

From Social Protest to Electoral Power: The Rise and Transformation of the Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Dravidian Movement holds an important place in the social, political, and cultural history of modern Tamil Nadu. It emerged in the early twentieth century in the Madras Presidency in response to caste inequality, unequal access to education and government employment, limited political representation, and the growing influence of Brahmin elites in colonial institutions. The organized phase of the movement began with the non-Brahmin movement and the establishment of the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known as the Justice Party, in 1916. A major transformation took place under E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar. Through the Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925, Periyar expanded the movement beyond demands for political representation. He challenged caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, social inequality, and patriarchal practices and promoted rationalism, self-respect, and social equality. The formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949 under C. N. Annadurai marked another important stage in the movement's development. The DMK adopted a more active approach to electoral politics and transformed Dravidian ideas into a mass political programme.

Keywords: Dravidian Movement; Justice Party; Periyar; Self-Respect Movement; DMK; C. N. Annadurai; Tamil Nadu; social justice; non-Brahmin movement; caste; linguistic identity.

INTRODUCTION

The Dravidian Movement is one of the most influential socio-political movements in the modern history of South India. It played a major role in reshaping the social and political life of Tamil Nadu. The movement cannot be understood as the creation of a single political party, leader, or ideology. Instead, it developed over several decades through changing organizations, leaders, ideas, and forms of political mobilization. Questions of caste, social equality, language, political representation, self-respect, and regional identity gradually became central to public life in Tamil Nadu.¹ The origins of the movement can be traced to the social and political conditions of the Madras Presidency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The expansion of English education, the growth of the colonial bureaucracy, the development of newspapers and print culture, and the introduction of limited representative institutions created new opportunities for political participation. At the same time, these developments

produced competition among different social groups for access to education, government employment, and political power.

The increasing representation of Brahmins in education, government services, and the professions became an important source of non-Brahmin political mobilization. Educated non-Brahmin groups argued that their communities did not receive a fair share of opportunities in colonial institutions. Their demands gradually developed into an organized political movement for communal representation and social advancement. The formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known as the Justice Party, in 1916 was an important milestone in this process.

The Justice Party represented the early political phase of the non-Brahmin movement. It concentrated mainly on political representation, access to government employment, education, and communal representation. However, the movement underwent a major ideological transformation with the emergence of E. V. Ramasamy, or Periyar. His Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925, gave greater importance to social reform and challenged the foundations of caste hierarchy, religious authority, patriarchy, and social inequality.

The DMK's electoral victory in 1967 marked a decisive turning point. The Congress, which had dominated Tamil Nadu politics for several decades, was defeated, and the DMK formed the state government under C. N. Annadurai. This victory demonstrated the growing strength of regional political forces in India and established Dravidian politics as the dominant political framework in Tamil Nadu.²

The subsequent development of Dravidian politics produced important changes in the state's political and social institutions. Social justice, reservation, welfare policies, linguistic identity, and regional political representation became central features of Tamil Nadu's political discourse. At the same time, the movement's history has also generated important scholarly debates concerning caste, class, religion, political populism, ideological transformation, and the extent of its social achievements. It begins with the social and political conditions of the Madras Presidency and the emergence of the non-Brahmin movement. It then examines the Justice Party, Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, the development of Dravidian ideology, anti-Hindi agitations, cultural mobilization, and the formation of the DMK. Finally, it analyses the significance of the 1967 electoral victory and evaluates the long-term contributions and limitations of the Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu.

Historical Background: Social Structure and the Rise of the Non-Brahmin Movement

The origins of the Dravidian Movement must be understood within the social and political conditions of the Madras Presidency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonial administration, the expansion of English education, and the growth of government employment created new opportunities, but these opportunities were not equally distributed among social groups. Brahmins constituted only a small proportion of the population, yet they were disproportionately represented in English education, the professions, law, and the colonial administration. This imbalance became a major source of non-Brahmin political criticism. The issue was not simply traditional ritual status; access to literacy, English education, urban networks, and new professional opportunities enabled particular communities to benefit more rapidly from colonial modernity. At the same time, the social position of non-Brahmin communities was highly diverse. Landholding groups and emerging educated intermediate communities experienced discrimination in some institutions but possessed greater economic resources than communities classified at the time as the "Depressed Classes" or Adi Dravidas, who faced severe

restrictions in education, employment, and social life. Thus, the early non-Brahmin movement should not be treated as a completely unified movement of all oppressed communities.

The available historical evidence demonstrates the extent to which representation had become a political issue. The Madras Presidency's system of limited representative government encouraged political organizations to demand a greater share of legislative seats and public employment. The Justice Party later institutionalized this demand through communal representation. Contemporary data show that in the Madras Legislative Council the elected membership in 1920 consisted of 57 non-Brahmins and 17 Brahmins out of 98 seats, while in 1926 the figures were 56 and 18 respectively. By 1937, after changes in the constitutional system, the legislature had 215 elected members, including 127 non-Brahmins, 15 Brahmins, and 31 representatives of the Depressed Classes. By 1946, the corresponding figures were 136 non-Brahmins, 9 Brahmins, and 28 representatives of the Depressed Classes. These figures illustrate the institutional transformation produced by the politics of communal representation, although they should not be interpreted as evidence that caste inequality had disappeared. ([South Indian History Congress Journal](#))

The development of English education and print culture further strengthened political consciousness among emerging social groups. Newspapers, journals, pamphlets, caste associations, reading rooms, and public meetings created a new political sphere in which questions of education, government employment, caste, religion, and social status could be discussed collectively. The emergence of non-Brahmin journals and associations helped transform individual grievances into organized political demands. The political vocabulary of the period increasingly emphasized **community, representation, equality, and social advancement**. As your source material indicates, colonial census operations and ethnographic classifications also encouraged political actors to think in terms of numerical community strength and proportional representation. Representation consequently came to mean not merely geographical representation but also the presence of different communities in legislatures, government services, and educational institutions.

This political consciousness developed alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, the Indian National Congress. The Congress attracted members of different communities and played an important role in the nationalist movement, but sections of the non-Brahmin intelligentsia argued that political freedom would have limited meaning if existing caste inequalities continued within Indian society. In the Madras Presidency, some non-Brahmin leaders therefore questioned whether the nationalist movement adequately addressed unequal access to education, government employment, and political representation. Their argument was essentially that **political independence should be accompanied by social equality**. This tension between nationalism and social representation became one of the important foundations of the non-Brahmin political movement.

The formation of the **South Indian Liberal Federation in 1916**, popularly known as the Justice Party after its newspaper Justice, represented the first durable organizational phase of this movement. T. M. Nair, P. Theagaraya Chetty, and C. Natesa Mudaliar were among its prominent leaders. The organization emerged at a time when constitutional reforms were expanding, although political participation remained restricted. Its principal demands concerned greater representation for non-Brahmins in the legislature, government services, and higher education. The **Non-Brahmin Manifesto of December 1916** argued that constitutional reforms without safeguards for non-Brahmin communities could reproduce existing inequalities. The manifesto was therefore not simply a statement of social philosophy; it was a practical political intervention designed to influence colonial policy and the emerging electoral system.

The Justice Party's subsequent electoral success demonstrated that communal organization could be converted into political power under the restricted franchise of the colonial period. Its ministries during the 1920s promoted communal representation and measures intended to expand educational opportunities for non-Brahmin communities. The most important long-term contribution of this period was the development of the principle that government institutions should broadly reflect the social composition of the population. Historical scholarship identifies communal representation in education and public employment as an important predecessor of the reservation system that subsequently developed in Tamil Nadu. However, the policy also had limitations. The earliest beneficiaries were often relatively better-positioned non-Brahmin communities rather than the most socially oppressed sections. The Justice Party itself remained socially conservative in several respects and therefore represented more an elite programme of political and institutional redress than a fully developed mass anti-caste movement.

This limitation helps explain the significance of **E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar**, and the Self-Respect Movement. Periyar's political experience in the Congress and his involvement in the Vaikom Satyagraha contributed to his growing opposition to caste hierarchy and priestly authority. He came to argue that independence from British rule alone would not eliminate social humiliation if caste and religious hierarchy remained intact. His break with Congress politics therefore represented an important ideological shift. Periyar's criticism went beyond the demand for a greater share of government jobs for non-Brahmins. He questioned the ideological foundations of caste, including hereditary priesthood, varna-based hierarchy, and religious authority as he understood it.

The **Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925**, transformed the character of Dravidian politics by making dignity and social equality central political objectives. The movement promoted rationalism and challenged customs that Periyar regarded as reinforcing caste and gender inequality. Self-respect marriages became a particularly important example of this programme because they rejected the compulsory role of Brahmin priests and emphasized marriage between equals. The movement also advocated women's education, widow remarriage, women's property rights, contraception, and criticism of patriarchal practices. Through publications such as Kudi Arasu, public meetings, conferences, and social campaigns, these ideas reached an expanding audience. Self-respect was therefore not merely a political slogan; it sought to change the everyday experience of caste by challenging practices of deference, ritual inferiority, and social humiliation.

The idea of **Dravidian identity** subsequently provided a broader ideological framework for these social and political demands. "Dravidian" increasingly became a political term associated with the languages, peoples, and social cultures of South India and with opposition to what movement leaders described as Aryan, Sanskritic, or North Indian cultural dominance. Tamil occupied a particularly important position within this ideological development. Language was increasingly connected with dignity, cultural identity, and political autonomy. The meaning of Dravidian identity, however, changed over time. At different stages it referred to a broader South Indian identity, the demand for a separate Dravida Nadu, Tamil linguistic nationalism, non-Brahmin political solidarity, and eventually a regional political identity operating within the federal structure of India.

The historical development from the **Justice Party to the Self-Respect Movement** therefore represents more than a simple change of political leadership. It involved a fundamental expansion of the meaning of social justice. The Justice Party initially focused on representation in legislatures, education, and government employment; Periyar subsequently extended the debate to caste hierarchy, religious

authority, gender relations, rationalism, and individual dignity. This ideological expansion created the foundations upon which later Dravidian organizations, particularly the DMK, could build a mass political movement. The eventual electoral transformation of 1967 was therefore the result of several decades of social mobilization, institutional experimentation, ideological development, and cultural politics rather than a sudden political event. The 1967 Assembly election illustrates the scale of this transformation: the DMK won **137 of the 234 Assembly seats**, securing about **40.7% of the vote**, while Congress won 51 seats with about 41.1% of the vote. The DMK-led alliance won 179 seats, demonstrating how electoral alliances combined with Dravidian mobilization could overturn Congress dominance.

The following sections can be made clearer by using **continuous research paragraphs**, while retaining the historical argument and adding relevant historical statistics where the material supports them. I have also kept the original critical approach rather than presenting the movement only as a success story.

Opposition to Caste Hierarchy

Opposition to caste hierarchy remained one of the central moral and political concerns of the Dravidian Movement. The movement challenged the idea that social status, occupation, education, and public privileges should be determined by birth. This criticism gradually changed the language of politics in Tamil Nadu. Questions of caste were no longer treated only as matters of private social custom; they became questions of public policy involving education, employment, political representation, and social dignity. The Justice Party had already attempted to address unequal representation through communal policies in the 1920s, while Periyar's Self-Respect Movement extended the debate by questioning the social and religious foundations of caste itself. The movement therefore introduced an important principle into public life: historical inequality required active social and institutional correction. However, the movement's anti-caste achievements should not be exaggerated. Non-Brahmin political mobilization did not eliminate caste divisions, and different intermediate communities benefited from political and educational opportunities at different rates. The continuing political importance of caste demonstrates the difference between challenging caste hierarchy and completely abolishing caste-based social identities.

Women's Rights and the Limits of Reform

Women's rights constituted another important dimension of Periyar's social reform programme. He strongly criticized practices that restricted women's freedom and challenged the traditional ideal that women should remain dependent upon husbands and family authority. He advocated women's education, property rights, widow remarriage, contraception, and greater control over marriage and personal life. The Self-Respect Movement gave practical expression to these ideas through self-respect marriages, which rejected the compulsory role of Brahmin priests and emphasized equality between the partners. These reforms were particularly significant because they connected the question of women's freedom with the wider struggle against caste and social hierarchy. The movement argued that social equality could not be achieved if women continued to be controlled by patriarchal customs.

At the same time, the history of women's rights within Dravidian politics contains important limitations. The radical arguments advanced by Periyar did not always translate into equal political participation for women within later Dravidian parties. As the movement developed into electoral politics, women's issues were sometimes incorporated into party structures, family-based politics, and popular cultural

representations rather than being pursued as an independent feminist programme. Consequently, the Self-Respect tradition represents both an important source of radical gender criticism and an example of the gap that can exist between ideological commitment and institutional practice. The historical significance of the movement therefore lies not only in the reforms it achieved but also in the questions about gender equality that it introduced into Tamil public discourse.

Language as a Mass Political Issue

Language became one of the most powerful instruments of mass mobilization in the development of the Dravidian Movement. The opposition to compulsory Hindi education in the late 1930s transformed the language question from a cultural issue into a major political controversy. The agitation began after the introduction of compulsory Hindi instruction in schools in the Madras Presidency under the Congress ministry headed by C. Rajagopalachari in 1937. The policy generated opposition among Periyar's followers and other Tamil activists, who argued that compulsory Hindi would impose an additional linguistic burden on Tamil-speaking students and weaken the position of Tamil. The agitation lasted from 1937 to 1939 and involved public demonstrations, meetings, arrests, and student participation. It helped establish language as a powerful symbol of Tamil identity and regional political rights.

The issue returned with greater intensity in the 1960s when the prospect of Hindi becoming the sole official language of the Union generated widespread anxiety in Tamil Nadu. The anti-Hindi agitation of 1965 became a decisive moment in the growth of the DMK. Students and young people participated extensively, while political activists, writers, and ordinary citizens joined demonstrations. The movement connected language with employment, education, cultural dignity, and the federal structure of India. Thus, opposition to Hindi was not simply opposition to another Indian language; for many participants it represented resistance to perceived cultural and administrative centralization. The agitation strengthened the DMK's mass appeal and weakened the Congress government's position in the state.

Tamil linguistic consciousness, however, had deeper historical roots than the Dravidian Movement itself. The revival of Tamil literature, the publication of classical texts, the growth of Tamil associations, and the activities of scholars and writers had already generated strong attachment to the language during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Dravidian Movement did not create Tamil language devotion; rather, it transformed existing linguistic consciousness into a political instrument. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has shown, devotion to Tamil possessed important literary, cultural, and intellectual genealogies. Dravidian politics connected this linguistic pride with questions of social dignity, regional autonomy, and opposition to centralization.

Broadening the Social Base

From the 1930s onwards, the Dravidian Movement gradually expanded beyond the educated non-Brahmin elite that had dominated the earlier Justice Party. Students, teachers, writers, workers, small traders, dramatists, and sections of the rural population became increasingly involved in its activities. Public meetings, newspapers, pamphlets, political conferences, street speeches, theatre, and later cinema allowed Dravidian ideas to reach audiences far beyond the established political class. The movement's ability to combine social reform with Tamil cultural pride was particularly important in creating a popular political identity. The message of self-respect could be presented simultaneously as a demand for social equality and as an assertion of Tamil cultural dignity. This expansion also changed the character of Dravidian politics. The movement increasingly developed a distinctive political language

that combined anti-caste ideas, Tamil identity, opposition to Hindi, criticism of Congress rule, and demands for greater regional autonomy. The result was a transition from an elite movement concerned primarily with representation to a broader mass movement capable of organizing voters and influencing electoral politics. This transformation became particularly visible after the formation of the DMK in 1949.

Building a Mass Party

During the 1950s and 1960s, the DMK developed an extensive organizational structure consisting of local party units, student organizations, youth networks, public speakers, writers, cultural activists, and political workers. The party combined several issues into a single political programme: opposition to Hindi imposition, protection of Tamil language and culture, greater state autonomy, social justice, and criticism of Congress rule. This combination allowed the DMK to appeal to different sections of Tamil society. Its support expanded among intermediate and backward communities, students, sections of the urban population, and groups that were dissatisfied with Congress politics. The party's growth can be measured through its electoral performance. In the **1957 Madras Legislative Assembly election**, the DMK won **15 seats**. In the **1962 election**, its representation increased dramatically to **50 seats**. Five years later, in the **1967 election**, the party won **137 of the 234 Assembly seats**, securing a clear majority. This progression demonstrates the rapid transformation of the DMK from a relatively new opposition organization into the principal political challenger to the Congress.

The 1967 Election

The 1967 election was a decisive turning point in the political history of Tamil Nadu. The DMK formed the government under C. N. Annadurai and ended the Congress party's uninterrupted dominance of the state. The significance of the election extended beyond the change of government. It demonstrated that a regional political party could mobilize linguistic identity, social justice, anti-Congress sentiment, and regional interests sufficiently effectively to defeat the dominant national party.

The election also demonstrated the adaptability of Dravidian ideology. The earlier demand for a separate Dravidian state gradually lost its centrality, while the DMK increasingly operated within India's federal constitutional framework. Instead of abandoning regional aspirations, the party redirected them towards demands for greater state autonomy, protection of Tamil linguistic interests, and a stronger federal balance. In this sense, the movement transformed separatist rhetoric into a form of regional federalism.

After 1967, Dravidian parties became the dominant political force in Tamil Nadu. The formation of the **AIADMK in 1972** under M. G. Ramachandran created a second major Dravidian party and permanently changed the state's party system. Electoral competition subsequently took place largely between Dravidian parties, although national parties continued to participate through alliances. The political transformation that began with the DMK's victory in 1967 thus had consequences far beyond a single election.

Conclusion

The origin and growth of the Dravidian Movement represent a continuous yet complex process in the social and political history of Tamil Nadu. The movement developed through several important stages, beginning with the Justice Party's demand for communal representation, followed by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's Self-Respect Movement and its radical critique of caste and social inequality, and

culminating in the emergence of the DMK as a major electoral force. The DMK's victory in 1967 marked a decisive turning point, as it demonstrated that a regional political movement based on social justice, Tamil identity, and opposition to political centralization could successfully replace the long-established dominance of the Congress in the state. The significance of the movement extends beyond electoral politics. It challenged traditional caste hierarchies and contributed to the expansion of educational and employment opportunities for socially disadvantaged communities. It also transformed Tamil language and cultural identity into important elements of political discourse. Through the principles of reservation, social justice, and welfare, the movement contributed to the development of a distinctive model of state politics in Tamil Nadu. Its use of newspapers, public meetings, theatre, literature, and cinema further enabled political ideas to reach large sections of society and helped create a strong mass political culture.

The Dravidian Movement should therefore be understood not simply as an anti-Brahmin movement or as the history of a particular political party, but as a broad historical transformation involving caste, social justice, language, gender, regional identity, culture, and electoral democracy. Its achievements and contradictions remain closely connected. The movement opened new spaces for political participation and challenged established social hierarchies, while many forms of inequality continued to survive within the political order it helped create. Later Dalit, feminist, and other social movements have consequently both inherited and questioned the Dravidian tradition. Nevertheless, the movement remains one of the most important forces in the making of modern Tamil Nadu and a significant example of how regional social movements can reshape democratic politics in India.

Endnotes

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