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**Tamil Nadu Politics and Development: A Comprehensive Review
of Caste, Dravidian Movements, and Inclusive Urbanization**

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Abstract: The review paper explores the ways in which the politics of Dravidianism in Tamil Nadu has transformed the relationship between caste, development, political communication, and urbanization from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary digital age. Through the use of literature pertaining to the politics of the Dravidian parties, the world of Tamil cinema, caste-based politics, and welfare-based development, the review argues that the “Dravidian model” of development in Tamil Nadu, which combines identity-based politics and welfare-based development, has led to a more inclusive model of human development and a dispersed model of urbanisation that is spread out across the state and is not restricted to a single metropolitan centre. It demonstrates how cinema, and later television and digital media, serve as a key site of political communication that helps to embed the ideology of Dravidianism, normalise populist welfare, and create a new Tamil identity, while also creating new forms of fragmentation and division based on caste, gender, and region. It also explores the economic impact of caste-based politics and mobilisation on issues of social exclusion, poverty alleviation, and employment, and how this has led to a new kind of empowerment through reservations and welfare, but also to a new kind of discrimination and patronage. Lastly, the review argues that contemporary trends such as the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, the use of digital media in political communication, and the aspirations of youth and the urban electorate represent a new challenge to the sustainability and adaptability of the Dravidian model of development and its capacity to deliver a new kind of social justice and deepened democracy.

Keywords: Dravidian politics; Tamil Nadu; caste and development; political communication; Tamil cinema; welfare populism; urbanisation; social justice; identity politics; digital politics.

Introduction

Tamil Nadu embodies a unique political and socio-economic trajectory in India, marked by the prevalence of Dravidian politics and caste-based mobilization, and an inclusive pattern of socio-economic development. Since the decline of the Indian National Congress in 1967, the state has been ruled by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra



Kazhagam (AIADMK), two regional parties with their origins in the Dravidian movement's anti-Brahminical ideology (Arun Kumar, G. 2019). In contrast to other states in India, Tamil Nadu boasts remarkable human development parameters, with high literacy rates (71.8% in 2011), substantial tertiary-level education among marginalized castes, and well-developed public health facilities, in addition to high rates of economic growth and urbanization (Kalaiyarasan, A., & Narayan, P. (2025). This review aims to explore the complex inter-relationships between Dravidian politics, caste-based mobilization, and the unique developmental trajectory of Tamil Nadu, with specific reference to the role of politics in determining economic and spatial changes and socio-economic inclusion.

Historical Evolution of Dravidian Politics and Caste Mobilization

The Dravidian movement was born in early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu as a radical response to Brahminical domination and caste oppression. Led by E.V. Ramasamy, alias Periyar, the Self-Respect Movement (1921) and Dravida Kazhagam (1944) sought to challenge traditional hierarchies through a unique ideology of anti-caste activism, rationalism, and Tamil linguistic nationalism (Subramanian, N. 2011). The fundamental ideology of the Dravidian movement was based on the rejection of the possibility of reforming the caste system within the framework of the traditional social structure and the complete destruction of the caste system through comprehensive social transformation. This ideological orientation of the Dravidian movement differentiated it from Indian nationalism, which was largely accommodating of the caste system in the implementation of its developmental policies.

The formation of the DMK in 1949 by C.N. Annadurai marked the transformation of the Dravidian movement into an electoral political party. Using the sophisticated medium of Tamil cinema and politics, the DMK was able to mobilize the support of the lower castes, backward classes, and other marginalized communities against the Congress Party and its Brahminical ideology (Hardgrave, R.L. 1965). The DMK's electoral victory in 1967 marked a watershed in Tamil Nadu politics, marking the consolidation of Dravidian hegemony and the effective challenge to the Congress Party dominance, which was characteristic of Indian politics in the post-Independence era. The emergence of the AIADMK as a political party after the split in the DMK further entrenched caste-based politics in Tamil Nadu, with both parties vying for support through specific welfare schemes and appeals to specific castes (Velayutham, S., & Devadas, V. (2022). An essential aspect of the political history of Tamil Nadu was the way in which caste identity was explicitly politicized and mobilized as a medium for electoral mobilization and implementation of policies. In contrast to national politics, in which the role of caste was deliberately kept outside the political discourse to maintain secular credentials, in Tamil Nadu, the regional parties recognized and mobilized caste groups as core political constituencies. This politicization of caste identity, in certain ways, further entrenched caste divisions in society. At the same time, this created an institutional framework through which historically marginalized groups sought to assert their political representation and access to state resources.

Political Communication, Cinema, and Identity Formation

Tamil cinema was an essential medium for the communication of Dravidian political ideology and the formation of Tamil cultural and political identity. The interrelation between cinema and



politics in Tamil Nadu was unique in the Indian subcontinent. Political personalities like M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalitha began their careers in politics using their screen fame as a platform for entry into politics (Pandian, M.S.S. (2007). Through cinema, Dravidian parties communicated their vision of social justice, Tamil nationalism, and anti-Brahminical ideology to the masses in a manner that was beyond literacy and reached the masses in the countryside. The representation of Dravidian ideology in cinema underwent an essential transformation over time. Dravida cinema in the early days of Dravidian politics was marked by allegory-based narratives celebrating Tamil cultural pride and attacking Brahminical social hierarchies through narratives of protagonists belonging to the lower castes fighting against oppressive systems. The aesthetic techniques used in Dravida cinema transformed it into an instrument of political communication. The representation of Dravidian ideology in cinema was frontal and direct in its appeal to the audience through the use of Tamil language and references to Dravidian leaders. As T.S. Baskaran noted, the construction of the screen image of M.G. Ramachandran as saviour of the subaltern classes was instrumental in his political mobilization (Pandian, M.S.S. (2015). Tamil cinema in recent times has witnessed major transformations, with a shift in focus from Dravidian political themes to "fragment politics," which involves dealing with various and sometimes contradictory forms of Tamil society, including gender, caste issues, nativism, and issues of everyday injustice (Velayutham, S., & Devadas, V. (2022). This change in focus in Tamil cinema may be seen in the context of changes in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu, with issues of urbanization, class, and youth taking precedence over Dravidian politics. This change in focus in political communication through cinema may be seen in the context of the dynamism of Dravidian politics.

Caste, Economic Inequality, and Political Patronage

Though the Dravidian movement was ideologically opposed to the concept of caste and was anti-caste in principle, the politics of caste in Tamil Nadu may be seen to have further entrenched the divisions between castes in the state's political economy. The implementation of reservation policies in Tamil Nadu, though it has helped to improve the prospects of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes in the state in terms of access to education and employment in the public sector, may also have created a sense of competition between castes for the limited resources and benefits available in the state's political economy (Yoganandham, G. 2025).

This phenomenon of the economic effects of caste-based politics, therefore, can be seen in the fact that although reservation policies have undoubtedly helped in the upward mobility of some individuals belonging to the marginalized castes, particularly in the government sector where reservation policies can be best implemented, the overall economic inequalities between castes still exist. Scheduled castes continue to have a very high rate of unemployment, low wages, and limited access to credit and entrepreneurial opportunities in the private sector (Subramanian, K., & Kattumuri, R. 2024). Although the issue of caste-based discrimination in the labor market may have become less apparent in comparison to the past, it still remains an issue for Dalits, who continue to dominate in the manual labor sector with very low wages.

The political economy of caste in Tamil Nadu: The political economy of caste in Tamil Nadu may be seen in the fact that the overall politics of resource distribution and patronage have become



institutionalized in the form of electoral politics. Welfare policies, such as the provision of free electricity and laptops to housing schemes, have been used by political parties to consolidate their vote banks according to caste lines (Thirupathi, P., & Anil Kumar, V. 2025). Although this phenomenon of providing welfare measures to the poor and disadvantaged sections of society may have helped in the reduction of poverty and an overall improvement in the quality of living for some, it may have at the same time promoted the phenomenon of caste-based identity politics.

Dravidian Urbanization and Inclusive Development

The pattern of urbanization in Tamil Nadu represents a unique model characterized by geographical dispersion rather than metropolitan concentration. Unlike the rest of the states of India, which experience a primate city model of urbanization with a single metropolitan centre, Tamil Nadu has a large number of small and medium-sized towns spread across the state's territory (Rukmani, R. 1994). This model of dispersed urbanization was not a result of natural economic processes but was facilitated through political and ideological interventions by the Dravidian parties to promote inclusive development.

The theoretical underpinning of this model of urbanization is rooted in E.V. Ramasamy's assertion that the village and caste system constituted a major hindrance to economic and social liberation. Ramasamy identified the village as a site of oppression, where the caste system was spatially expressed through separate settlements, differential patterns of land ownership, and occupational segregation. In order to overcome this oppression, Ramasamy sought to break the geographical and occupational barriers of the village through urbanization, industrialization, and the creation of several urban centres where people could overcome the geographical and occupational limitations of the caste system.

Once in power, the DMK governments undertook a wide range of infrastructural and institutional reforms to promote this vision of spatial development. For example, investments in rural electrification, road development, and irrigation systems were intended to integrate rural people with the economic opportunities of the urban centres. In fact, by the 1970s, Tamil Nadu had almost completely electrified rural areas through subsidized electricity provision, which facilitated the development of agriculture and non-agricultural economic activities in rural areas. Similarly, the expansion of bus transportation and the provision of low-cost transportation facilitated the movement of people from rural areas to urban centres.

Complementing the "big push" in infrastructure, investments in education and public health also contributed to the development. With the midday meal scheme, universal education in rural areas, and a sound public health platform, economic opportunities extended beyond the landed classes to include marginalized groups and castes. Public investments in education and health, along with reservation policies and land reforms, opened up possibilities for ordinary peasants and artisans from lower castes to gain entry into modern manufacturing industries.

This series of moves led to the modernization of agriculture and the development of agro-industry in the state. With adequate irrigation and electricity, as well as favourable market conditions for some crops, region-specific modes of agricultural development emerged. With successful agriculturalists entering into the business of trade, followed by processing, and finally moving into industries, regional industrial clusters emerged in the state. Industrial



clusters like Tiruppur in cotton garments, Karur and Erode in power looms, Sivakasi in safety matches and printing, Ambur and Rani pet in leather goods, and so on, emerged scattered rather than concentrated in the metro hub. Significantly, these industrialists emerged from peasant and artisan backgrounds, rather than merchant backgrounds, thus reiterating the democratic character of capital accumulation, which Dravidian politics aimed at.

Social Dynamics and Caste-Based Networks in Contemporary Tamil Nadu

The state of Tamil Nadu continues with its development agenda and has shown positive results in terms of growth rates, poverty reduction, and human development achievements. However, challenges persist when it comes to caste-based discrimination and violence that pervades urban spaces as well. Scholarly works suggest that contemporary urban spaces are still divided by caste identities and that it is possible to be physically close yet socially distant from people of different castes (Ranganathan, M. 2022). For instance, even in urban spaces like Chennai, many roads are still like silent hierarchies of caste and social status, with segregated living patterns and poor people of marginalized castes relegated to living in slums and informal settlements without access to basic amenities (Roberts, B. 2016).

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary urban spaces in Tamil Nadu is the phenomenon of “neo-untouchability.” When urban spaces are engaged in development and beautification efforts, it is ironic that one of the most effective strategies of urban planners is eviction of poor people from urban spaces, with marginalized castes being disproportionately affected and forced to relocate to areas without adequate facilities and access to economic opportunities (Shanmugha Sundaram, R. 2021). Thus, it seems like the divide that Dravidian politics sought to erase is still being perpetuated in urban spaces of contemporary Tamil Nadu, albeit through development strategies that are ostensibly meant to improve urban spaces and lives. Another factor that continues to be relevant in contemporary urban and rural spaces is caste-based economic networks. The Dravidian movement did succeed in displacing traditional elite dominance in Tamil Nadu, but other castes, especially intermediate and backward castes, have continued to rely on caste identities as a means of economic mobilization and even limiting the upward mobility of Dalits (Karthikeyan, V., et al. 2012). For instance, even today, Dalits are still closely associated with menial jobs and are yet to be able to break away from this reality despite legal provisions that prohibit discrimination on caste grounds.

New research suggests that there is a need for a dynamic understanding of caste, keeping in mind the changing structures and acknowledging the fact that caste is constantly changing and adapting according to the changing economy. Thus, instead of understanding caste as having been frozen in its traditional form, it is necessary to recognize that caste-based oppression is actually taking new forms created by economic change. In Tamil Nadu, for example, caste violence often emerges when new actors who were denied economic opportunities and have challenged traditional hierarchies gain access and status, and the traditional caste groups retaliate against them through violence.

Digital Media, Political Communication, and Governance Challenges

The development of digital media, including social media, WhatsApp, and online ads, has presented new opportunities and challenges for political communication in Tamil Nadu.



Dravidian parties are increasingly using these media platforms to reach the younger, technologically savvy voters of the state and disseminate messages on welfare policies and party identity (Kumar, A. 2017). Digital media allows politicians to reach people directly, bypassing intermediaries, which can have positive effects on citizen involvement in politics. There are, however, potential drawbacks. Misinformation, manipulation through caste and communal categories, and the exacerbation of the digital divide, where those with greater digital, economic, and educational resources have greater advantages, are concerns. When parties have greater command over data analysis, information can be unevenly distributed. While digital technologies have the potential to 'democratize' information, in practice, they can further 'centrally control' politics, favouring party leadership and personalistic rule. But beyond merely discussing ways of governance, Tamil Nadu's struggles highlight a larger conflict inherent in the Dravidian political movement. For all the rhetoric of actual democratic participation from the ground up, there is a very centralized approach to governance, with those at the top making decisions. What was once hailed as a bureaucracy responsive to marginalized populations has evolved over time into one of corruption and rent-seeking. Tamil Nadu is one of the more corrupt states in India, with sophisticated mechanisms for extracting economic surplus from natural resources and government contracts based on caste and party affiliations (Sivakumar, G. 2018; Narayan, P. 2018).

Challenges to the Dravidian Development Model and Contemporary Political Competition

The Dravidian parties' control over the economic and political scenario is once again under challenge from various quarters in contemporary India. The national-level movements, especially the BJP and Hindu nationalist movements, are disrupting the traditional political scenario in Tamil Nadu both ideologically and in terms of voting results (Arun Kumar, G. 2019). The BJP is seeking to establish their foothold in Tamil Nadu by allying with smaller parties based on caste affiliations and capitalizing on cultural nationalist sentiments, especially in reshaping Tamil Nadu's identity in terms of Hindu nationalism (Subramanian, N. 2011). However, the Dravidian model's focus on caste-based identity and distribution may have led to the neglect of more overarching concerns such as economic inequality, gender justice, and environmental sustainability. It has been argued that the Tamil parties' reliance on populist policies such as free electricity, laptops, and food subsidies may have been attempts to buy votes while ignoring more fundamental issues in terms of asset distribution, land, and capital (Harris, J. 2001). Even in the context of urban industrialization, the continuation of feudal relations in rural areas may reflect the limited scope for redistributive policies in reshaping rural India. Gender is another area that is comparatively less explored in the politics of Tamil Nadu, though recent research has indicated that the Dravidian parties have promoted "welfare programs targeting women while at the same time reinforcing patriarchal structures" (Geetha, V. 2011). "The presence of women in low-wage manufacturing and service work, even as female labour force participation in Tamil Nadu exceeds the national average, suggests that gender oppression operates in conjunction with, and sometimes separately from, caste oppression."



Conclusion

Tamil Nadu is neither a success nor a failure when it comes to identity-based governance. It is more of a complex story of negotiated modernity, where caste mobilization, regional identity, and welfare-driven growth intersect and create new paths for social mobility and hierarchy. What the Dravidian movement offers is a model of politics based on social justice and its potential for new paths of development. What it also suggests is that social inequalities continue to evolve with change. What is needed is research that transcends success stories and failures and begins to examine the ways in which caste, class, gender, and digitality intersect and create new paths for Tamil Nadu.

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