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### Title-Bovine Nationalism: The Story of Patronage and Populism in the State of Tamil Nadu, India

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## Title-Bovine Nationalism: The Story of Patronage and Populism in the State of Tamil Nadu, India

*Dr. Lavanya Suresh*

### **Introduction**

The death of the sitting Chief Minister of the State of Tamil Nadu and the head of the ruling party All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), J. Jayalalithaa, on 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2016 destabilised a two-party dominated system of elections. From the 1970's onward Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its political rival All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) have been the major parties in the State and represented the Dravidian politics in the region. After the death of the head of the AIADMK, Jayalalithaa, a close aid of hers V.K. Sasikala, tried to take over, but on 14 February 2017, a two-bench Supreme Court jury pronounced her guilty and ordered her immediate arrest in a disproportionate-assets case, effectively ending her Chief Ministerial ambitions. This has led to political turmoil in the state, which has been capitalised on by the right-wing party that controls the central government, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In doing so the BJP has gained political ground in a state it did not have a chance in prior to this period.

This marks a shift in the type of patronage and populism that has defined politics in the State of Tamil Nadu. An event that highlights this is the pro-*Jallikattu* protest that was held in Chennai, the capital of the State. The protest was initially started by a group of fifty students on Marina Beach, but soon snowballed into a massive protest of Tamils against the ban on *Jallikattu*, a bull sport held during the harvest festival of Pongal. The sport that was popular among only some communities in the central and western districts of Tamil Nadu suddenly acquired an authentic Tamil identity. For over a decade debates over it raged in the courts of the country, but this year, a group of supporters of the *Jallikattu* converged at Alanganallur, the village near Madurai that is famous for the sport, demanding the lifting of the ban (Kalaiyaran, 2017). The students and the thousands who subsequently joined them in Chennai were expressing their support for the local people in the name of protecting Tamil culture.

The *Jallikattu* protest was based on the *Pulikulam* or *Kangayam* breeds of bull. On its own the event seems innocuous, but the right-wing party in power at the centre has been pursuing an aggressive 'holy cow' politics (Editorial, 2017). They have been glorifying India's past and have co-opted various ecological entities like the river Ganga and the cow to push forward a violent form of patriotism and cultural homogenisation. The question here is, are these protests in Tamil Nadu a form of resistance by the subaltern against an apathetic state or is it a way by which the BJP seeks to gain a foothold in this southern state where previously they had no presence? Or is it both?

In the 2016 assembly election, Jayalalitha became the first Tamil Nadu chief minister since M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) in 1984 to be voted back into office. Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu from 1989 till 2011 have been dominated by two parties; the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) who have ruled the state alternately for more than two decades. Both parties have roots in the South India justice party formed in 1916 which had the objective of social equity and opposed Brahminic domination.

Tamil Nadu is one of the states where the Congress lost power in 1967 and could never regain it. The reason behind this is that unlike most parts of the country with a fairly large percentage of the upper castes, their proportion to the population is low in Tamil Nadu. It may be noted that unlike in the Gangetic valley, the category of non-Brahmin upper castes (such as the Bhumihar and the Rajputs), constituting the landed aristocracy, is almost absent in Tamil Nadu. This distinct feature lent a certain dynamic to the socio-political discourse in the state. During the British rule, unlike in other parts of India where the ruling elite sided with the colonial rulers for reforms and then joined the Indian National Congress, in Tamil Nadu, Periyar E V Ramasami Naicker walked away from the congress

party in 1924. He did so to protest the discrimination faced by children in the Congress-run schools due to the practice of untouchability. He started the self-respect movement and was able to rally support during the elections to the Madras Provincial Assembly under the Government of India Act, 1935. This consolidation received an impetus when the Rajaji-led Indian National Congress provincial government (1937-1939) in the erstwhile Madras Presidency moved to make the learning of Hindi compulsory in schools. The anti-Hindi agitation and the Self-Respect Movement laid the foundation for the non-Congress political formation in the state and the formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949.

In the decade that followed, the DMK became a force to be reckoned with and challenged the Congress in the newly christened state of Tamil Nadu (The naming of the state was thanks to the demand made by the then chief minister C N Annadurai in Rajya Sabha) and consolidated itself into the sole representative of the intermediary social classes across Tamil Nadu. The consolidation was further made possible when the state government-initiated reservation in state government jobs for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The DMK, however, underwent a split soon and gave rise to the ADMK (Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam) in 1972, under M G Ramachandran (MGR), matinee idol and treasurer of the DMK until he was expelled. This marked the beginning of the two-party domination that came to characterise the political discourse in Tamil Nadu. However, this move also revived the Congress into a relevant force (Ananth, 2014). Later MGR prefixed All India to the party name. Jayalalithaa was a film actress turned politician and became the main face of the party after MGR's death in 1989. The two decades of the 1990's and 2000's saw power shift from one party to the other with an anti-incumbency deciding every assembly election till 2016. In these two decades both these parties thrived on a manifesto of patronage and personality politics.

### *Patronage in Tamil Nadu*

From the very beginning, the AIADMK, under the leadership of popular actor and long-serving Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran, used benevolent patronage and a pro-poor posturing as its calling card. When Jayalalitha took over, the AIADMK retained patronage, a form of governance where its political support is based on transactions between the client (the people) and the patron (the party in power), to ensure support for itself. These transactions were either public goods and welfare in the form of subsidies that are not targeted, or club goods and services to clients across communities. Patronage politics had enabled the AIADMK to cater to large sections among Tamil Nadu's poor and the MGR appeal, burnished through his well-spread fan associations, owed itself to the efficacy of this system. The DMK, on the other hand, was more of a cadre and agenda-driven organisation that emphasised the need for a circulation of elites from middle castes and communities while empowering the state bureaucracy to implement public welfare. The DMK initiated a series of reforms based on affirmative actions that have had significant impacts in Tamil Nadu society over the years. The DMK's turn to benevolent populism or its strategy to also indulge in what is called the freebie culture was something new, adopted only in the late 2000s in order to emulate the AIADMK.

Almost a decade of such patronage politics and populism of this kind has meant that there is virtually no political distinction between the DMK and the AIADMK. In fact, what distinguishes and differentiates the two is the leadership of the parties and the animosity that they share for each other. The consequence of this form of competition is the reduction of the political contest to one of persona and leadership rather than issues and policies. There is little to differentiate between the AIADMK and the DMK if one considers the left-right ideological or progressive-conservative spectrums.

### *Populist welfare policies*

What is common to these parties is their insistence on populism, leader (and associated family) supremacy which entails the subsuming of the image of the party, its organisation and its political

positions to the persona and authority of its supremo. Their political appeals are directed to all segments of society in varying degrees and there lacks a clear differentiator in respective support bases based on cleavages in society. This form of politics was very beneficial in terms of welfare policies reaching the people. There has been a rising trend in Human Development Index parameters for the state. A look at *Amma Unavaga* (Canteen) in 2016 in Chennai reveals the widespread appeal of the populist schemes rolled out by both parties.

“The food is good. The place is clean. Actually, I prefer the cleanliness over the menu,” P. Divaraj chuckles. “The real reason I’m here is because it’s the end of the month and I’m running out of money.” A 10-minute walk from his office to Amma Unavagam on Santhome High Road in Chennai and all it cost Mr. Divaraj, a software professional, was Rs.15 for a midday meal of curd (Yogurt) rice, sambar (Pigeon Pea) rice and lemon rice.

The canteen, inaugurated by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on February 19, 2013, was the first *Amma Unavagam* to be opened in the State. On a good day, says canteen supervisor S. Santhisree, its 16 staff members serve between 4,500 and 5,000 meals. There was even a time when the outlet would serve up to 7,000 meals a day. There are the regulars such as Mariaselvi, a sweeper with the Chennai Corporation, who comes in everyday for lunch after completing her shift. And there are seasonal patrons such as Mr. Divaraj (Ramani & Sebastian, 2016).

The canteen is very popular and has made a difference in the everyday lives of the people in the State. This populist policy has met a welfare goal of providing all with access to food and has made a huge difference. The success and efficiency with which the *Amma Unavagams* is run is a testament to how ostensibly populist government schemes end up positively impacting the life of people in the state. Framing welfare as the distribution of public and club goods, be it *Amma* canteens, subsidised salt, or goods such as grinders and mixers which have been distributed during the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) regime as also similar initiatives during the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) regime, helps it reach the people beyond sectional interests. The efficiency of the delivery of goods and services in both the regimes has been very high.

Tamil Nadu’s political economy, over the past two decades, has been shaped by this comprehensive welfare model that is dominated also by a patronage system. This model of patronage politics is a system which depends upon parties delivering resources and material promised to voters, especially the poor, during elections. The effectiveness of this system is in its reach through governmental agencies or party networks and the interpersonal nature of the distribution of goods. The party representative or the party head strives to deliver specific goods, either public goods such as free power or cheaper rice or club goods such as laptops or grinders, or services to clients across communities or even raises the hope of clients about delivery, expecting prospective voting in the party’s favour. In Tamil Nadu’s case, the effectiveness of the patronage system is what makes it unique in one respect. Distribution of goods has generally happened, either in the DMK’s or in the AIADMK’s case, in accordance with the promises made prior to elections.

This form of patronage made welfare universal and not based on caste alliance. The Dravidian parties’ own bases might have, at one point of time, been dominated by the presence of intermediate castes, with the legacy of the Dravidian movement flowing from the Self-Respect movement in the State, but today it is difficult to pin down the parties as being constitutive of specific caste or communities controlling them because of the universality of the patronage system.

Competitive populism, however, has a flip side to it, and its practice across the political divide in Tamil Nadu; has stunted the evolution of a genuine liberal democracy in the State. Formal aspects of a liberal democracy are adequately institutionalised, but the substantive aspect of choice and differentiation that is facilitated by difference in ideological and political positions is increasingly becoming a illusion.

To a certain degree, competitive populism, as the *Amma* canteens show, is not necessarily antithetical

to public interest. But the flip side is the lack of intervention by the state to address social and economic inequities which cannot be simply wished away by patronage. Patronage politics also bring along with them the problem of corruption. It reduces the electorate as passive recipients of welfare, who use elections as sites of transactions (social bribes). It is no wonder that the authoritarian attitudes of select leaders and dynastic nature of the Dravidian parties are taken for granted even by the electorate. This has weakened democracy in Tamil Nadu and does not augur well for a liberal democratic order.

There is also the fiscal impact of distribution and subsidy programmes that leave little for the state to spend in productive and long-lasting investment that could transform the economy. Persisting grievances and lack of differentiation have resulted in the Dravidian parties taking turns in government despite the efficiency of patronage (Ramani & Sebastian, 2016). These problems have been worsened because of the fact that patronage in the state is based on personality-driven politics of both AIADMK and DMK.

### *Personality-driven politics*

An effective patronage system is reliant upon a strong network that ensures delivery of promises. This is best helped when loyalty of the cadre is ensured, which means that the control of party finances is important and therefore centralised. This is perhaps why the structure of both parties is characterised either by the control of one family (the DMK) or one charismatic individual aided by a trustworthy aid (the AIADMK), respectively. The former has also been helped by a strong organisational structure, nurtured over the years by the first family of M. Karunanidhi at the top, while the AIADMK has had the benefit of utilising the vast array of MGR fan associations in the past, which have formed the backbone of the party. The AIADMK needed to propagate the charisma of the leader to sustain the model, which explains the sycophancy of its other leaders and the massive image building exercises venerating its leader.

It must be said that the DMK adapted itself to the patronage-based system from being an ideology-driven party as a response to the success of the AIADMK model. Today, being parties dependent mostly on patronage and generally devoid of distinguishing principle is the reason why the blight of corruption affects both parties, with senior leaders of both parties alleged to have amassed wealth due to proximity or presence in power. It is also why the charge of malfeasance against Ms. Jayalalithaa did not have much resonance with her supporters or the general public, as the standard that she was measured against, the opposition, was stuck with similar charges recently.

Differentiation between these parties is made therefore not on the basis of their respective positions on issues or even their degrees of upright governance, but on the efficiency of delivery of promises when in power and the promises they make before coming to power. Yet, such a form of governance driven largely by patronage-based populism has its limits, as it does not address structural issues related to the economy. Effective distribution of specific goods is not a substitute for a true welfare model that seeks to achieve growth through enhancing productive resources in the economy. Tamil Nadu is better off than many other States in India in that respect due to advantages of being a manufacturing hub (aided by the fact that the State has a long mercantile history and ports) and an up and coming services sector. But there are always discontents who suffer from the lack of upward mobility or distress due to agrarian issues or social insecurity (Ramani, 2015). That is the reason why the sudden death of J. Jayalalithaa on 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2016 has left the state vulnerable to a rightist nationalist ideology that is driven by communal identity and authoritarian nationalist tendencies. The DMK is weak as its patriarch Karunanidhi is 93 and the party is plagued by sibling rivalry, his son M K Stalin, successor to the throne, and his elder brother MK Alagiri are engaged in turf wars. The Congress, which was uprooted by the Dravidian parties half a century ago, does not have a strong state leader or cadre leaving the field open for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP, that controls the central government, has been using this political turmoil to pit ambitious politicians against each other and in doing so gain political ground in a state it did not have a chance in prior to this period.

The BJP has been trying to gain ground in the state since 1999 with little success but post the death of Jayalalithaa the BJP has been able to make in-roads into the state as her party the ruling AIADMK split into two factions. The factions were led by O. Panneerselvam (OPS) on one side and Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS) on the other. This resulted in the state having three chief ministers in one year (2017). It almost had a fourth one when Jayalalithaa's aide V.K. Sasikala was ready to be sworn in before she was jailed in a disproportionate assets case in February 2017. Sasikala and her nephew T.T.V. Dhinakaran were later side-lined within the party, and a truce was orchestrated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) between chief minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS) and O. Panneerselvam (OPS).

The BJP's influence in the state can also be seen in the events that followed the merging of the factions. A new governor for the state of Tamil Nadu named Banwarilal Purohit was appointed on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2017. He had in 2009 contested elections on a BJP ticket. He met with the Coimbatore (an administrative division in the state of Tamil Nadu) district collector (a bureaucrat who executes policies on the ground) and other officials in November 2017 to review the work of the administration. This act was beyond the constitutional role of a governor, who is appointed by the centre and is not an elected representative. This makes him the nominal head of the state and the real powers should lie with the elected representative. The opposition DMK de-facto leader Stalin raised suspicion that the BJP at the centre was trying to rule by proxy in Tamil Nadu (Thangavelu, 2017). In fact, the Tamil Nadu deputy chief minister O Panneerselvam has said that he merged his faction with the current chief minister K Palaniswami, on the advice of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi who heads the BJP.

### *A shift from populism to authoritarian populism*

The BJP has capitalised on acceptance the people in the state have had for populism and changed it into authoritarian populism. "Authoritarian populism typically depicts politics as a struggle between 'the people' and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged 'Others', at home or abroad or both." (Scoones, et al., 2017, p. 2). One event that highlights this shift in the type of populism is the pro-*Jallikattu* movement in January 2017. The reason this event is of interest is because it reflects a particular type of Hindu majoritarian nationalism that the BJP has been advocating at the centre and in the north Hindi belt of India. The BJP and its supporters have used a language of cultural nationalism that is exclusive of all other communities, beliefs or histories. This has included a consistent targeting of Muslims and Dalits in the country in the name of cow protection. These events have been termed as vigilantism.

The BJP came into power in the centre in 2014 and a year later Mohammad Akhlaq was lynched to death in the state of UP over rumours that he and his family had consumed beef. In October 2015, Noman from Himachal Pradesh was killed for allegedly smuggling cattle. In January 2016 seven members of a *Gauraksha Samiti* (Cow protection group) assaulted a Muslim couple in a railway station in Madhya Pradesh on suspicion of carrying beef in their luggage. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Majloom Ansari and twelve-year-old Imtiyaz Khan were beaten, strangled and their bodies hung from a tree on rumours that they had eaten beef. On July 17, 2017 a Dalit family in Karnataka were beaten as they were suspected of eating beef. These are just a few instances of violence from across the country. In the first six months of 2017, twenty cow related lynching cases have been reported (The Wire, 2017). These attacks have been reported mainly in the north Hindi belt. In the south these attacks have been reported in states like Karnataka where the BJP has a strong presence and is the second largest party.

In Tamil Nadu this politics has taken a different form. Mukul Sharma (2014) argues that the two social currents of environmental conservation and Hindu politics have forged bonds in India. Hindu ideologues are gaining mileage for their ideology by espousing major environmental projects (Sharma, 2014). The link made here is not in favour of an environmentally sustainable world, but rather the upholding of the values of the dominant mainstream Hindu culture. In this case it's in the name of animal protection. The emergence of this in Tamil Nadu was through the pro-*jallikattu* protests. The protest was started by students and was against the Supreme Court's order to ban *jallikattu* a traditional Tamil bull taming sport, which is held during Pongal, a harvest festival in the state of Tamil Nadu,

India. The sport is conducted annually on the second day of the Tamil month *Thai* (Jan-Feb).

The sport was banned by the Supreme Court in 2014. The court based the verdict on the fact that it was cruel to the animal based on a lawsuit filed by the animal rights activists group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which asserted that the tradition violates the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA), 1960. The order state that bulls should not be used as objects of entertainment as they were cruelly treated, where in the tails of bulls were bitten and twisted, collapsed bulls were pulled by ropes attached to their noses, and the bull's tailbones were purposefully broken. However, in response to the protest the government used an ordinance (i.e., when the Legislative Assembly of the State is not in session and the Governor of Tamil Nadu is satisfied that that circumstances exist which render it necessary for him to take immediate action. It has the effect of a law.) to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA), 1960 and thereby overturn the May 7, 2014 Supreme Court judgement. The ordinance promulgated by the Governor on January 21, 2017 on jallikattu (Tamil Nadu Ordinance No. 1 Of 2017) was titled - An Ordinance to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 so as to preserve the cultural heritage of the State of Tamil Nadu and to ensure the survival and wellbeing of the Native breed of bulls. Among other amendments, one amendment was the incursion of section 28A which read as follows, "Saving in respect of *Jallikattu*: - Nothing contained in this Act shall apply to 'Jallikattu' conducted to follow and promote tradition and culture and such conduct of Jallikattu shall not be an offence under this Act."

The festival was conducted and resulted in the death of ten people, including a policeman on duty and several bulls were injured. One terrified bull ran for its life and died after falling into a quarry. The pro-jallikattu movement did not address any of these issues. Instead the entire rhetoric was in the name of Tamil pride and culture (Rajan, 2017). The Tamil identity historically was an assertion of speaking Tamil as well as simultaneously an anti-caste, secularist and anti-sanskrit movement. However now one can be a good Tamil, good Hindu and a good Indian together. This option was not available earlier (Kalaiyaran, 2017, p. 12). The Hindu right could indeed find its takers in the state now, with the new understanding of Tamil identity as being one that is culturally bound in the idea of the 'holy cow'.

## Conclusion

This new idea of populism is not one that is universal, but rather it is divisive. It is finding traction because with the lack of a charismatic leader the old form of patronage is collapsing. The parties have lost their cadres on the ground and the AIADMK party members are scrambling to get access to Jayalithaa's assets. The politics of patronage which had worked well for the state of Tamil Nadu for more than two decades has now broken down and given room for an authoritarian populism that could lead to communal violence becoming a part of the discourse in the state. The route being used is by connecting ecology to a nationalist cultural rhetoric. Nature and environmental discourses are often linked, regrettably, to irrational reactionary political agendas. Varying degrees of environmentalism can lead to reasons to exclude others (Hamilton, 2002, p. 42). This enables the articulation of a type of politics that could destroy the democratic fabric of a state that has a long unique political history. Tamil Nadu has carved its own trajectory in the landscape of the democracy of India. The hope is that it will continue to do so and move away from the divisive communal politics that has the country in its grip now.

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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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