

## Introduction

### Two Scenes of Departure

I claim Sir, to come from a country, a part in India now, but which I think is of a different stock, not necessarily antagonistic. I belong to the Dravidian stock. I am proud to call myself a Dravidian. That does not mean that I am against a Bengali or a Maharashtrian or a Gujarati. As Robert Burns has stated, “A man is a man for all that.” I say that I belong to the Dravidian stock and that is only because I consider that the Dravidians have got something concrete, something distinct, something different to offer to the nation at large. Therefore it is that we want self-determination.

—C. N. Annadurai, in his maiden address to Rajya Sabha,  
April 1962<sup>1</sup>

It rained that evening, September 18, 1949, at Robinson Park, Royapuram, Chennai, where the public meeting to announce the founding of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was held. People never fail to mention the rain whenever the legendary first public meeting is remembered. The rain has many valences in a narrative; it is primarily a cathartic device that epitomizes the emotional surge of a moment. It is hard to imagine a greater moment of a mix of intense emotions for the people gathered there than that evening. They were sad, bitter, despondent, angry, hopeful, euphoric, and happy all at the same time. They had parted company with the father figure, the inimitable Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), who had adamantly refused to listen to their plea for negotiation over the future of the organization, the five-year-old Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), molded in 1944 from the fragments of the Justice Party, also known as the South Indian Liberal Federation (founded in 1917), and the vibrant group of activists gathered in the Self-Respect Movement nurtured by Periyar (since 1925).

## TEAR DROPS

The public meeting at Robinson Park was the culmination of the deliberations held on September 17 and 18 in several rounds. The decision to launch a new party was first taken by a smaller group of those who were holding offices in the DK closeted in a room and was announced to all those gathered outside. The name of the party and a provisional design of the party flag were decided (the provisional design of the two-color flag, black strip on top and red strip at bottom, was later confirmed as the party flag). The general council, with 133 members, with several subcommittees were formed and office bearers were selected on the 17th. The modus operandi of the new party was discussed. Following these discussions, the public meeting was held on the 18th in the evening (Tirunāvukkaracu 2017, 325–332).

There were about twenty-six speakers on the dais to address the gathering of several thousand people, presided over by Pethampalayam Palanichamy. However, only about nine of them could actually speak due to the rain. The final declamation lasting one and a half hours, on the rationale on which the party was founded, setting out the goals and aspirations was delivered in the pouring rain by the General Secretary Conjeevaram Natarajan Annadurai, commonly referred to as Anna, to be pronounced with stress on the second syllable, *un-nnaa*. “Anna” is the kinship term for elder brother. Annadurai characterized himself as the foster son of Periyar Ramasamy who was often referred to as *thanthai*—the father. Hence, the kinship metaphor of the parting was obvious. The father had thrown the son out of the house and family, disinheriting him. The reason was, it appeared, sufficiently personal: the remarriage of the father, which Anna and the other foster sons objected to. Periyar Ramasamy, at the ripe old age of seventy years, married Maniammai, aged thirty, the daughter of a party worker who had become his personal attendant some years back. In the era in which the joint family structure was beginning to break up with sons setting up separate households, known as *thanikudithanam*, a word that signified familial discord, this moment of parting was suffused with anguish and sorrow, of having to leave the father figure. Since Annadurai listed the names of the party members who did not approve of the late marriage of Periyar as “tear drops” (*kanneer thuligal*) in the journal *Dravida Naadu*, Periyar started derisively referring to their new party, the DMK, as the “Tear Drop party” (Kanneer Thuli Katchi).

The family allegory and the emotional underpinnings should not be allowed to cloud our critical appreciation of the nature of the political departure. There can be no doubt that the marriage precipitated the issue. We need to basically consider why a personal event like the leader’s remarriage, however unseemly in terms of the age gap between the partners might be, should cause such devoted followers to rebel. In personal terms, Periyar did reason out the marriage well; he felt that marriage was the most honorable form of relationship that would recognize the intimacy needed for nursing him placed on the loving attendant on a day-to-day basis. The choice

could have been regarded as less scandalous than the Brahmacharya experiments of Gandhi a couple of years before, where physical intimacy without sexual desire was being forged. As Periyar had consistently opposed the ascetic image, it was only natural for him to disambiguate intimacy as conjugal through a marriage, even if the purpose was not a conjugal relationship. This should hardly have been a concern for Annadurai and his followers. What really mattered, however, was Periyar's claim that he resorted to marriage also in order to find a trustworthy successor to manage the affairs of the organization or movement. Periyar had formed a trust combining his personal wealth and the funds raised for the organization, which he thought would sustain the movement. It is in terms of access to this trust-held property that Periyar claimed to seek a trustworthy successor. This, Annadurai and his followers felt, was a deliberate insult. While Periyar's lack of trust in Annadurai, the most obvious political successor, cast personal aspersions on the latter, again, this is more a political discord than anything actually personal.

There had been several moments when differences between Annadurai and Periyar had surfaced since 1944, the most widely known among them being the dispute over the organizational response to Indian independence. Periyar announced that the Independence Day, August 15, 1947, was to be treated as a day of mourning—*thukka nal*—as it affirmed north Indian suzerainty over south India, also known as the Dravidian country. Annadurai publicly disagreed, calling for celebrations to mark the end of colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> While instances such as these were certainly indicative, the actual problem was far deeper in terms of how political activity was conceived by them, to which we will return to several times in the course of our reflections. However, we need to take a brief note, at the outset, of what was the common Dravidian formation of the political and how Periyar and Annadurai differed in their *modus operandi*. What was the common or shared political aim of the Dravidianists was to fight Brahmin, casteist hegemony to instill political aspiration in those disempowered by the practices of caste hierarchy. It was feared that such a Brahminic–Hindu hegemony would be strengthened through the rule of the nationalist power elite combining a Sanskrit past and the Anglicized present.<sup>3</sup> The power elite, it was widely felt, would best serve the interests of the north, as Hindi was being Sanskritized to make for the national language on a majoritarian premise. In the period of anti-colonial struggle, the Congress had sufficiently manifested such tendencies to consolidate a power elite that perhaps lead the subaltern to realize the need for strengthening the political through the languages of India, which in the case of Tamil Nadu, then part of the Madras Presidency, was Tamil. The language of the people was the necessary site of development of the political. These processes crystallized in the demand for Dravida Nadu, an independent Dravidian republic. We will consistently translate the Tamil phrase “Dravida Nadu” as Dravidian republic and not as Dravidian nation, the import of which will become clearer as we proceed.<sup>4</sup> While this shared understanding was the bedrock of the political, Periyar

was focused on promoting a political culture of agonism as a way of strengthening the republican spirit, the basis of a new political order. Annadurai, however, was intent on constructing a people aspiring for democratic self-governance. The crucial manifestation of this difference is with regard to the formalization of organizational structure and functioning, possible electoral participation, and taking up governance. Periyar preferred to remain a force outside of any ruling formation and electoral fray so that there was no constraint placed on the propagation of critical and agonistic formulations by the need for evolving consensus. Annadurai felt that without building consensus and capacity for democratic self-governance through which political power could be harnessed, a mere capacity for agonistic thinking would not help in contesting the power consolidation at the national level by the nationalist elite with the deeply entrenched shades of Brahmin hegemony. The parallel this difference between Periyar and Annadurai holds with the difference between Gandhi and Nehru is unmistakable in their varied approach towards social transformation and governance. Gandhi and Periyar aspired to work for political awakening, both of them self-styled, popular pedagogues with a historical mission who were never keen on or even abhorred offices. While Gandhi strategically maintained an “official” distance from the Indian National Congress as a political party, Periyar had no interest in building a political party as an organization, which Annadurai had already begun to undertake with the formation of DK in marked contrast to Periyar’s style of functioning as a tenuously networked movement.

We should conclude by noting that though the parting was inevitable, Annadurai could hardly match Periyar in terms of resources, political experience, clout, and the support of the wealthy. The 133 members of the first general council of the DMK, formed on that day prior to the rain-drenched meeting in the evening, were all mostly from a lower-middle-class background with no significant property holdings to speak of. Furthermore, they were mostly young, who could treat the forty-year-old Annadurai as an elder brother. For example, Karunanidhi, who was to become the fulcrum of political mobilization and subsequently the leader of the party succeeding Annadurai, was only twenty-five years old; E. V. K. Sampath, who would be the agent of a major split in 1961, was only twenty-three; Nedunchezian, who was billed as an ideologue, was twenty-nine, and so on. During the course of the day of founding the party, reference to paucity of funds came up several times. Annadurai could only bank on his skills for propagation. He and his followers appear to have felt, however vaguely, that the winds of history would set them sail.

## OCEAN OF SORROW

Almost twenty years later, on February 3, 1969, the whole state of Tamil Nadu came to a standstill. In fact, while normal life came to a halt, there was an unprecedented surge of masses in the magnitude of several millions towards Madras. Every moving

vehicle was loaded with people filled with grief, who were going to participate in the funeral procession of their leader, Annadurai. The cry “Anna ...” rented the air everywhere. The upsurge was such that it could be claimed that a staggering number of 15 million people attended the funeral, though estimates varied. The term “massive” manifested its full meaning. The entire phenomenon was spontaneous, as testified by several eyewitnesses. Many died on the way, while many others were grievously hurt. Nothing could contain the bursting of welling emotions. It was indeed an ocean of sorrow (*thuyarak kadal*).<sup>5</sup> The DMK had come to power with a thumping majority exactly two years before, in 1967, when Annadurai assumed the office of chief minister. His premature death at the age of sixty just two years after taking the DMK to power grieved the whole state beyond measure. The spontaneous mass gathering confirmed what election results announced two years earlier: *a* people, Tamils as Dravidians, *had* been constructed as the work of formation of the political executed by the DMK.

Earlier, at the moment of their electoral victory, Annadurai and other leaders of the DMK surprised everyone by going to Trichy, 200 kilometers away from Madras, the capital city, to meet the long-estranged Periyar before assuming office. The old man was overwhelmed; he had opposed the DMK the whole of eighteen years, never sparing a moment to take a jibe at the “tear drops.” He campaigned for the Congress and its leader Kamaraj in the elections. But Annadurai and the DMK maintained their claim that Periyar was indeed their estranged leader by leaving the position of the president of the party unoccupied for him to grace whenever he chose. Hence, they went to dedicate the electoral victory to him, to seek his endorsement, before assuming office. For the next final six years of his life, Periyar made good on his estrangement from the party by his steadfast support to the DMK rule. He of course had many reasons to do so. To begin with, the entire ministry took an oath swearing on their conscience and not on the divine, allegedly for the first time anywhere in India. Periyar beamed with pride and all acrimony of intervening years was forgotten. When Annadurai died soon after, Periyar mourned the premature demise of his foster son.

The DMK had accomplished many things in the elections apart from just coming to power. They were in alliance with both the liberal and left extremes of the political spectrum. The Swatantra Party headed by C. Rajagopalachari (1878–1972), better known as Rajaji, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), headed by P. Ramamurthy (1808–1987) in the state were aligned with the DMK.<sup>6</sup> Rajaji had many a historical role to play as the friend and foe of the Dravidian formations. It was he who inducted Periyar into the Congress in 1919; he provided causes for the grist of political opposition through imposition of Hindi in schools in 1938 as the premier of the Madras Presidency under dyarchy, and a family-centered vocational stream in primary education in 1953 as chief minister of Madras State in free India. He had finally broken his ties with the Indian National Congress in 1956,

launching the Swatantra Party, campaigning for a free market economy in opposition to the socialist creed of Nehru. But neither he nor the CPI(M) had any problem in becoming minor partners in the alliance led by the DMK, along with parties like the Praja Socialist Party. The DMK lead the coalition, contesting in 174 seats and winning 137 of them. The Swatantra Party contested 27, winning 20; the CPI(M) won 11 out of 22 contested; the Praja Socialist Party of Jayaprakash Narayan and J. B. Kriplani won all 4 out of 4 contested; the Indian Union Muslim League won 3 out of 3; the Sanghata Socialist Party 2 out of 3, and the DMK-backed independents won 2 out of 2 seats. The coalition could win 179 seats in the 234-member assembly, conceding only 51 seats to the Indian National Congress, which contested in 232 constituencies all by itself. The broad electoral alliance against the Congress, which the DMK forged, and the massive funeral procession of Anna clearly demonstrated that the DMK had managed to evolve a broad consensus on the nature of political goals in the state which it represented.

The assumption of power by the DMK was not just a one-time electoral victory. The Indian National Congress has never managed to come to power in the state after that. Half a century later, it appears more unlikely than ever that a national party can come to power in Tamil Nadu. It can be said that in a federal vision, Tamils have become a self-governing component of the Indian nation. The power sharing between the state and the Union government is still a fraught question with the Center accumulating powers all through the decades. The fact that the DMK and other regional parties often become part of the coalition government at the Center does not result in decentralization of powers, which allows for the countervailing tendency of homogeneous and centralized nationalist power consolidation by the Hindutva forces. However, the fact that the political is being increasingly localized in the states betokens the eventual need for the rise of the truly federal governance of the nation. The DMK is the exemplar for the nation in locating the post-independent political history in the state of Tamil Nadu.

The eighteen years between 1949, in which the DMK was founded, and 1967, in which the DMK came to power in the state, present a unique history of formation of the political in which the political mobilization and propagation of political ideas by the DMK played a pivotal role. The intent of the book is to provide a synoptic overview of the key aspects of this history.

## THE DMK AND HISTORY

We do not intend to write the empirical history of the DMK, though it provides the necessary template for our conceptual analyses. We are rather interested in posing the question of what the political process initiated by the DMK in the eighteen years of our study means for our understanding of history as such. Is construction of a people a historical process if they do not aspire for or achieve a sovereign nation

state? Is “becoming sovereign” the only axis of history? Can “becoming a people” replace “becoming sovereign” as the axis of history? We posit that this opens up the question of the distinction between self-governance and sovereignty. Since freedom is conceptually associated with sovereignty, constructing a people without making them a sovereign nation state, as the uncritical common sense feels and historiography succumbs to agree, appears to make their history incomplete, a sort of miscarriage.<sup>7</sup> We believe “becoming a people” as an axis of history relates to immanent transformation of the social through infusion of the political, a form of content of the political, while “becoming sovereign” as an axis of history relates to transcendental claims of a collective, a form of expression of the political. The distinction we make between “becoming a people” and “becoming sovereign”, “immanence” and “transcendental,” as well as between “form of content” and “form of expression” calls for elaboration, which we will undertake iteratively throughout the book. However, it might still be useful to offer an outline of our conceptual scheme at the outset. We take political to mean, as Schmitt (2008) suggested, “pure” friend–enemy antagonisms emanating from the social. In populist reason, as theorized by Laclau (2005), these antagonisms transcend the social antagonisms predefined in the order of the social through forging a transcendental schema of internal frontier contextually inscribed between the segment standing in for plebs and the segment standing in for power elite (non-Brahmin vs Brahmin in the case of the DMK). This internal frontier will be notional and not rigidly identarian since the frontier inscribed is internal to the imaginary whole proposed by the plebeian aspiration, which also posits an empty signifier (Tamil in the case of the DMK). The positing of a putative unity by the plebeian aspiration through the empty signifier constructs a people; this will retain democratic and socialist potential only when accompanied by the inscription of internal frontier alongside, since it is the plebs who imagine the whole, which will mobilize and realign the socially nuclear friend–enemy dyads into political formations. The shifting electoral alliances formed by various political parties and outfits will offer a good demonstration of what we suggest here. We call such formation of the political to take place on the axis of “re-formation” and “becoming a people.” The DMK, in our analysis, provides a good example for this process of forging left populism. In contrast, if the internal frontier is de-emphasized by hegemonic groups in favor of a totalizing empty signifier through locating the enemy “externally” in the axis of “becoming sovereign,” the result would be a fascist consolidation through popular sovereignty. The politics of Hindutva offers a ready example for such a process. Even as both processes could be incomplete, as captured in the insightful title of Partha Chatterjee’s second book on Indian nationalism, *Nation and Its Fragments*, we would urge that the former process of becoming a people be accorded greater attention, loosening the fixation with the latter, with the materialization of sovereign nation state as the only locus of history.



We contend that there is a serious disciplinary problem in taking India, the name of the nation-state, as the location of history. The singular historiographic construction of India impedes the federal imagination of the nation. It will not be wrong to say that the major political problem of contemporary India is such a historiographic practice. The understanding of the political process initiated by the founding of the DMK, its organizational growth, mobilization of popular support, and the electoral victory depends much on our appreciation of historical unfolding of formations of the political. We find the existing literature on the political party in English language lacking in that respect due both to traditions of historiography and historical methods employed or, as it often happened, the additional buttress through anthropological accounts of the “ethnic” politics as against the politics of the imagined cosmopolis of the nation.

The first conceptual problem is the distinction made between the nation and its region. Whatever processes that constitute the politics of the nation and its state formation is taken as historical. Whatever processes that constitute politics in the region is considered external or at best supplementary to the history of the nation. Such an approach becomes pre-selective in so far only such of the elite formations that have national provenance and circulation will be deemed to be part of history. We find this attitude making a crippling impact on the literature on post-colonial political history of India. We can find many books on Indian politics where states like Tamil Nadu are hardly paid any attention to or given cursory attention. Those who write on Tamil Nadu tend to see it as a deviation from the mainstream of national history. Terms such as “ethnic” as descriptive appellation to the so-called regional identity deny historical validity to the construction of the people as formation of the political.

The second conceptual problem is understanding the role of language. A term like “vernacular” inaugurates the problem here. What does it mean to call Tamil a vernacular language? What distinction is introduced by such an adjective? Tamil is certainly one of the oldest languages of the world; it is also a classical language in terms of possessing literary texts of antiquity, many parts of which can still be read contemporaneously without the aid of lexicons and commentaries. It is a language spoken by about 800 million people in Tamil Nadu. In writing the history of Tamil-speaking people, if one refers to Tamil language sources, it is to be deemed as referring to vernacular language sources, whereas English-language sources are not deemed as vernacular sources. It is unclear what kind of hierarchy is assumed between “vernacular” and “non-vernacular” sources, but it can be shown that many of the works on Dravidian movement written by Euro-American scholars have not found it necessary to access vernacular language sources, that is, what is available in Tamil language, since the business of scholarship and the business of the lay people are known to be conducted in two different languages: that of the court on the one hand and that of the people on the other hand. Hence, we suspect that efforts to



write about a political party such as the DMK suffer from a certain lack of universal attributes which get marked by qualifiers such as regional and vernacular. Such a lack is in marked contrast to the self-perception of the DMK, which assigned itself the task of mobilizing Tamil people to participate in the world historical processes mankind was going through as they were unfolding in most nations after the Second World War, in realizing democratic self-governance marked by liberty and equality, in short, human emancipation. The DMK, in the footsteps of the previous iterations of Dravidianism, the Justice Party, the Self-Respect Movement, and the DK, obviously felt that the Indian National Congress, which was controlled by Hindi-speaking north Indians or Brahmins, was not capable of being agents of such history since the Congress cannot lay claim to the cultural historical distinction of Tamil people, which the party would erase in favor of a composite Indian identity. What we hope to narrate is how the DMK applied itself to such a historical task that it had undertaken to construct a people towards democratic self-governance.

Such a task for the DMK was set by history through the founding of the Indian republic and the inception of electoral democracy with universal adult franchise. It was like a blank cheque issued by history to the people that needed to be encashed by a fast-tracked spread of political awareness and the desire for empowerment in terms of individual freedom which was enshrined in the secret ballot. The vast swathe of the people was still locked in agrarian hinterlands in various kinds of bondage to landlords; the small towns and urban centers were still being formed with nascent industries sprouting here and there. The literacy rate among the people was about 20 percent, which meant that the people were still largely uneducated about the kind of political modernity they had been ushered into.

The Indian National Congress trained in anti-colonial nationalist discourse could not immediately grasp and come to terms with the internal contradictions that should animate the political in the free country. The Communist Party was well aware of the unequal power structures but, constrained by the doctrine of class antagonism leading to class essentialism, could not find ways of constructing a people as a necessary process for the formation of the political through electoral democracy in Tamil Nadu. This has been the problem of the Communist Party in most parts of the country, with the exception of Kerala, the state adjacent to Tamil Nadu, and later West Bengal. We propose that the DMK stepped into the fissure where it could forge a discourse of emancipation that could become popular and allow for people to be politicized in the process of metaphoric encashment of the blank cheque issued by history. What we seek to do through an account of such unfolding of history in Tamil Nadu via the formation of the political lead by the DMK is also to help understand what preceded half a century of Dravidian rule in the state, its achievements, and shortcomings. We are aware that any critical evaluation of the period we study is now clouded by the half-a-century rule of the Dravidian parties and many discontents, actual and perceived, in its wake. This

requires that we remark on what we deem to be certain uncritical dispositions about the party and also certain frames of polemical and critical engagements. Our purpose is not to take sides in the polemics or refute critical engagements. We state them as pointers to future reflections on the basis of a new framework of analysis we develop, which aspires to moderate such uncritical dispositions and polemical frameworks. The analysis rests on a critical appreciation of the party as an exemplar of populist mobilization that has produced a historical outcome that we describe as the twin enterprise of “construction of a people” and “formations of the political” as outlined above. It is our surmise that the conjoining of two enterprises has allowed for continued rearticulations of injuries suffered by various constituencies within a well-energized democratic contestatory field.

## UNCRITICAL DISPOSITIONS

There is a mute pervasive sense of opprobrium, which sometimes turns vocal, in English-language writing and also elite writing in Tamil in explaining how a political party started by people of inadequate financial means and social status, the commoners or *samanyargal*, could defeat the Indian National Congress of pan-Indian provenance, backed by the rich and mighty, in the electoral turf in such a short span of time, eighteen years to count. There are many significant reasons for such an opprobrium. First of all, the DMK’s opposition to pan-Indian nationalism was perceived to be ill-informed, since the nationalist elite had already posited the unified civilizational history of India, however plural it might be, informed by Brahminic Hinduism as its political unconscious. It was feared that to speak of a distinct Dravidian–Tamil cultural history made for a divisive politics, often denounced as fissiparous tendency, that would weaken the new nation that had heroically thrown off the colonial yoke. Further, it was feared a mobilization based on caste, particularly non-Brahmin, would ruin governance with the ascent of the “uneducated” and “uncultured” to ruling positions. We will be citing some such expressions of uncritical dispositions in the chapters that follow.

Second, while the DMK adopted rhetorical strategies that would appeal to the masses, the same were seen by the elite as empty of true political content, banking merely on affective potential and emotional appeal, often stooping to “rabble-rousing” tendencies. The alliterative and rhyming phrases and sentences coined by the DMK speakers and their attention to sound patterns in language earned them much criticism for lacking in real political content. Such a word play, *varthai jalam*, was accused of both conceit and deceit.

Third, such perceptions were further aided by the use of theater by the DMK leaders to popularize their ideas. They wrote plays and acted in them at every party conference. These were seen to be the means of seduction of the masses. Further, the DMK leaders famously got involved in the film world. Popular Tamil cinema was