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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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
to the millions of party cadres

the site of historical transformation
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; Sundarraj, Pudukkottai; Marimuthu, Pudukkottai; Senthalai Gowthaman and friends, Sulur; Mannavan, Sulur; Sivasenathipathy and Karthikeya Sivasenathipathy, Kuttapalayam; Singaravel and Govindarajan, Coimbatore; Ezhirko Pamanar, Coimbatore; Maran, Trichy; Mahadhevan and Kuppalakshmi for their hospitality at Trichy; R. Govindaraj and N. Sriram, Trichy; Anush and Srinivisan of Ethir Veliyedu, 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, Allingaram, Theni; Mohan Kumaramangalam, Theni; M. Paranthaman, K. R. Ganesan, Periya Mayan, Gudalur; M. S. Prabhakar, K. M. Lawrence, Rayappanpatti; Heebee 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 Annalai, Virudhachalam. We have included only the key interlocuters in all these locations, leaving out a host of others who had something to say in response to our queries.

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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.