

Rule of the Commoner

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has been singular in heralding and establishing a firm regional polity among the Indian states after the Indian Union was inaugurated as a republic. Academic scholarship has often treated the DMK as a Tamil nationalist or ethno-nationalist formation without conceptual clarity or critical insight. *Rule of the Commoner* demonstrates, with persuasive evidence, that the DMK appealed to a federalist and not nationalist imagination. The DMK's combining of the non-Brahmin Dravidian identity and allegiance to the Tamil language led to a counter-hegemonic formation of the plebs and left populism.

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau, the book argues that the DMK achieved the construction of a people as Dravidian–Tamil, with Tamil being the empty signifier of the social whole and the Brahmin versus non-Brahmin divide functioning as the internal frontier leading to the formations of the political. It elaborates the conceptual scheme under the three rubrics of ideation, imagination and mobilization.

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V. M. S. Subagunarajan is an independent researcher and has been long associated with theatre and literary movements in Tamil Nadu. He has written extensively on the Dravidian movement, especially on Periyar. His book on Periyar's lectures at caste association meetings is considered a landmark in Dravidian studies. He was also the editor of Tamil film journal *Kaatchipizhai* and culture studies journal *Akam/Puram*.

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978-1-009-19717-5 — Rule of the Commoner

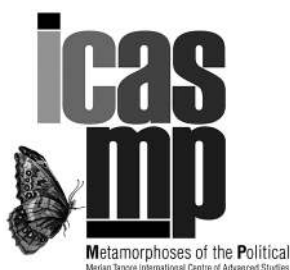
Rajan Kurai Krishnan , Ravindran Sriramachandran , VMS Subagunarajan
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Rule of the Commoner

*DMK and the Formations of the Political in
Tamil Nadu, 1949–1967*

Rajan Kurai Krishnan
Ravindran Sriramachandran
V. M. S. Subagunarajan



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, vic 3207, Australia

314 to 321, 3rd Floor, Plot No.3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009197175

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First published 2022

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-19717-5 Hardback

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to the millions of party cadres
the site of historical transformation

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Great popular movements are not mere accidents of history. They are the outcome of the urge of the people for an assertion of the true nature of their corporate personality. Often humble and obscure at their source, they swell into oceanic proportions on their march towards their destination. Generally, these movements are noticed only when they reach their final crescendo. We then work back laboriously to trace their beginning.

—S. Vedaratnam, *A Plea for Understanding: A Reply to the Critics of the Dravidian Progressive Federation* (a pamphlet in English released during the first state conference of the DMK, 1951)

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Acknowledgments

All three of us grew up in Tamil Nadu in the 1960s and 1970s, separated by a few years, immersed in the social that was stirred and shaken by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). V. M. S. Subagunarajan was already in school at the time of the anti-Hindi agitation in 1965. Rajan Kurai Krishnan and Ravindran Sriramachandran vividly remember the public outburst of grief on the demise of Annadurai in 1969. We gratefully recall our families, relatives and neighbors, classmates and teachers for filling our political commonsense. Interestingly, all three of us, though in different social and geographical locations, charted a similar path in our adult life; we studied English literature in our undergraduate and postgraduate programs, picked up our acquaintance with Tamil modernist literature first and literary circles identified as the little magazine subculture later that included film societies and experimental theater groups. Our critical sense, largely influenced by Marxist, neo-Marxist, and post-Marxist thoughts that wafted from the West, kept us reevaluating our lifelong engagement with Dravidian politics. We recall with gratitude the countless number of writers, activists, and thinkers in the adult phase of our life who immensely added to our reflective processes. We don't have the space even to produce a selective list here as we are indebted to so many. Rajan Kurai Krishnan and Ravindran Sriramachandran had a late, mid-life entry into the world of academics when they enrolled in the graduate program in the anthropology department at Columbia University, New York. The present work owes much to the rigorous conceptual training that was made possible by the program. While again the list of names to whom they are indebted would be too long, it is necessary to acknowledge a few for the crucial insights and mentorship they provided: Partha Chatterjee, Valentine Daniel, Nicholas Dirks, Rosalind Morris, David Scott, and Gayathri Spivak contributed to their education immensely. The companionship and conversations with Nauman Naqvi and Milind Wakankar were an indispensable part of learning.

There are a few signpost events that incrementally prepared us for writing this book. V. M. S. Subagunarajan organized a three-day seminar on the Dravidian movement at Madurai in 1997, which gathered many important scholars and thinkers writing in Tamil to reflect on the historical phenomenon. Though the papers presented could not

be compiled, the event inaugurated a strong impetus for further research. Similarly, the five-day workshop on Tamil cinema organized by M. S. S. Pandian through MIDS, Chennai, in 1997 also honed our engagement with history, particularly through our encounter with the inimitable collection of material at RMRL, Chennai. Finally, we could organize an international seminar in Delhi to mark the historical signpost of 100 years of Dravidian movement and 50 years of Dravidian rule in January 2018, jointly sponsored by Ambedkar University, Delhi, and Ashoka University. V. M. S. Subagunarajan organized a Tamil version of the conference in Chennai later that year. We thank all the individuals who made organizing these events possible and scholars who participated in them. By then, the three of us were already into preparing to write the book.

Even though we had undertaken several exercises of field immersion on various occasions for research engagements, election time participant observation traveling across the state, we decided to plan some fieldwork anew for the book jointly and severally. Such invaluable exercises were made possible by the kindness and generosity of many individuals. We thank Ramasamy, Coimbatore; A. B. Shanmugasundaram, ex-MLA, Devanurpudur; Chinna K. R., Lakshmapuram; Rajasekhar, Pethampalayam; Sundarrajan, Pudukkottai; Marimuthu, Pudukkottai; Senthalai Gowthaman and friends, Suler; Mannavan, Suler; Sivasenathipathy and Karthikeya Sivasenathipathy, Kuttapalayam; Singaravel and Govindarajan, Coimbatore; Ezhirko Pamaran, Coimbatore; Maran, Trichy; Mahadhevan and Kuppulakshmi for their hospitality at Trichy; R. Govindaraj and N. Sriram, Trichy; Anush and Srinivisan of Ethir Veliyeedu, Pollachi; Manoharan, Mahalingam, and Prakash, Pollachi; S. N. Subramaniam, Raveendran alias Vamanan, M. Vijayaraghavan, Manimozhi, Pollachi; Rathinakumar, Madurai; R. Natarajan, Bodinayakanur; Muthu, Nagu, Vetri Arasan, Allinagaram, Theni; Mohan Kumaramangalam, Theni; M. Paranthaman, K. R. Ganesan, Periya Mayan, Mokkaraju, Gudalur; M. S. Prabhakar, K. M. Lawrence, Rayappanpatti; Hebeeb Mohammed alias Saketha, Uthamapalayam; Kumarandass, Sami Dravidamani, Arangasamy, Kaivalyam, Kalavathi, Puluvar Pazham Nee, Karaikudi; Kalai Kamal and Mohammed Safi, Cumbum; Nagappan, Thamparam; Ravi Karthikeyan, Villupuram; Srinivasan, Ira.Ilakkumanan, Ramanathan, Imayam Annamalai, Virudhachalam. We have included only the key interlocutors in all these locations, leaving out a host of others who had something to say in response to our queries.

The support of staff members in various archives was inestimable. We thank Vibha. S. at the *Hindu* archives, Kannan and Thangapandi at G. D. Naidu Memorial Library in Coimbatore, and Sundar Ganesan and his staff at Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai, for their assistance. Kamaraj Karuppannan and Praveen Chandrasekharan, both research scholars at Madras University, functioned as research assistants to gather and sift through the print literature connected to the DMK. We cannot thank them adequately for their involvement, enthusiasm, and insightful collaboration.

We thank Gilles Verniers and Mohit Kumar of Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, for their help with the map of Tamil Nadu. Ravindran Sriramachandran would like to thank Ashoka University for a semester of sabbatical and

other institutional assistance provided. Rajan Kurai Krishnan would like to acknowledge Ambedkar University, Delhi, for the stimulating intellectual atmosphere and various forms of support provided.

We were encouraged by a set of senior scholars and activists in undertaking this project. We would like to particularly thank S. V. Rajadurai for being warm and generous in our meeting with him at the beginning of the project. His essay with rich personal anecdotes published in the Tamil journal *Uyir Ezhuthu* on the occasion of the demise of M. Karunanidhi was a real source of inspiration for us. We thank Thirunavukkarasu, whose three-volume history of the DMK and numerous other publications served as necessary resource material, for his words of encouragement. We thank Viduthalai Rajendran for his advice and counsel. Senthalai Gowthaman and friends stand as proud specimens of the values inspired by the DMK. It was inspiring to meet them. Our long-time interlocutors V. Arasu and Sundar Kali have contributed in ways too many that are hard to recall. We are grateful to the collegiality and encouragement provided by A. R. Venkatachalapathy, S. Anandhi, M. Vijayabaskar, and A. Kalaiyaran at MIDS, Chennai, and for their sustained research engagement with Dravidian movement. We particularly thank S. Anandhi for many helpful leads, most particularly for pointing to the work of Charles Ryerson. We dearly miss M. S. S. Pandian whose name was metonymic with MIDS for us in the mid-1990s. In a sense, Pandian pioneered our research interests.

We drew much strength during the writing of the book from our interactions with Dr J. Jeyaranjan, whose enthusiasm for research and reflection was infectious. We were also stimulated by interactions with A. S. Panneerselvam, who was completing a biography of Karunanidhi simultaneously.

Partha Chatterjee, Arjun Appadurai, Milind Wakankar, and Santhosh Sadanandan were extremely generous to find the time to read the manuscript and offer their comments. Without their critical remarks, encouragement, and advice we would not have had the confidence to take the manuscript for publication. Salil Misra of Ambedkar University read the chapter on the “Uses of Language” and offered helpful comments. We cannot adequately express our indebtedness to all of them. However, we authors are responsible for all the shortfalls that may still remain.

We finally need to acknowledge the inner circle members of the authorial group. Srikumar Kannan is almost part of our team and always ready to help with any material required for consultation and bounce off ideas. We thank R. V. Bhavani and Srikumar for their generous hospitality whenever we gathered in Chennai. Our consultative meetings at Kodaikanal were enriched by the care and attention bestowed by Dr Suthanthira Devi. Likewise, Dr Suthanthira Devi, Rochana Mitra, Nandhini Venkatachalam, and Jayashree Venkatadurai alias Monikhaa took care of our base camps called home, allowing us to focus on research and writing. Without their constant support we could not have accomplished the task.

We cannot adequately thank Debjani Majumdar of ICAS for her interest and support in guiding us towards publication. We thank Qudsiya Ahmed and Anwasha Rana of Cambridge University Press for mentoring the process of publication with

patience and attention. We thank Priya Das for the care with which the manuscript has been edited and many helpful suggestions. We are grateful to the two anonymous readers for their generous appreciation, comments, and provocations.

We still feel we may have left out someone. The feeling is not only generated by the inexhaustible list of empirical individuals who we encountered but also the overwhelming recognition of the abstract presence of millions of grassroots workers who made history and hence this book possible. In all humility imposed by the momentousness of the transformative process, we dedicate our tiny conceptual analysis of that history to them.

Note on Transliteration

A book of this kind inevitably has a considerable number of transliterated words. We have chosen to use diacritical marks for book titles, names of authors, and direct quotations, wherever needed. Diacritics are also used wherever there is a gloss of a particular word or where the word itself is used for its significance and wherever it is crucial to retain the metrical composition. Elsewhere we have kept them to a minimum so as not to distract the reader. We have followed the transliteration scheme of the Tamil lexicon published by Madras University.