appeal, but also because he represented the shock and possibility of the contingent moment in history.

The Victory

The TVK benefited from a mix of analysis and strategy, which helped compensate for the absence of a party organisation.

To be sure, the party could rely on members of Vijay's fan associations. More than 100 of them had won in local body polls held in newly created districts in 2021. Yet, they and indeed the fan groups as a whole had to be marshalled into purposive action. The strategist played a role in ensuring that they did, based on a road map that had been prepared.

The political strategist who relies on surveys and trends to gauge the public mood (not public opinion) has played an important role in redefining the sphere of electoral politics. This is consequential and is likely to redefine the meaning of the political, as such. Data, algorithms, 'social trends' that may be gleaned from these, and the premium that social media grants to sensational political claims and disclaimers-all these are subject to analysis. Local grievances are heeded as well, and every such grievance is a fulcrum around which many things can turn. A leader can be called in to address it or it could be used to catapult a lesser-known personality into the limelight. A grievance could be useful to discredit an opponent, or to promise voters that things can only get better.

> In this call-and-response model of politics, the voters become an object of messaging and are seldom accounted for on their own terms.

In addition, the TVK hired so-called influencers who literally flooded the internet with messaging that ensured that Vijay was always in focus. Vijay had prepared for his current 'role' for a while. Over the last decade, he had made sure he was present at events that were deemed politically sensitive, such as 17-year-old Anita's death by suicide (a promising Dalit student, she took her life when she did not secure the required marks in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test [NEET] to make it to medical school). His dramatic appearance was recalled during the election campaign and made a part of an election script that he followed carefully, and this was amplified on social media.

The marshalling of social media is a staple of political communication today. This is part of an entire series of changes that have taken place in the realm of government and governance. An expert, whether a consultant or a non-governmental organisation (NGO), specialising in health or education or finance is called in by governments. He or she comes with a set of people, many of whom have postgraduate degrees and more, and who view policy as the new vanguard of social change. They, in good faith, undertake research and analysis to further efficient governance.

Meanwhile, this latter is aligned to tangible outcomes, which are to be listed in one or the other of the various apps that government personnel, especially in health or education, have to use. Even as social media calibrates popularity, these experts calibrate rule, substituting for the public sphere with aggregates, algorithms, and incessant visual and aural messaging.

In this call-and-response model of politics, voters become objects of messaging and are seldom accounted for on their own terms. Nor are they situated within broader contexts that shape electoral choices. These contexts, and the responses of voters, are what we must now turn to.

Constituencies

Among those that voted the TVK to office were women in their mid-20s to late 30s. This age cohort turned to Vijay for two reasons. He unequivocally assured them during his campaign that he would end the drug menace that threatens their homes and children, and would take firm steps to put down what has been viewed as growing sexual violence against women.

These women seem to have heard him out in good faith, and found his disarming boy-man image comforting. He is that malleable lad next door, always willing to lend a hand, either with household work, or a problem that has surfaced in the neighbourhood. He is not entirely 'good', in that he conveys a sense of reckless mischief, but he is always around when trouble visits. It is as if he is the son, brother, or lover who will not let his family down. He appears an anomaly in a world where men are either absent, being away at work elsewhere, or not available to their families as bread-winners.

It is useful to remember that in so-called progressive Tamil Nadu, nearly one-fourth of households are headed by women. In the face of an economic and social reality that leaves women vulnerable to debt, intermittent poverty, and an overload of productive and reproductive labour, the winsome young man who promised to mitigate their anxiety and suffering clearly won the day.

On the other hand, not all women have responded to the boy-man image-the DMK won in several constituencies where women voters outnumbered men. Given that all governments have focused on welfare that answered to women's needs since J. Jayalalithaa's stint as chief minister, and that the DMK's contribution to this welfare was central to the party's pre-election propaganda, this was to be expected. In this sense, the female vote for Vijay and his party is not decisive. Yet public articulations of wonder, admiration, and support by women have been unabashed and gushing.

> Aspiration sits with allure, and the struggle to get ahead is laced with expressive angst, social mockery, and economic longing.

Then there are the first-time voters, who grew into adulthood through the traumatic Covid-19 years. To them, Vijay stands for possibility. His iconic presence and manner of communication through simple, easy-to-grasp one-liners speak to a generation that has very little use for the past, or have much interest in it.

Teachers in government and government-aided higher secondary schools and colleges-with whom I have interacted through a series of workshops convened by the government of Tamil Nadu-have called attention to the listlessness that pervades classrooms now. They have also noted the sense of precarity that their wards experience, whether this has to do with the economic status of their households, or their hopes for the future. The young, they noted, have no use for political or social homilies, or for talk about the usefulness of education and the importance of working one's way to a steady job.

They wish to 'fix' things, either through shortcuts that get them where they want to go, or through looking out for themselves-this clearly is another sort of *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance). To them, the Dravidian model of growth and the social philosophy that ostensibly underlies it (productivity plus social justice plus welfare)-put forth as the singular achievement of the DMK, prior to and during the election campaigns-appears quaint, and those who espouse it seem tendentious.

For the present is all about movement, mixed-up cultures and languages, and getting on and finding one's way into a consumer economy. Aspiration sits with allure, and the struggle to get ahead is laced with expressive angst, social mockery, and economic longing.

Ideology

The cohort of the young that voted for Vijay includes a large number of Dalits (the TVK won in a majority of the reserved constituencies). There are more Dalit ministers in his cabinet than in earlier ones, and Dalits have been appointed to posts in government departments and institutions as well. Many of these appointees are in their 30s and 40s. Their profiles tells us something about the curious fate of ideology in these times.

A recent appointee is Loyola Mani, a young man in his 30s who has been a political agitator for long, and who joined the TVK on the eve of the election. His career is illustrative of a generation of young Dalits who come to the city to study because of government scholarships and the reservation policy.They have no cultural capital or kin to fall back on, and no prospects for decent work once they are finished with studying. Troubled by the patent injustice of class and caste, some among them gravitate towards agitational politics. They either join a Dalit political group, or a leftist students' union, or try their luck with a party that finds them useful.

> The TVK's politics is thus a pastiche in the making, and segments are likely to be taken off, or added, based on their popularity on social media.

This is what Mani did. He did time with the Viduthalai Siruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and was a prominent face in the campaign that the party undertook against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. Before that, he had gained prominence during a protest sit-in that demanded that the Tamil Nadu and Indian governments ask for an enquiry into war crimes in Sri Lanka. Here, Mani had drawn on the familiar trope of Tamil nationalism that folds caste and other identities into a putative Tamil cause. Dalits have long been supporters of such causes, viewing the idea of Tamilness as a secular guarantee that might enable them challenge caste-based differences and eventually the social order itself.

Mani did not get to finish his college education. Meanwhile, agitational life had shaped his sense of the political-as a space where spectacle meets ideology, and rhetoric defines outcomes. He chose to become a 'proper' politician to manage his generally precarious existence, as well as to retain some sense of what might be done about matters that troubled him.

Mani left the VCK and joined the TVK. The latter had programmed its politics drawing on the familiar 'Dravidian' template, except that there was a difference. The TVK's version of Dravidianism does not suffer from the weight of historical memory, sustained by tales of past victories and martyrdoms for the Dravidian cause. Nor does the party need to frame it in terms of ideological triumphalism-the DMK has done this consistently. For a new party, ideology is less a matter of passion or even rhetoric. Rather, it is a given, and a convenient point of departure.

The TVK's vision, such as it is, is governed by a template that is fine-tuned, based on algorithmic logic. Currently, this template remains 'Dravidian', but it could as well be of another kind-depending on context and conjuncture. The TVK's politics is thus a pastiche in the making, and segments are likely to be taken off, or added, based on their popularity on social media. It is a form that approximates the condition of what has been called the 'precariat', as different from the 'proletariat'.

This is a fair description of men like Loyola Mani. A segmented, cobbled-together politics speaks to his and others' precarity in complex ways, which we need to unpack and understand.

Politics

It is not that all Dalit young persons who take to a political life or who are sensitive to injustice choose this path. There are others of Mani's generation who have chosen otherwise. They write, have become lawyers and teachers, and found their way into government service or the information technology (IT) sector. Some among them are part of what the sociologist Sharmila Rege, known for her work on Dalit feminist standpoint theory, called "Dalit counter-publics".

Given that these latter shape our sense of active Dalit youth, we do not quite countenance or know men like Mani. Yet, their lives and choices are as much constitutive of Dalit politics, pointing, as they do, to what a young, energetic Dalit political person might yet want. The boy-man who leads the TVK communicates a carefully constructed political innocence. For all those who are frustrated and

discontented with the existing political world, especially subaltern political actors, this becomes a point of focus, as they strive to make the most of this "innocence".

> All these communities have been affected by Dalit assertion and by Dalit disengagement from the caste-class stranglehold of rural life.

As for Bahujan youth, from the so-called backward and most backward castes, there are class subalterns among them who are as beset by economic precarity as the Dalits.

Agrarian stagnation has affected peasant castes such as the Vanniyars, especially those with little leverage within their social and economic contexts. Equally, it has shaped the political choices of the working and lower middle classes among the Gounders or Kongu Vellalars, who are aware of the losing proposition that is an agrarian livelihood and have looked for other, often urban, options, from industry to trade. The Thevars in southern Tamil Nadu hold land, but are also visibly present in media, cinema, local credit operations, and in the lower rungs of local government. In eastern Tamil Nadu, they are primarily peasants, and the modest sections among them suffer when there is either flood or drought.

All these communities have been affected by Dalit assertion and by Dalit disengagement from the caste-class stranglehold of rural life. This is viewed as intolerable by the backward castes in general, and especially by those communities (in this case, sections of the southern Kallars), who, historically, have viewed Dalits as a community in perpetual bondage. Caste assertion appears a recompense in such situations and is expressed in and through a mix of political and social demands-enhanced reservation quotas (a longstanding demand of the Vanniyars) and/or doing away with the Prevention of Atrocities against the Scheduled Castes/Tribes Act of 1989, which is viewed as leading to false allegations by all these castes.

It is not accidental that Bahujan anxiety vents itself in policing the intimate sphere-this has to do with a fear of miscegenation, on the one hand, and with wanting to show Dalits their place, on the other. Often, members of these castes respond with alacrity to cross-caste marriages, where the groom is Dalit and the bride from a backward or most backward caste community. The lovers are separated forcibly, the Dalit man is killed, while the woman, when not murdered, is incarcerated within the caste household, or forcibly married off. Sometimes, she is pushed to take a stance against her Dalit partner during the criminal investigation of the murder.

Neither the DMK or the All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) have sought to address this matter with the seriousness it deserves, or pursue a clear-cut policy on the continued rights violations that Dalits routinely suffer. Unsurprisingly, both Dravidian parties are dominated by dominant caste leaders-some from the 'forward' non-brahmin communities, and quite a number from the Backward and Most Backward Castes.

> This is not so much imitation, as a play with the transgressive aspects of Tamil cinema, where the hero can be outlandish in every which way and yet claim his place in regular, mainstream society.

This has led to a steady alienation of younger Dalits from these parties. This has happened even in Dalit families that traditionally vote for the DMK. While the TVK has been as scrupulous in matching candidates with caste and geography, its messaging seeks to integrate all recipients, especially younger voters, within the charismatic circle that has been drawn around Vijay. It does this by ensuring that his iconic boyishness segues into a generalised cross-caste youth culture, which revolves around cinema, for the most part. Masculinist, if not misogynist, this culture revels in an edginess that it borrows from screen images and narratives, whether this has to do with hair styles, clothes, ways of addressing women, or clamping down on the villain.

The anthropologist Constantine Nakassis has argued that this is not so much imitation, as a play with the transgressive aspects of Tamil cinema, where the hero can be outlandish in every which way and yet claim his place in regular, mainstream society. Vijay fits this bill perfectly, and depending on one's caste location, the audience likely finds him charmingly defiant (as Dalits might) or touchingly loyal to family, kin, and community. He was also the wildcard this time around, and for young voters that proved attractive, with chance standing in for hope.

Economics

For all its rhetoric of social justice, and commitment to Dalits-Bahujans, the DMK has chosen to be blind to the actual unfolding of social and economic relations in agrarian as well as rural Tamil Nadu. First, the economic growth that Tamil Nadu has witnessed co-

exists with persistent female indebtedness, high levels of unemployment (of the educated), and a degraded environment. All of these have affected working-class women from all castes (but in particular Dalits), educated Bahujan-Dalit youth who are caught within a cycle of expectation and precarity, and all those who stand to be affected by the loss of green, sinking water tables, and unimpeded pollution.

Second, the growth pattern that has emerged, however productive, favours those who possess, what is increasingly viewed as "caste capital" provided by influential kin and caste networks, and disfavours those whose caste capital comprises only of their labour. This is as true of urban industry, as it is of agrarian worlds. In this context, Dalits and the poorer among the Bahujan castes have fared badly- the former because they have neither social nor productive capital, and the latter because they are forced to adhere to unfair conditions of work and production by their wealthy caste peers.

The Dravidian parties' answer to this inequality has been welfare and more welfare, inciting cynicism in some, and discontent in many. Most of all welfare is taken for granted, naturalised, and it is evident to all that the structures of everyday work and living are unlikely to change.

> The actor-politician literally enfolds their ambition into enabling fantasy, becoming himself the means for its realisation.

Third, economic growth has resulted in the emergence of production hubs, where modern means of manufacture sit with a labour process that relies on caste subalterns, many of whom are from the rural hinterland and are willing to work for modest or even meagre wages. These hubs are part of mid-sized cities-such as Tiruppur (famous for its knitwear), Ambur (leather), Sivakasi (fireworks and matches), and Hosur (automobiles to androids).

Over the decades, with the overall informalisation of the economy, dissenting and oppositional politics is relatively absent in these places. On the other hand, given that factory jobs with somewhat regular pay are viewed as 'freeing' and 'better' than seasonal agrarian labour, these towns incite mobility within limits, and promote a vision of betterment linked to consumption. There is relative if not provisional freedom from the economic hold of caste and the social authority that comes with it in an agrarian context.

Without quite outlining a politics of distributive justice, Vijay and his party have addressed younger voters and their apprehensions about the future. Many of these voters are found in semi-urban and urban worlds, given that they move from their villages to study or work. Adventurous and aspirational, their sense of the future is inchoate. Vijay's boy-man image resonates with them. The actor-politician literally enfolds their ambition into enabling fantasy, becoming himself the means for its realisation.

The spokespersons for the Dravidian model-and this includes scholars writing in English-have not addressed these contradictions. The DMK government chose to amplify the views of these scholars and researchers, and transform them into popular slogans and phrases, which did not quite resonate with the aspirational parvenu. This is because the Dravidian model enthusiasts have read data, in keeping with the ideology of Dravidian thinkers, rather than through a granular examination of changed social and economic relations and lives. Such an examination is available in Dalit critiques of the social order, feminist writings on the economy, and equally in contemporary literature.

National

The DMK's positioning of itself as a perpetual political antidote to Hindutva and the centralised state, and its commitment to federalism have been taken note of, more than ever before, in a national sense. In the Tamil context, federalism continues to be taken seriously across the polity with opposition to Hindi and the NEET exam resonating with vast sections of young persons, who stand to be affected by the promotion of English and a flawed, centrally administered exam.

> These changes found visible expression in the choices made by younger voters. It is not that they wilfully turned away from the Dravidian parties in all instances.

However, the party's critique of *sanatana dharma* (the 'eternal order' invoked by the Hindu right to describe Hindu tradition) has not been granted a premium, largely because it has remained a self-evident truism and is therefore neither heeded nor investigated, except by the Hindu right. This "disinterest" has been salutary in that it is expressive of the Tamil indifference to the 'nationalisation' of Hinduism. Hence, what might appear a radical idea, remains ignored, for the most part.

It is useful to remember that for all the criticism of sanatana dharma, the DMK has been reluctant to enforce Dalit rights to being a part of temple festivities in parts of the state unless the matter is forcibly brought to its attention, or taken to court. This mode of being secular-opposition to the Hindu right, an affirmation of social justice, and a consistent indifference to the situation of Dalits-is problematic to those who see casteism as an inseparable part of the Hindu right's ideas. A general affirmation of Tamilness and secularism is not enough. More is needed by way of political direction and action when it comes to the Dalit question.

The Wager for the Present

The TVK's electoral fortunes were a wager made by that party. But until the wager was actually won, it remained just that-a wager. While Vijay's screen appeal and his party's deft handling of social media might appear decisive to this outcome, other trajectories of change found their focus during the elections. These changes found visible expression in the choices made by younger voters. It is not that they wilfully turned away from the Dravidian parties in all instances. Rather, they found in Vijay an icon that spoke to their present, in ways that the political and historical legacy of the Dravidian movement did not, and would not.

V. Geetha is a feminist historian, writer, and translator from Chennai. She writes in English and Tamil on gender, caste, labour, and education.