Chapter VI

CONGRESS.POLITICS AND DERADICALISED DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

There are significant forces and processes that are conspicuously visible in the politics of regional and national political scenario. Increasingly politics and parties are subjected to the processes of regionalization and federalization as new social groups achieved political consciousness and awakening. In this changed environment the national parties are responding in adequate measure to provide respect and recognition to the forces of the region. The politics of Tamil Nadu is subjected to massive modifications in nature, social base of political parties and how the national party of congress has reacted to these changes in regional and national politics becomes an important matter for analysis.

The Dravidian movement in the last two decades had undergone the twin interrelated processes of ideological deradicalisation and coalitional disintegration resulting in the creation of vast disenchanted social groups, which offered fertile opportunities for national parties like congress to mobilize and capture power in the state. Many populous communities like Vanniyars of northern Tamilnadu, Parayars of north and central Tamilnadu, the Devendrakula Vellalars of southern districts, the Telugu speaking Arunthathirs of the western districts, the religious minorities of Islam and Christianity began to dissociate themselves from the rainbow like coalition the Dravidian movement had built and maintained in the previous decades. But the response of the congress party to these events was tentative, reluctant and at times suicidal and this nonchalant attitude contributed to the continued marginalization of the congress party. And concomitantly various new players based on caste and religious identities have emerged to fill up the vacuum heralding a new age of socio political mobilization based on caste and religion and competitive multi polar electoral alliance system.

From the decade of 1980’s the lower backward classes and Dalits have begun to challenge the Dravidian identity assiduously crafted and maintained by the political parties of Dravidian tradition. The uneven progress of the Dravidian movement in
social, political and economic dimensions precipitated the disintegration of the traditional social coalition of non-Brahmins.¹

The Brahmin-non-Brahmin dichotomy created conditions conducive to the crystallization of different non-Brahmins under the Dravidian umbrella. Different non-Brahmin castes, which had joined the non-Brahmin umbrella followed different trajectories of development enjoying in the process differential gains. While the forward non-Brahmins reaped the benefits of the Justice party, other elite non-Brahmin communities like Thevars, Nadars of south, Gounders of west, Mudaliyars of north greatly prospered because of the Dravidian movement. The caste communities relatively at the lower and lowest rungs of the social ladder like the Vanniyars, Parayars, Pallars did not derive social and economic benefits commensurate with their numerical strength and as this awareness arose in the 80's they began to dissociate themselves from the Dravidian parties.

"The materially more advanced sections of the non-Brahmins such as the Chettiar elite, who during their economic ascendancy endorsed and funded the movement, found it no longer to be of any great relevance. While on the other hand the Dalits and groups like the Vanniyars have fallen away because the Dravidian parties have not met their aspirations. The most important and obvious reason for this tragic political shift is the growing power and arrogance of the backward class elite at the local level, which has often translated itself into Adi-Dravida violence."²

Dalits and Politics in Tamil Nadu

The contemporary political scenario in Tamil Nadu characterized by the disintegration of the social coalition built by Dravidian parties provides immense opportunities to the political parties to mobilize Dalit support to capture power in the state. The Dalit communities can act as a decisive factor in determining the electoral dynamics in the state as they contributed a crucial 20% of the population and as they are distributed across all regions and districts even though a denser distribution is found in the
agriculturally fertile river belts. A thorough analysis of the electoral politics of the state since independence unmistakably demonstrates the political axiom that consolidation of Dalit votes provides crucial edge to political parties to enter the corridors of St. George Fort in Chennai.

After independence the Dalit communities largely supported the congress party, a political axiom that could be adduced as one of the factors contributing to the dominance of congress party in the system characterized by the existence of a plurality of political parties. There were many factors heralding the consolidation of Dalit votes behind congress in the first two decades after independence. The political assimilation of Ambedkar with congress government headed by the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the enactment of republic constitution that provided fundamental rights without discrimination to all citizens galvanized the support of the marginalized communities behind congress. The abolition of untouchability under the article 17 of the constitution that declared the preaching and practice of untouchability on any ground as illegal and the enactment of the Untouchability Abolition Act that was later amended as Protection of Civil Rights Act promoted the interests of the hitherto oppressed Dalit communities.

In practice the prevailing economic system in the countryside too enabled the congress party to capture the votes of Dalits. There existed a system in agriculture called as Pannayal system where the Pannayals or agricultural workers were dependent on their agricultural masters in economic, social, political and religious dimensions of their life and their relationship was similar to the feudal master-slave relationship of the medieval Europe.

This system enabled the agricultural masters to mobilize the votes of oppressed classes in favor of the congress party. The owners largely supported the congress party as the later had implemented land reforms by abolishing zamindari system that had greatly benefited the middle level agricultural caste groups in the countryside in Tamil Nadu. The indirect patron-client mobilization also called as vertical mobilization worked to bring the votes of the agricultural workers to the congress party in the polling booths.
The Dalits supported the congress because of their conflict with some anti-congress dominant communities. In the southern districts the militant Maravar community under the leadership of Muthuramalinga Thevar was organized into a political party called Forward block. The Dalit community of this area then called as Pallars but now called as Devendrakula Vellalars was locked in a bitter conflict with the Maravars and they began to support the congress party as a result of local political antagonism. The congress party organized this Dalit community successfully in the 1957 elections in the Mudukulathoor assembly constituency and Aruppukottai Lok sabha constituency. This precipitated a bitter conflict between the Maravars and Pallars in which a number of people were killed. The district administration at Ramanathapuram convened a peace conference in which the Maravar leader Muthuramalinga Thevar and Devendrakula Vellalar leader Immanuel participated. As a result of the hot exchanges between them in the peace committee meeting the Dalit leader was killed a day later precipitating another round of classes. The congress state government took strong action against the perpetrators of the murder and caste classes that alienated the Maravars from the congress and simultaneously consolidated the Devandrakula Vellalars behind congress.5

The support of Dalits to the congress party partially got diminished in the wake of the aggressive mobilization tactics of DMK in the epoch-making 1967 elections. The chief of DMK C.N.Annadurai was able to maintain an atmosphere of non-contradiction between Dalits and caste Hindus for sometime.6 But the emerging consolidation of Dalits behind DMK came to be arrested by the Kilavenmani massacre in the agriculturally fertile Tanjore district. The communist parties had for a long time worked hard and mobilized the agricultural workers of Kilavenmani near Mannarkudi as part of its peasant mobilization movement. The assertive and politically organized agricultural workers were subjected to a brutal arson in 1968 in which local landlords murdered forty-two Dalits. As the ruling DMK was supported by the aggressive landlords of the area belonging to the non-Brahmin communities, the Dalit alienation from DMK began to materialize.7
In the early seventies the Dalit leaders revolted against the leadership of DMK on the ground of political, economic and social discrimination. The author of the Dalit revolt within DMK was the minister called Satyawani Muthu. She was a founder member of DMK, a member of the executive council of the party and earlier Dravida Kazhagam. She hailed from a family that had introduction into politics through congress party but later on came to join the self-respect movement. In early seventies she was the cabinet minister for Harijan welfare. She was disillusioned with the programmes of her own government in the domain of Harijan welfare as the caste Hindus controlled the party machinery and bureaucratic apparatus. She exhorted her caste members to get united and politically organized to fight caste oppression. When she claimed that Ambedkar was her only leader and not the chief minister of Tamil Nadu she was expelled from the ministry and party. Her revolt against the party was rather substantial as ten members of state legislative assembly two members of legislative council and a member of parliament had joined her. The split coincided with the formation ADMK and the Dalits walked out of DMK into the fold of the sibling ADMK.

When ADMK was formed the Dalits spontaneously embraced it as they were attracted by the pro-poor and anti-rich image of M.G. Ramachandran in his films. The fledging party was able to sustain attraction for Dalits as it was seen as less supportive of the dominant caste Hindus in the villages, an image that could be attributed to the non-Tamil origin of the matinee idol. Many politically conscious Dalits felt in the eighties that ADMK offered better political opportunities for Dalits aspiring for community empowerment and individual development. Some of the administrative and educational measures of ADMK government greatly benefited the disprivileged groups thereby strengthening the bond between them and the party. Administratively the government abolished the post of Karnam or village accountant and in its place installed the modern, government appointed village administrative officers. In the traditional Karnam system the dominant communities alone could exercise power but in the new system the members of oppressed communities also came to be appointed as per the mandatory reservation provisions of constitution. This new method of V.A.O. appointment greatly
altered the social relations at village level as the caste Hindus had to approach the VAOs belonging to the scheduled castes for all their administrative needs.9

Educationally the ADMK government extended the noon-meal scheme of Kamaraj government in nature and scope to attract and retain school children. The nutritious noon meal scheme was meant for all school going children but there is substantial veracity in the statement that children belonging to scheduled castes greatly benefited as these communities in comparison to others suffered overwhelmingly from acute poverty and illiteracy.10 This scheme historically proved to be the strongest pillar of M.G. Ramachandran’s enduring legacy and ADMK’s electoral supremacy.

After the death of the charismatic chief minister and as a result of internecine rivalry between the two factions of ADMK the state was brought under president’s rule under article 356. The congress party wanted to recapture the support of the Dalits and therefore projected the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi as the inheritor of M.G.R. legacy. Though initially the party paid greater attention to Vanniyar sangam, later on after the breakdown of its talks with them began to cultivate the Dalits. Whenever the prime minister visited the state (he visited rather frequently) the itinerary always included his visits to the slums and Dalit settlements. It sought to project its concerns for the marginalized communities repeatedly.11 It sought to consolidate their support through its own leader Elayaperumal. He was one of the most important Dalit leaders of the congress party in the 70’s and 80’s. He hailed from Kattumanner Kovil in the Vanniyar dominated northern Tamilnadu. He won the first Lok Sabha elections in 1952 from the Chidamparnam constituency. He was a disciple of Swami Sahajananda, a Shaivite scholar and prominent Dalit leader. He took over the Nandanar educational society formed to educate the scheduled caste people by his mentor. He was earlier appointed by the central government as the chairperson of the first ever-national committee to investigate the social, economic conditions of the scheduled castes. The report prepared by the committee titled “Untouchability: Economic and Educational Development of Scheduled Castes” provided extensive recommendations to empower the scheduled castes.12
He was appointed as the president of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee in 1979. He was elected to the parliament in the 70's twice and once to the legislative assembly of the state. When congress came back to power in the 1980 parliamentary elections he campaigned for the implementation of the Elayaperumal Committee Report. As there was no immediate response from the government and his party, he quit the same to form his own party called Indian Human Rights Party with the primary objective of Dalit empowerment and advancement. He rejoined the party in the late 80's and he was projected by the party to capture the votes of the scheduled caste but for various reasons the effort was fruitless and futile.

In the dawn of the 90's as deradicalization of Dravidian parties became more and more pronounced and ADMK under the leadership of a right leaning chief minister deviated from Dravidian moorings the Dalits began to gradually dissociate themselves from Dravidian parties. Moreover the ADMK because of its ideological modifications and personal relationship between the chief minister and her confident Sasikala Natarajan, a member of dominant Thevar community sided with socially entrenched groups forcing the Dalits to gradually delink themselves from party. The educated representatives and leaders of Dalit communities realized that their problems are not amenable to easy political solution given the support structure and leadership recruitment pattern of major political parties in the state and therefore decided to organize themselves independently.

All the three major communities of Dalit identity had formed separate political parties to fight for their interests. The Arunthathaiars of western Tamilnadu organized a party called Tamilnadu Arunthathiar Youth Front (TAYF). This group is the least politically organized community among Dalits in the state and therefore their political party is operating only at the periphery of politics in the state. In the late 1990's the TAYF strove to secure an understanding with Bahujan Samaj party of Uttar Pradesh. The second largest Dalit community Devendrakula Vellallar started their political party called Pudiya Tamilagam meaning new Tamilnadu. Dr. Krishnaswamy, a physician in the western city of Coimbatore, organized it. Having bullock cart as its

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symbol the party captured the political limelight in the Manjolai estate workers issue. The caste conflict between the dominant Thevars and assertive Devendrakula Vellalars in the mid 90's politically galvanized the support of the caste members to Pudiya Tamilagam and in the 1996 legislative elections its leader came to be elected to the legislative assembly from Ottapidaram in the south.¹⁴

The largest Dalit community of the state the Parayars otherwise called as Adi-Dravidas have started their own political party called Dalit Panthers of India. This party was organized with Thirumavalavan as its leader and had undergone significant changes in its nomenclature, as it is now known only as Liberation Panthers.

**TMC and Dalit Consolidation**

A third front as an alternative to either of the Dravidian parties emerged on the eve of the 1999 parliamentary elections in Tamilnadu which witnessed the consolidation of disparate Dalit parties behind Tamil Maanila Congress, the mainline congress faction of the state. As caste classes erupted the assertive Dalit parties championed the cause of their members and their opponents painted them as terrorist, disruptive forces. In this backdrop to achieve the twin goals of protection of the Dalit interests and assimilation into the political mainstream of the state the Dalit parties chose to join the third front floated by Moopanar. They appreciated the decision of TMC on the question of secularism as it voted against the BJP led National Democratic Alliance government in the no confidence motion. The Tamil Maanila Congress too wanted to provide a genuine alternative to either of the Dravidian parties in the state. Historically Moopanar actively campaigned for an independent strategy to capture power for congress without the debilitating alliance with either ADMK or DMK as symbolized by the congress independent bids in 1977 and 1989 legislative assembly elections. The broad based front inclusive of all the major Dalit parties came to be formed under the leadership of TMC. Moopanar described it as a silent revolution.¹⁵
The TMC believed that the consolidation of discontented Dalit and polarized anti-establishment minorities along with its own traditional vote bank would enable the party to provide an alternative to the Dravidian parties in the State. The alliance was believed to be mutually beneficial, as the Dalit parties would boost TMC electoral fortunes while TMC's association with them would provide scope for the acceptance of these Dalit parties by caste Hindu communities. When the Chief Minister Karunanidhi criticized the wisdom of TMC aligning with castiest elements TMC replied that its association with these parties of marginalized communities would bring them back from violent extremism to the mainstream of democratic politics. The TMC and Moopanar gave the Dalit parties the credibility denied by other mainstream political parties.16

The very personality of TMC leader Moopanar brought together for the first time in the electoral history of the state a mainstream political party and Dalit identity based parties. Though born in a land holding family in the agriculturally fertile Tanjore district in a backward caste cluster called Parkavakulam Moopanar always practiced simplicity in politics as he was easily accessible which was rather uncommon in the political culture dominated by aloof but charismatic leaders. A former union minister belonging to a Dalit community Arunachalam had described an event indicative of the commitment of Moopanar to Dalit welfare. When Moopanar was the general secretary of All India Congress Committee during the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi he was in-charge of party affairs in Rajasthan. There was a controversy in a place called Nathwara where the marginalized communities were ill-treated and not allowed to enter the temples. When the issue was brought to the notice of the congress party a committee was sent to enquire the issue under the chairmanship of Moopanar. After intensive persuasion Moopanar succeeded in getting the entry rights for Dalits in that area.

Even after the formation of the TMC Moopanar was conscious of providing due representation to the Dalit communities and he recommended a Dalit member of parliament to the union council of ministers as one of the four nominees of TMC. He also sought to provide adequate representation to Dalits in the organizational structure of his fledgling party.
When caste classes took place in the southern districts between the aggressive Thevars and increasingly assertive Dalits the TMC took serious efforts to solve the issue. Along with the Pudiya Tamilagam it organized a meeting in Chennai to which Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, Bharathiya Janatha Party, Pattali Makkal Katchi were also invited. The anti caste conference passed a resolution demanding efforts by all concerned to eradicate casteism and the attendant evil of untouchability. The conference demanded the government to take active measures for the propagation of the noble ideas of Periyar and Ambedkar in the caste afflicted areas so that peace and social renaissance could be promoted. The TMC leader Moopanar said that the only a complete change of heart among the people would end casteism and caste related conflicts. The conference demanded the government to sincerely and in letter and spirit implement the provisions of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and SC/ST reservation in public employment and educational institutions.

Later on the TMC criticized the chief minister for unwarranted procrastination in the implementation of the Government Order issued by the previous regimes to the effect that a transport corporation be named after Sundaralingam, a Dalit icon of the earlier era. The active intervention of TMC to resolve caste clashes invited the anger of the dominant communities. The dominant Thevar community for siding with Dalits attacked the TMC and its supporters. For example in Sivakasi the Thevars were aggrieved by certain administrative measures taken by the chairman of Municipal Council belonging to TMC. They were dissatisfied with the municipal administration's decision to remove encroachments and to order fresh auction for the maintenance of public utility services. Hence the members of Thevar community attacked the supporters of TMC and when a peace committee meeting was organized a Dalit councillor was seriously attacked.

The Manjolai estate workers dispute and the subsequent Tirunelveli massacre brought together the Pudiya Tamilagam and Tamil Maanila Congress. There was a protracted wage related dispute in a tea estate at Manjolai in the Western Ghats falling under the territorial jurisdiction of Tirunelveli district and many agitating workers were
arrested and jailed. As most of the workers belonged to the Dalit community of Devandakula Vellalars the Pudiya Tamilagam was in the forefront of the agitation. A multi party procession was organized in Tirunelveli town on the banks of Tamiraparani river to demand early resolution of the wage dispute and release of arrested workers in which besides Pudiya Tamilagam the Tamil Maanila Congress and the two communist parties also participated. The participation of TMC was substantial as its leader, the leader of opposition in the Tamilnadu legislative assembly S. Balakrishnan and four other MLAs joined the procession. The TMC accepted the demand of the Pudiya Tamilagam that the government must take over the Manjolai estate owned by the Bombay Burma trading company. But the police launched a brutal assault on the procession in which around 19 people were killed. The TMC leaders characterized the killings as mini Jallian Wallabagh and condemned the police action as premeditated. Moopanar even held that the Chief Minister should accept moral responsibility for the tragic events as he held additional charge of home ministry.19

A multi party fast was organized in Chennai and other district headquarters on 31st July 1999 condemning the Tirunelveli massacre where parties like Tamil Mannila Congress, Pudiya Tamilagam, Tamil Muslim Aikkiya Jamaath, Human Rights Party, Indian Union Muslim League and Ambedkar Makkal Iyyakkam participated.20 Here the TMC demanded that action should be taken against the district collector, the commissioner of police and other officials connected with the massacre pending an enquiry. When the chief minister rejected the demand on the ground that it would anger the backward classes, the TMC criticized the statement of chief minister as an attempt to create disharmony and distrust among different castes. At the end of the fast the leaders issued a joint statement arguing that the fast was to focus people attention on the anti-Dalit, anti minority and anti poor stand of the state government.

Later on the TMC demanded an enquiry by a sitting judge of the high court rejecting the constitution of the judicial enquiry by a retired district judge proposed by the government. The chief minister conceded to the new demand of TMC and a retired judge of Supreme Court was designated to conduct the enquiry. The TMC also supported the
leader of Pudiya Tamilagam who filed a petition in the Madras high court seeking an enquiry into the massacre by the Central Bureau of Investigation and a second post mortem on the victims.

A few months later the Republican Party of India organized a “Dalit Social Justice” conference in Salem in which the TMC leader Moopanar actively participated. While addressing the people Moopanar articulated that Dalit empowerment would come only if they aimed at participating in governance and decision making process. He supported the important resolutions adopted at the end of the conference aimed at Dalit welfare. One such resolution asked the government to identify the approximately two-lakh acres of panchami lands in the state encroached by various other communities so that they could be restored to the farm labourers and also to establish a separate commissionarate for this purpose. Another resolution called upon the government to establish a separate bank to meet the financial needs of Dalits as the existing TAHDCO did not serve any purpose as dominant people through benami transactions cornered the funds. Another resolution called for the creation of a separate housing board to construct shelters for Dalits in urban areas. It also asked for the establishment of a separate court to deal with numerous cases filed by vested interests against allotment of site pattas by the Adi-Dravidia welfare department. The TMC leaders Moopanar and Ramasamy Udaiyar, a member of the property protection committee of the party, supported these resolutions.

But the TMC-DPI-PT alliance failed to perform creditably in the 1999 parliamentary elections. The failure of TMC-DPI-PT alliance to put up a creditable performance could be adduced to various factors. Firstly Dalit parties were not greatly successful in mobilizing the alienated segments of their own communities. The Dalit mobilization so far had not penetrated into the consciousness of most Dalits in the State. Secondly the dichotomous, disharmonious relationship between the two dominant Dalit communities of Parayars and Pallars (Devendra Kula Vellalars) effectively halted the consolidation process. Thirdly there was differential and highly unequal mobilization of Dalit communities. For example the dominant Dalit communities of Parayars and Devendrakula Vellalars were partially mobilized but the third most important Dalit
community the Arunthathiyars of western Tamil Nadu were totally untouched and unorganized in the politics of the State. In terms of education, employment, political organization the Arunthathiyars is the most underprivileged and their dichotomy with other Dalit communities increases by the fact that their mother tongue is Telugu and not Tamil. Fourthly TMC and Dalit parties alliance had only a short lived existence and this limited period of existence was not sufficient for achieving their cherished objective of providing a third alternative to DMK and ADMK in the politics of the State. The alliance if continued for a considerable duration would have paid dividends but the electoral outcome and the deteriorating health of Moopanar ended the hopes and life of the alliance.

**Congress, Vanniyars and PMK**

The vanniyars form one of the largest communities of Tamil Nadu and are concentrated in the northern districts sprawling from Chennai in the north to Trichy in the south, Pondicherry in the east to Krishnagiri in the west. Though they claim a hoary past, they now mostly practice agriculture either as small landowners or as laborers. Under the influence of westernization and sanskritisation they were the earliest among Tamil communities to witness the deepening process of political consciousness and therefore formed many associations in the colonial period like Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Sangam.  

In the year of national independence the leader of vanniyars of south Arcot district Srinivasa padayachi established a political party called Tamil Nadu Toilers Party while the vanniyars of north Arcot under the leadership of Manikkavelu naicker formed a separate party called Commonweal Party. These two vanniyar parties contested the first legislative Assembly elections to the Madras state in 1952. They performed appreciably winning together 25 seats and their performance contributed to the lack of majority for congress party in the legislative assembly of Madras heralding political instability in the state.  

The commonweal party offered its support to Rajaji led minority congress govt in the state to enable it to achieve majority in the assembly and in reciprocity was awarded a
cabinet birth. Later the advent of Kamaraj as the chief minister of Madras in the post- Rajaji phase and his image as a champion of backward classes induced the merger of the other vanniyar party, the Tamil Nadu Toilers Party. Therefore both vanniyars parties came to be dissolved in the ocean of congress organization in 1950’s.

The epoch-making Parliamentary and Legislative Assembly elections of 1967 brought the DMK to the echelons of power in the state, the St. George fort and the alienation of vanniyars from the Baktavachalam led congress govt and the subsequent consolidation of their support behind DMK could be adduced as one of the causative factors for this historic result. Around two thirds of seats won by DMK in the legislative Assembly were located in the vanniyar belt and one of the important vanniyar leaders Govindasamy had earlier joined the DMK that had galvanized all vanniyars to get behind DMK.

From 1967 to 1989 the vanniyars supported largely the DMK even after the formation of ADMK by the expelled matinee idol M.G.Ramachandran. Consequently DMK became the most powerful party of north Tamil Nadu even as the western Kongu region and the southern districts shifted their loyalty to ADMK.

In 1980 Dr. S. Ramadass, a physician from Tindivanam organized a political get together of diverse, distinct and peripheral vanniyar pressure groups that led to the birth of a homogenous organization called Vanniyar Sangam. The new leadership devoted to the causes of desanskritisation and socio-economic development gave up the traditional kshatra status demand and concentrated on political empowerment alone. This new association in the hands of a fresh leadership that had faith in Periyar movement emphasized the growth of Tamil language, spread of rationalism and women empowerment etc, in addition to the development of its caste members.

The new Vanniyar Sangam through various agitations, processions and conferences pleaded for the reformation of backward classes reservation on the basis of individual populations. The Sangam demanded that separate Vanniyar quota should be established granting it 20% in the State educational Institutions and government
employment and 2% nationally. It demanded a special quota for Vanniyars as its "gains from the BC quotas were neither commensurate to their numbers nor to their role in he Dravidianist subcultures". The Vanniyar Sangam sought to make special representations to the Chief Minister to put forth its longstanding demands. As political parties turned down its repeated requests and demands the Sangam launched a number of violent agitations to press forth its demands. The Sangam attacked ADMK as the ruling party had failed to concede to its demands in early 80's.

The Congress leadership realized that the dominance of Congress in the politics of the State in the 50's and 60's was established only because of the support extended from numerically stronger backward class communities. The disenchantment of the backward communities precipitated its downfall in 1967 elections. Now in the 80's fighting vigorously to reestablish its position in the politics of the State Congress made conscious attempts to woo back the numerically strong, formerly Congress supporting communities. In this endeavor Congress paid special attention to the numerically largest community of Tamil Nadu, the Vanniyars of northern Tamil Nadu.

In the post MGR phase article 356 was imposed and the State was brought under President's rule. The Congress party started to approach the discontented Vanniyars in its bid to come back to power. A number of meetings were held formally and informally with various leaders of Vanniyar Sangam to thrash out a solution to the longstanding demands of the community. For example one important Vanniyar leader M.S.Subramaniam had a secret meeting with Central Ministers to discuss the Vanniyar demands. He also met the Governor and his advisors to formulate a new reservation policy that would satisfy Vanniyar aspirations.

As the Governor's administration and Congress party seemed to be sincere in their commitment to implement the Sangam demands, the Sangam in reciprocity rolled out the red carpet to the Prime Minister when he was in one of his frequent visits to the State. The Union Minister for external affairs P.V. Narasimha Rao was deputed by the
Congress high command to interact with Vanniyar Sangam to achieve a satisfactory solution.33

A few days later Governor P.C. Alexander deemed it necessary to come out with a public statement to the effect that the demands of Vanniyars were under the consideration of the administration. Again the General Secretary of Vanniyar Sangam M.S. Subramaniam went to Delhi to discuss the issue with the External Affairs Minister. The Sangam delegates met the Union Minister and made several suggestions, particularly a Kerala type reservation system providing a certain percentage of reservation in government jobs and educational institutions to backward classes based on their population.34 The Union Home Minister Bhuta Singh visited the Adhi Parasakthi temple at Melmaruvathur and sought oracle from godman Bangaru Adigalar. Incidentally the godman was a Vanniyar by caste and has influence among the Vanniyars. The Vanniyar Sangam was confident of achieving its longstanding demand of separate reservation for Vanniyars. But the Congress party was thinking of some sort of assurances to the Sangam to placate their discontent. In spite of the extensive and intensive negotiations with Vanniyar Sangam, the Congress party and central government were hesitant to provide immediately separate reservation to Vanniyars as such a decision if taken by the Governor would lack political and popular legitimacy.

**Governor's Announcement**

The T.N. Governor in an announcement accepted in principle separate compartmental reservation for certain groups of communities among the backward classes considered to be the most backward. He said that a new group would be formed where Vanniyar community along with 39 most backward communities would be included for the purpose of separate reservation in educational and administrative opportunities and jobs. The Governor also assured that the proposed special reservation would be within the 50% reservation existing for backward classes. The Governor also said that "the appropriate decision regarding the number and composition of groups for separate reservation and
their respective percentage of reservation would be announced after collecting accurate
data on the relative numerical strength and backwardness of different communities". 35

For getting accurate and updated data the Governor ordered a comprehensive time
bound survey. He also said that P.V. Venkatakrishnan, Special Commissioner and
Commissioner for Land Redemns would be appointed as the Special Officer to get more
reliable and accurate data about different backward class communities in the State.

Reactions from Vanniyar Sangam

There was spontaneous, violent protest from Vanniyar Sangam to the announcement of
the Governor. It harshly criticized that the statement of Governor saying that it "smacked
of stupidity to the core". 36 It characterized Congress party as the party of traitors. It said
that hereafter Congress would be number one enemy of Vanniyars in the State. It called
for poll boycott, strikes, demonstrations and hartals etc. It demanded that all the Vanniyar
MPs belonging to Congress (I) from TN should resign their posts in keeping with the
sentiments of the community.

The Sangam criticized the announcement of the Governor outlining the
acceptance of compartmentalized reservation in principle on three major grounds:

1) No need for independent survey
2) Absence of interim arrangement
3) Betrayal of promises

Unnecessary Survey

The Vanniyar sangam took exception to the formation of an independent survey
commission to arrive at the population of different backward class communities. It said
that the voluminous reports of Sathanaathan and Ambasankar Commissions were readily
available with the government. Moreover the Sangam representatives had furnished
sufficient documentary support justifying the claims of the community. The government
justified the proposed formation of the commission to gather reliable data and said that the report of Ambasankar Commission could not be taken up, as the Commission members themselves had disowned the report. Moreover there would be opposition from other communities if the reports of this commission were taken as basis. For example amidst this mounting controversy the President of Kongu Vellala Gounder Federation said that both Ambasankar and Sathanathan, who headed these commissions were Vanniyars and as they presented distorted figures in favour of their community, these reports should not be taken up as the basis for determining the exact composition of population in the State in terms of different backward class communities. Moreover the methodology of these commissions adopted in estimating the numerical strength of these different communities came under fire. The President of Kongu Vellala Gounder Federation even characterized these commissions as "sectarian, partial and one sided".  

The government also did not recognize the documentary evidence submitted by the Vanniyar Sangam leaders and the Governor said that going by claims made by leaders of various backward communities in Tamil Nadu, the total population of such communities alone, would come to be 11 crores in the State (More than twice the population of Tamil Nadu). It was also pointed out that even Vanniyar Sangam had earlier rejected Ambasankar recommendations. So the Governor emphasized that independent, updated survey was essential.

**Absence of Interim Arrangement**

The Vanniyar leaders took exception to the nine months time given to the Commission to complete and furnish the population statistics. The Vanniyar leaders said that the Governor must have given an interim arrangement to satisfy the aspirations of Vanniyars even while leaving the final decision to be taken by an elected popular government. In the midst of violent struggle by Vanniyars the former electricity Minister Ramachandran closely associated with Vanniyar Sangam met the External Affairs Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Home Minister Bhuta Singh and requested them to impress upon the new Venkatakrishnan committee to provide an immediate interim arrangement to benefit
the Vanniys. The committee could provide such interim arrangement based on the enormous volume of information gathered in the reports of the previous committees on backward classes was his assertion.

Betrayal of Promises

The Vanniyar Sangam accused the government of betrayal. It said that the government had broken its promises given to the leaders of the Sangam. It was said that the Foreign Minister had given guarantees to the Vanniyar leaders that a new scheme of compartmentalized reservation would be formed and in this scheme all backward class communities would be divided into five groups with each group having equal weightage. This proposed scheme would be beneficial to the Vanniyar Community. But vested interests in other minority communities thwarted the proposed scheme was the argument of Vanniyar Sangam. It held the Congress (I) Union Government and Governor responsible for the betrayal and described Congress as a traitor and hence to be dealt with severely in the elections.

Dilemma and Decision of Congress

Though Congress with zeal to reorganize itself decided to extend concessions to the Vanniys the possible reaction from other dominant communities prevented it from accepting completely the demands of Vanniyar Sangam for separate reservation. Already there were voices of protest from other influential communities. The President of Kongu Vellala Federation had complained at the level of importance given to the Vanniyar community by the Governor while other communities like Kongu Vellalars, Mukkulathors, Yadavas, Nadars were also backward and numerous. He even demanded the arrest of Vanniyar Sangam leader Ramadoss under National Security Act over the stir. The Tamil Nadu Vellalar Federation, Thevar Peravai etc. welcomed the formation of independent commission to identify the composition of Tamil Nadu population in terms of castes.

The Congress party was also to take into account the conditions and complaints of scheduled caste communities in their State, especially in North Tamil Nadu. It feared that
the extreme identification of the party with the Vanniyars would alienate the scheduled castes from it as the vanniyar agitations had produced hardships to them. Ultimately and unfortunately for Congress the vanniyar issue instead providing the scope for regeneration had become the main hurdle in the elections.

In 1989 legislative Assembly elections the DMK came to power in a four cornered contest primarily on the basis of a divided opposition. The new govt decided to satisfy the political demands of Vanniyar Sangam as the party had considerable support base among them. The electoral boycott of the Sangam as a result of breakdown of talks with congress party on the eve of the elections contributed to the electoral success of DMK. Though the DMK govt was desirous of addressing the separate reservation demand of vanniyars it did not want to provoke other equally powerful communities and therefore brought out a new scheme of reservation through the bifurcation of existing backward classes reservation. It created a new category called most backward classes in which umbrella a total of 39 communities including vanniyars were brought in to provide 20% reservation in educational institutions and public employment.41

The Vanniyar Sangam indignantly reacted to this amalgamation of around 39 communities under the MBC quota and bitterly attacked the govt. It resorted to extreme denigration of DMK leadership and decided to form a new political party to fight for the interests of its members. In the 1989 parliamentary elections the party entered electoral contests and though it did not win any seat, it performed commendably polling around 5% of the popular vote.

**Congress and PMK in 90s**

There was considerable bitterness between congress and PMK throughout the decade of 90’s that had crucial implications for the electoral fortunes of the congress party especially in the late 90’s. There were two issues on which these parties disagreed.
Sri Lankan Conflict

The ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka created bad blood between congress and PMK in the state. These two parties had stood at the opposite poles of the conflict with PMK repeatedly expressing its profuse support to the formation of a separate home land for Tamils called as Tamil Ealem. It is one of the few parties in the state apart from the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagamn that had steadfastly extended support to the establishment of Ealem in the north eastern parts of Sri Lanka even after the assassination of congress president Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 in the midst of electoral campaigning. In 1992 the party had conducted a Tamils Right to Live (Tamilar Vaalvurimai Manadu) conference in Chennai where the violence perpetrated on Tamils in North eastern Sri Lanka and Karnataka in the wake of cauvery dispute were condemned. There was glorification of LITE leadership in the processions and platforms connected with the conference that even provoked the chief minister to demand a ban on the activities of PMK. In its election manifesto in the 1999 parliamentary elections the party held that Tamil alone would solve all the problems in the island and urged the Central Govt to consider the LITE struggle as a nationalist struggle.

It organized a mass fasting later in different parts of the state to express its solidarity with the sufferings of Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. When the LITE –Sri Lankan army conflict escalated, the party condemned the army for violating the human rights of Tamils.

Moreover the party had always articulated its vehement opposition against any military assistance to Sri Lankan government in its fight against LITE from India. In the early years of the new millennium when LITE expressed its desire to hold the ongoing peace negotiations in south India the PMK had supported the request. The party also had requested presidential pardon to the convicts involved in the assassination of the former prime minister who were awarded capital punishment by the Supreme Court.
The congress considered PMK as an arch enemy in the politics of Tamil Nadu. And therefore the PMK had to necessarily secure membership of National Democratic Alliance formulated by BJP. Even on the eve of the 2001 Legislative Assembly elections the congress spokesman said ‘our political reservations about the PMK continue. We will not be part of any power sharing arrangement with them in Pondicherry’. The congress party hesitated to endorse a full fledged alliance with PMK even though they had sailed in the same boat in the 2001 legislative Assembly elections.

But the political dynamics of the situation began to undergo considerable metamorphoses as congress decided to renunciate its strategy of independent line to capture power at the center and in turn chose to become a member of the broad based alliance in the 2004 parliamentary elections. As DMK spearheaded the formation of democratic progressive alliance to fight the elections, the congress party accepted the inclusion of PMK and MDMK irrespective of differences so that the opposition strength is not diluted. As the electoral combine spectacularly swept all the Lok Sabha seats in the state and the union territory of the Pondicherry coalitional government led by the congress came to be formed at the center and two ministerial berths were allotted to PMK.

Thus in the last two decades the congress had traveled away from the strategy of independent assimilation of vanniyars to a strategy of inter-party alliance.

In the run up to 2006 Legislative Assembly elections a vanniyar leader of congress Tindivannam Ramamoorthy had protested against the lack of representation given to vanniyars in the party. Subsequently a new congress president in the name of T. Krishnamoorthy was appointed to assiduously assuage the sentiments of vanniyars. The congress failure to negotiate with vanniyars in the late 80’s deprived the party a historical opportunity to plant its organizational rooting among them paving the way for the emergence of identity based politics among vanniyars.
Issue of Pondicherry

The issue of Pondicherry ignited antagonism between PMK and Congress(I) especially in the 2001 legislative assembly elections and 2004 parliamentary elections. The tiny Pondicherry is a union territory consisting of four distinct regions. While Pondicherry and Karaikal are located within the territory of Tamil Nadu, though separated from each other by the Cauvery delta districts, the third area called Yanam is located in the neighboring Andhra Pradesh and the fourth one Mahe is located in Kerala. All these disparate places are amalgamated to form the union territory of Pondicherry as they were distinct from rest of India in the colonial period. They were parts of francophone India and came to be ceded to India in the fifties. From 1954 to 1962 they were being administered as an acquired territory as the treaty of cession had not been ratified by the French parliament. Once they were ratified in accordance with constitutional provisions by French parliament, they came to be categorized as union territory and the fourteenth constitutional amendment law was enacted for this purpose.

Though there are Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam speaking areas in this union territory, the Tamil areas of Pondicherry and Karaikal are the largest in terms of demography and geography. In the beginning there were arguments for merger of these disparate places with their neighboring states but the people of this union territory had always opposed the talks of merger as they believe that central rule is more beneficial economically. The union territory became one of the thorny issues in the National Democratic Alliance government led by the Atal Behari Vajpayee in the late nineties. When the government decided to create the new states of Jharkhand and Uttaranchal and to accord statehood status to national capital territory of Delhi, its ally ADMK opposed these moves by saying that unless Pondicherry is also conferred with statehood status, it would not support the creation of new states and as a result the central government postponed the creation of new states.47

The conflict between PMK and Congress arose in the new millennium as PMK wanted to catch political limelight in the union territory. It believed that as the Vanniyars
dominate the demography of the union territory, it should be allowed to govern the political system there. In the 2001 legislative assembly elections held simultaneously in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry congress-TMC-ADMK-PMK alliance had faced a problem in seat adjustment in Pondicherry.

As PMK demanded preeminence in the union territory the TMC-congress group was not willing to give center stage to PMK in Pondicherry as it considered the union territory as its political bastion. There were many reasons for congress to reject the PMK-ADMK agreement. The party was afraid that if it were to lose even once Pondicherry to PMK it would perpetuate its political marginalization in the politics of Pondicherry forever. The ghost of 1967 defeat in Tamil Nadu and its protracted marginalization still haunts the party managers in the union territory. Moreover the congress party was the most powerful party in Pondicherry and PMK never had any appreciable base there. From 1962 to 1999 congress had won nine parliamentary elections there consecutively. In the legislative assembly too it had majority most of the time.

As negotiations reached a roadblock the alliance parties chalked out a compromise formula whereby Pondicherry was delinked from Tamil Nadu. While ADMK, TMC, Congress, PMK and CPI would form the alliance in Tamil Nadu, ADMK and PMK would form a separate front in Pondicherry.

The ADMK had entered into this electoral agreement with PMK whereby it allotted 10 seats to the PMK while retaining 20 seats with itself. The agreement also stipulated that PMK nominee will be chief minister for the first half of the term followed by ADMK nominee later. But in the final count TMC-Congress-CPI won the election while PMK was completely defeated in all the seats it contested. In 2004 parliamentary elections too the conflict between PMK and congress arose over the Pondicherry seats. The democratic progressive alliance leader DMK had guaranteed the seat to PMK and presented a fait accomplice to congress which the later would not reject even in the face of overwhelming opposition from its government, party and cadre in Pondicherry.
Finally that Lok Sabha seat was won by PMK and congress still has reservation over that issue with PMK.

**BJP, Region and Coalitional Politics**

The last decade of the previous century witnessed the spectacular emergence of Bharatya Janata Party as the fulcrum of Indian politics along with the apparently irreversible decline of the congress party. Within a decade BJP had undergone an unprecedented, swift, geographical and political expansion unmatched by any other national political party. From its lowly position in 1989 when BJP was a small localized party with a political presence restricted to just a few states in the Hindi heartland the party had become the centre of gravity in Indian politics towards the end of the century. This unprecedented emergence could be attributed to the ideological flexibility, organizational rigidity and tactical maneuverability demonstrated by the party.

For long the party was looked at with disdain and trepidation by other political parties occupying the left and left of centre positions in Indian political scenario. As a result of the fractured mandate in the 1996 parliamentary elections the party came to form the national government for the first time in history but it proved to be a short lived experience as no political party came forward with parliamentary support even though it desperately solicited support from most of the players. Chastened by its inability to achieve a stable coalitional support at national level the party quickly adopted modified ideological and electoral strategies. To attract regional parties it projected the moderate leader Atal Behari Vajpayee as its new political face and withdrew the hard-line symbols back into the organizational cover. More importantly the party deliberately placed the controversial ideological beliefs on the backburner. The construction of Ram Temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, take over of other controversial places of worship in Kasi and Mathura, abrogation of article 370 granting autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the enactment of uniform civil code as per article 44 of the constitution are some of the ideological features of the party that had given it the status of political untouchable in Indian politics. Therefore it began to deliberately displace these issues.
from the political limelight. The perceived ideological moderation of the party attracted the regional parties who were convinced that the minorities would not become alienated from them in the changed situation.

Moreover the BJP's increasing attractiveness also stemmed in part from a perception by leaders of regional parties that the congress(1) was in serious decline and thus was unable to provide the political alternative with which they can join as junior partners and reach the corridors of power. More importantly regional parties which viewed the congress (1) as the main electoral enemy in their respective states were understandably reluctant to assist the congress to form a national government. Based on the logic of local politics the BJP in many places was the lesser of the two evils or better of the two friends.

BJP was more intelligent and efficient than congress in according recognition to the forces of the region that demanded loudly attention. In the 1999 parliamentary elections the party that stood for a united India with strong, powerful centre without hesitation embraced coalition politics, alliances with regional parties and the principle of decentralization of power to the states. There were three types of representatives of the region with whom BJP made electoral alliances.

The first group consisted of political parties that showed ideological similarity and proximity. Though this group was small in number, they provided BJP crucial political and electoral advantages. In the western state of Maharasta the party entered into an electoral alliance with Shiva Sena whose contemporary political commitments are Hindutva oriented though in the incipient stage of its political existence it advocated the plank of regional pride of Maharasta.

The second category of alliances the party made was with political parties that considered congress as the main enemy. It made alliance with Biju Janata Dal in Orissa and a post-poll alliance with Telugu Desam party in Andhra Pradesh. The third group of regional parties with which BJP made electoral alliance was the ones who had neither
ideological contradiction nor congruence with it. The Samta Party of Bihar, the Dravida parties of Tamil Nadu was the political parties of this category. This type of alliance was very significant as it was geographically, territorially and socially spread widely.

**BJP Region and Tamil Parties**

The forces of region like other national parties influenced the BJP in the state since the arrival of the party with conspicuous visibility in the 1998 parliamentary elections as part of the broad alliance built by All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. At that time the induction of BJP in an alliance that included Dravidian parties raised many eyebrows but the ideological deradicalization present in ADMK ever since its formation had facilitated the unexpected inclusion of BJP into the Dravidian front. Since then the BJP continues to be an electoral partner of either of the Dravidian fronts in Tamil Nadu unfailingly. The BJP also had undergone a significant degree of Tamilization and regionalization process that had made the party acceptable to the Dravidian parties, leaders and people.

The social base of the party in Tamil Nadu is located among the regional elite communities. The bulk of its supporters and sympathizers come from the backward class communities who after their economic, political empowerment through Dravidian movement now consider BJP as attractive as DMK or ADMK. In the domain of state leadership too the party had given fair share of representation to the backward classes. Most of the members of parliament belonging to the party in the 11th and 12th Lok Sabha hailed from locally dominant communities like Kongu Vellala Gounder and Nadar. Often the state unit of the party made regional appeals and demands. The national executive meeting of the party held in the capital of the state in 1999 had reflected the degree of Tamilization process the party had undergone. There the meeting complex was named after the great Tamil poet of ancient period Thiruvalluvar who was invoked as the symbol of secular Tamil culture by the Dravidian movement. The party translated around one
hundred couplets from his masterpiece 'Thirukural' into Hindi and English and distributed them to the leaders and cadres attending the conference.\textsuperscript{51}

Earlier when the state government under the Chief Ministership of Karunanidhi constructed a 133 feet statue of Tiruvaluvar in the sea beyond Kanyakumari the BJP actively associated itself with the function. When the DMK Govt. published a Government Order making Tamil a medium of instruction in primary schools, the state unit of BJP had wholeheartedly welcomed the measure. At the advent of the millennium year the state unit appealed to the Human Resources Development minister to declare the year 2000 as a year of Tamil language. Therefore the acceptability of BJP as an electoral partner in Dravidian politics stemmed in because of the deradicalized Dravidian movement and regionalized Tamil Nadu state unit of BJP.

**ADMK and Hindutva Politics**

As a result of the landslide victory achieved by the ADMK in the 2001 legislative assembly elections the contours of politics in the state began to undergo massive modifications. The new state government under the chief Ministership of J. Jayalalitha began to drift away from its Dravidian moorings into the direction of Hindutva. This rightward shift of the a major Dravidian party had immense implications for the politics of the region as for about three years till the path breaking results of 2004 parliamentary elections the preeminent position occupied by the region in the politics of the state began to get eroded.

**Anti Conversion Law**

In 2002 the ADMK Government brought in an ordinance that was later made into a law once the legislative assembly was reconvened barring forcible religious conversions. With no immediate provocation the govt. brought on the law that many political parties condemned as violating the fundamental rights to religion guaranteed under our constitution. There was widespread condemnation of the law as it is "regressive,
draconian and biased against the minorities, the socially oppressed and economically disadvantaged".\textsuperscript{52}

The government argued that the objective of the law was to act as a deterrent against anti-social elements exploiting the innocent people through financial allurement and to prevent communal tensions in the name of conversions. But for many political parties and communities the explanation of the government seemed hollow and shallow. The Dravidian parties and leaders criticized the law from the standpoint of Dravidian history and ideology saying that this law violated the main ideological commitments advocated by the Dravidian leaders and founders like Periyar, Annadurai etc..\textsuperscript{53}

Therefore a joint committee with broad based representation was formed to mobilize opinion against the act. Many political parties of Dravidian and non-Dravidian orientations like PMK, DMK, Congress, MDMK, CPI, CPI (M) along with community leaders participated in the struggle. But various political and apolitical organizations of Hinduism ardently supported the anti-conversion law of the govt. The RSS was pleased with the act and Tamil Nadu government as only a month earlier RSS Sarsanghachalak S.K. Sudarshan wrote about the need for such legislation. The Kanchi Shankaracharya, then a close confident of the chief minister defended the controversial law. The Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front) leader Ramagopalan too commended the chief minister for passing the law to protect Hindu interests.

The Chief Minister was stubborn in her defense of the law in the face of mounting criticism emanating from diverse quarters. She was firmly in favour of establishing a renewed political partnership with BJP. Earlier she had allotted considerable amount of money for the renovation of many temples. She also had introduced a new scheme called Annadanam through which arrangements were made to feed the poor in around 360 temples throughout the state. She attempted to move closer to the Hindutva politics by refusing to condemn the Gujarat BJP chief minister when that state was engulfed in communal flames. She had even flown to Ahemadabad to attend the swearing in ceremony of the BJP Chief Minister who openly admitted that under inspiration from
ADMK govt. the new Gujarat was considering a new piece of legislation to ban religious conversions. 54

Ban on Animal Sacrifice

The AIADMK government issued a directive to the administration to enforce strictly the existing ban barring animal sacrifice in temples. The law though enacted about five decades back had been ignored all along to respect the sensitivities of the little traditions of India. But the orthodox social groups and Hindu political organizations had demanded a ban on these practices on the ground that they polluted the places of worship. 55 The state BJP leaders and religious mutts belonging to the Sanskritic traditions supported the government’s directive. The leaders of backward communities and scheduled castes opposed the move of the government. It was pointed out that the govt.’s directive violated the constitutional rights to worship belonging to the little communities of the region. The Dravidian leaders argued that the ban on animal sacrifice was a concession to the Hindutva forces aimed at obliterating the religious practices of pre-Aryan origin. Ultimately due to the immense pressure and protest from the people the state govt. came forward to annul the Tamil Nadu Animals and Birds sacrifice protection Act, 1950.

Hindu Sentiments

The president of DMK Karunanidhi criticized many practices and rituals of Hindus in the state like the fire walking ceremony, applying kumkum on forehead. He stirred a hornet’s nest by his observation that the word Hindu means thief. In this backdrop the general council of ADMK was called and a resolution was passed recommending the state govt. to proceed against DMK chief under the section 153(A) of the Indian penal code for hurting the religious sentiments of the majority Hindus. The state leadership of BJP too supported the ADMK resolution even though both DMK and BJP were partners in the National Democratic Alliance govt. The state unit of the party dared the president of DMK to question the obsolete practices found in other religions like Christianity and Islam. When they asserted that Hindutva is the lifeline of BJP, the DMK said that
Hindutva agenda could not be implemented, as it was never a part of the national agenda on governance adopted by the coalitional parties in 1999.56

**Sonia Gandhi as Foreigner**

Another issue that brought BJP and AIADMK together on the same platform was the foreign origin of the congress president Sonia Gandhi. The BJP had campaigned vigorously against her prime ministerial candidature. It was in favour of bringing a new legislation that would expressly bar naturalized citizens from holding constitutional posts like president, prime minister etc.,

Apart from BJP and the Nationalist Congress Party which had been formed by congress dissidents like Sharad Pawar on this issue, ADMK was the only main stream political party that aggressively campaigned against Sonia Gandhi. While attending a media conference in New Delhi, the general secretary of the party J. Jayalalitha spurred on the journalists to ask her opinion on the use of foreign origin of congress president and then launched an aggressive assault on her. She had expressed her support for any legislation that would bar people of foreign origin from holding politically significant positions. She said "it is a crying shame and moral bankruptcy of the congress party that its leaders, who were at the forefront against foreigners, should think of having a foreigner as prime minister".57

The BJP had toned down its aggression on this issue after the pronouncements of the Supreme Court. But ADMK continued to attack and the Tamil Nadu chief minister repeatedly referred to the congress president as Antonio Maino Gandhi and equated her prime ministerial candidature with colonialism and said that the evil of colonialism should not come in through the backdoor.58

On the other hand the rival DMK maintained a studied silence on this issue and once ADMK gestures were reciprocated by BJP began to oppose the aggressive campaigning of ADMK. The DMK said that quality of leadership not the origin of the
leader is important. The Tamil Nadu Congress Committee reacted angrily to the continuing attack of ADMK on Sonia Gandhi. The All India Congress Committee provided the ADMK letters of support to Sonia Gandhi’s prime ministerial candidature in the aftermath of the collapse of the Vajpayee led National Democratic Alliance government in 1999. This controversy brought together the BJP and AIADMK in a mood of consolidation and partnership and alienated DMK from NDA.

In this background one of the leaders of state unit of BJP characterized the party’s attitude towards DMK and ADMK by saying that it had friendship with DMK while with ADMK it had relationship. This cryptic statement meant that ideologically ADMK is more important to BJP even though it continued to have links with DMK due to practical political considerations. This open expression of support to ADMK provoked the DMK president Karunanidhi to say that the DMK had neither kinship nor relationship with the Tamil Nadu unit of BJP.

Marginalization of Region and end of NDA

The growing relationship between BJP and ADMK on ideological and practical grounds precipitated the scenario where the BJP came to be perceived as showing indifference to the concerns of the Tamil region thereby heralding the initial disintegration of NDA coalition in the state and the concomitant electoral downfall of the party. The BJP party was responsive to the pressures and concerns of the region till the 2001 legislative assembly elections. But once ADMK came to power and its chief minister made gestures of friendship, the BJP began to ignore the regional concerns and parties. Consequently almost all the regional parties one by one broke away from National Democratic Alliance leading to the consolidation of congress inclusive rival front.
The arbitrary use of Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) by ADMK government and the reaction of BJP tellingly brought out the nonchalant, indifferent attitude of the party to the region and its allies. Though the regional members of NDA like DMK, MDMK, PMK supported the passage of the POTA in a joint sitting of parliament the issue wrecked the NDA coalition finally as ADMK government in the state arrested Vaiko, General Secretary of Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam under the provisions of the act. In a speech delivered at Thirumangalam near Madurai, Vaiko repeated his speech in parliament reiterating his steadfast support to the establishment of a separate homeland for Tamils called Ealem in Sri Lanka. 60

The state government arrested him on the ground that his expression of support to a banned organization like LTTE violated certain provisions of POTA. The regional allies of NDA like DMK, MDMK, PMK condemned the arrest as gross misuse of the law in the state. When the unrelenting state government arrested P. Nedumaran of Tamil National movement and Nakkeeran Gopal, a journalist the NDA ally in the state DMK begin to call for the cancellation of this ominous law.

The attitude of BJP leadership to the prolonged detention of MDMK leader who was imprisoned for more than 500 days created rift and mistrust between BJP and the regional constituents of NDA. The party failed to come to the rescue of the leader of one of its allies even though all political parties agreed that it was a clear case of misapplication of law. When the arrested leader filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court against his arrest and state government’s misuse of POTA, the central government filed an affidavit defending his arrest and the action of the state Government. When the regional allies of the coalition like DMK, MDMK threatened to walk out of central government in protest, the centre filed a second affidavit stating that Vaiko’s speech did not attract the provisions of POTA. This faux pas on the part of central government greatly disappointed the allies of the region as it seemed that BJP was interested more in pleasing ADMK state government than preventing the injustice done to its ally. 61
Earlier when MDMK collected over one crore signatures demanding the release of Vaiko and went to seek support from all political parties in the state, the BJP did not come forward to sign the memorandum. When Vaiko completed one year in detention, the DMK organized a party conference in Villupuram and demanded the immediate intervention of the centre to secure his release. The party also announced that it would picket the offices of state and central governments to press for the repeal of POTA. When the national leadership of BJP questioned the wisdom of a coalition partner going on agitation against centre, the DMK walked out of the NDA arrangement, a decision that was taken by the high level strategic committee of the party which met in late December 2003.

TANSI Case

Another issue that widened the gulf between BJP and DMK was the TANSI cases that had a roller coaster trial in the courts. The two cases involving the buying of land belonging to the Tamil Nadu Small Scale Industries Corporation by the General Secretary of AIADMK in the previous period of ADMK rule had traversed a long way from the metropolitan magistrate court to the special court, Madras High Court and finally the Supreme Court. The special court had found her guilty and awarded punitive sentence, which was nullified by the High Court. The Supreme Court upheld the judgment of the High Court acquitting the supremo of ADMK. But the honorable judges of the Supreme Court made sharp observations that she must atone for buying TANSI property. When the Supreme Court judgment was delivered, the opposition parties in the state demanded that the chief minister should renounce her post due to the critical observations made by the court. The case had its dysfunctional ramification on the politics of Tamil Nadu as even though all opposition parties castigated the chief minister, the local unit of BJP adopted a divergent stand by stating that the chief minister need not resign. This stand of BJP angered its regional allies like DMK which started to believe that a secret understanding had been reached between BJP state unit and AIADMK.
Govt. Employees Strike

To enforce fiscal discipline the state government undertook many stern measures that involved cutting down a number of rights and privileges of government employees especially in the domain of procedures governing pension and gratuity. To deal with the disgruntled employees the government passed a law called TESMA (Tamil Nadu Essential Services Maintenance Act 2002) that made participation in a strike an offence punishable with imprisonment and / or fine. In July 2003 about 2 lakh teaching and non-teaching employees of the state government and government aided educational institutions participated along with government employees in an indefinite strike that demanded the restoration of the rights and privileges that had been taken away. The government took stern action against the striking employees and arrested over 2000 agitators. It also resorted to summary dismissal of around one lakh seventy five thousand employees. When the affected employees approached the Madras high court for redress, the court ordered them to approach the Tamil Nadu Administrative Tribunal for redress as the appeal against dismissal lay with the appointing authority and administrative tribunal alone. But the employees approached the Supreme Court as the administrative tribunal was moribund and understaffed. The Supreme Court in a landmark judgment declared that the government employees had no fundamental, legal, moral or equitable right to strike work.

The Supreme Court also ordered the Tamil Nadu government to reinstate the dismissed employees and teachers on certain conditions. They were forced to tender an unconditional apology for resorting to work and also to provide an undertaking that in future they would abide by conduct rules of the government.

Though most political parties condemned the stern action of the state government, the Tamil Nadu unit of BJP was not forth coming in its condemnation of the state government. Moreover the central government did not actively undertake measures to rectify the situation arising out of the unprecedented dismissal of around two lakh employees that had effectively paralyzed the administration. The failure of the centre to
intervene in this serious matter, despite repeated request from its allies and the
disappointing role of the state unit of BJP all contributed to the increasing divergence
between BJP and its allies in the region. As the election year dawned the major allies of
BJP in Tamil Nadu had more or less decided to walk out of the alliance. The high power
strategy committee of DMK decided to pull out its members from the NDA government
in the first phase that was followed by walking out of the coalition in the second stage. It
had many grievances like center’s refusal to transfer police officers after the midnight
arrest of Karunanidhi on 2001, BJP’s deliberate indifference to Supreme court’s strictures
on ADMK chief in the disproportionate wealth case, BJP’s reluctance to defend the
fundamental right to go on strike, repeal of POTA, failure to act on DMK memorandum
about the failure of constitutional machinery in the state.65

The MDMK also walked out over the issue of Vaiko arrest. The PMK decided to
dissociate from NDA citing that BJP had failed to deliver on its key demands like
declaration of Tamil as a classical language, reservation for backward classes in private
sector and implementation of Mandal report in entirety. The BJP that had responded
satisfactorily to the concerns, demands of Tamil region till 2001 from 1998 chose to get
attracted by the Hindutva leaning ADMK and in the process alienated the regional
interest, leaders and parties of Tamilnadu that contributed to the mammoth electoral
debacle in 2004.

Acceptance of Region in Congress Strategy

The decline of the congress party could be adduced to a number of factors and among
them the exodus of regions, regional classes and regional leaders from the party occupies
a prime position. In the 1990’s the party faced three important regional revolts that
emasculated the strength of the party in three populous states. In Maharastra the regional
chieftain Sharad Pawar revolted against the national leadership of the party ostensibly on
the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi but actually because of the systematic marginalization
of his faction in the politics of the party in his home turf.
In West Bengal the vociferous leader Mamta Banerjee revolted against the central command to form Trinamool Congress. As seen in the previous chapter the paramount faction of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee over the renewal of alliance with ADMK in the 1996 Parliamentary and legislative assembly elections revolted to establish Tamil Maanila Congress. These three parties, Nationalist Congress Party of Maharashtra, Trinamool Congress of West Bengal and Tamil Maanila Congress of Tamil Nadu demonstrated the restlessness of regions in the Congress organization. Many regional communities like the chamars of Uttar Pradesh, Paswans of Bihar, Scheduled Tribes of Jharkhand had also walked out due to their increasing political consciousness and mobilization. The congress decline therefore was caused by the revolts of the region and regional classes.

In the 1990’s the congress party was oblivious of the commanding position occupied by region in the dynamics of national politics and refused to come to terms with them. The political resolution adopted in the plenary session of the party in Kolkatta under the presidency of Sitaram Kesari refuted the coalitional strategy which alone could provide representation to the region in the changed politics of the country. Betraying ignorance the resolution of the party said “the congress party has the will and capacity to ensure and acquire the support of the people of this country for a viable and stable one party government in the country”.

Again a year later the party organized a brainstorming session at Pachmarhi in Madyapradesh on the model of Narora Camp organised in 1974 to iron out the party’s ideological and organizational inconsistencies and to evolve guidelines for the party’s political advancement in short, medium and long terms. The internal deliberations have also concluded that the reestablishment of the party’s dominance could be achieved, as no opposition party was able to match it in societal base, political strength and geographical spread. The declaration adopted here affirmed that the party considered the present difficulties in forming one party government as a transient phase in the evolution of our polity. It also pledged to restore the party to its primacy in national affairs and also decided that coalitional rule will be considered only when absolutely necessary and that
too on the basis of agreed programmes which will not weaken the party or compromise its basic ideology.\textsuperscript{67}

This negative posture against coalition with regional forces in national politics worked to perpetuate the downfall of the party in the 1999 parliamentary elections that was won by National Democratic Alliance. The party was able to win only a paltry number of seats and had the ignominious record of losing for the first time two consecutive general elections to parliament.

But as the new century dawned and as NDA strengthened its position the congress party began to undergo gradual changes in its attitude towards coalitional relationship with regional forces. The Eighty-first session of All India Congress Committee held in Bangalore, the conference of congress chief ministers held in Gauwhati and the party conclave in Srinagar all gradually diluted party’s rigidity against coalitional strategy. The culmination of this gradual process led to the adoption of Shimla Sankalp in 2003 which said “the prevailing situation in the country makes it incumbent on all secular parties to evolve a strategy for combating communalism and religious fundamentalism and for ensuring the defeat of BJP and allies”. Therefore it invited all “progressive thinking men and women, institutions and political movements who share the party’s concern and its vision to join hands in the ideological and electoral battle”\textsuperscript{68}

Through this Shimla declaration the congress party had sought to do away with the self imposed handicap and denied the BJP the advantage of the exclusive use of the coalitional strategy and heralded the advent of competitive coalitional era. While adopting the pro-coalitional strategy the party also made it clear that such a coalition would have to be headed by the congress party under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. The party had to make this condition because of two reasons. Firstly many of the regional parties like Rashtriya Janata Dal of Laloo Prasad Yadav had historically grown in politics on the plank of anti-congressism and even now these parties preferred congress alliance only as the later was weak in their area of influence and BJP was the main rival.
Secondly many political parties like Nationalist Congress Party had repeatedly attacked the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and her prime ministerial candidature by harping on the issue of her foreign origin. The party did not want the 1996 type of situation where it had to get satisfied with providing outside support to the third front alternative to keep BJP out of power and in favour of secularism. The Shimla declaration was a candid admission of the inability of congress to regain its previous dominance. It gave impetus to the party to implement an electoral strategy that recognizes and respects the political significance and aspirations of diverse regions and their political parties.

The congress party formulated crucial alliances in populous states like Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Maharashtra etc., It entered into an alliance with DMK, MDMK, PMK, CPM, CPI in Tamil Nadu. The Progressive Democratic Alliance as the alliance was called in Tamil Nadu symbolized the drastic changes accepted in the party as it had caused the downfall of Gujarat led coalitional Government in 1998 over the presence of DMK ministers in the ministry. The inclusion of MDMK and PMK, close supporters of LTTE were also pregnant with meanings. Leaving the bitterness of the past, the party agreed to establish coalition that has winning prospects at the hustings.

The congress manifesto on the eve of the 2004 parliamentary elections said “the congress realizes that this is not a moment for a narrow pursuit of partisan power. This is the moment to consolidate all forces subscribing to the fundamental values of our constitution. The congress’s goal is to defeat the forces of obscurantism and bigotry. In this sacred endeavor the congress has joined hands with like minded political parties in different states. The congress and its allies are united in this determination to defeat the BJP”.

Place of Tamil Region in UPA Rule

The Shimla strategy of electoral alliances and coalitional governance worked immensely to bring down the NDA government and installed the congress led United Progressive Alliance government. The crucial alliances the congress party formulated in Bihar,
Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Andra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu contributed to the formation of a new congress led government. In Tamil Nadu the democratic progressive alliance performed spectacularly winning all the 39 Lok Sabha seats and one in the adjoining union territory of Pondichery.

As Tamil Nadu initiated the process of congress comeback the region was appropriately rewarded by the new government in the union council of ministers and a record twelve ministerial berths were given to Tamil Nadu including six of cabinet rank. The portfolios of finance, health, information and broadcasting were given to the Tamil members of Parliament. The common Minimum Programme formulated by the coalitional government incorporated various demands and concerns of the region.

**Classical Language Status for Tamil**

All the regional political parties in the state had demanded the classical language status to Tamil language in the last two decades. The DMK in its Trichy conference in 1996 articulated that Tamil should be declared an official as well as classical language. The same party had included this demand in its election manifesto in the 1996 general elections. The rival ADMK after its victory in the 1998 parliamentary elections in the aftermath of Coimbatore blasts demanded the centre to provide classical language status to Tamil. When the National Democratic Alliance government declared 1999 as Sanskrit year enabling the flow of funds to the universities and Sanskrit organizations the regional partners of NDA demanded that year 2000 should be declared as Tamil year. In the period from 1999 to 2004 even while remaining part and parcel of central government the DMK organized many demonstrations to make Tamil a classical language. Again on the eve of the 2004 general elections the DMK conference at Villupuram passed a resolution in favour of this longstanding demand. The UPA government now had implemented symbolically the most important demand of the Tamil region by making Tamil a classical language. The Sanskrit versus Tamil controversy had always dominated the political discourse of the state and recognition provided to Tamil symbolized the unprecedented reach and power of the Tamil region in the domain of national politics.
The conflict between Tamil and Sanskrit in the regional political discourse arose as Tamil constituted the only literary tradition indigenous to India that was not derived from Sanskrit and that has its own poetic theory, grammatical tradition, aesthetics and unique body of literature.\textsuperscript{70} In practical measures the classical language status as the congress spokesman had articulated would lead to the establishment of professional chairs in many universities by the university grants commission and the constitution of two major annual awards of international reach.\textsuperscript{71}

**Sethu Samudram Canal Project**

The Sethu Samudram Canal Project is another longstanding demand of the Tamil region. The project entails digging a canal to connect the Gulf of Mannar with the Park Bay to shorten the sea route between the east and west coasts of India. The project involves dredging the sea for a length of around 100 kilometers. This project is expected to promote the development of backward South Tamil Nadu districts either directly or as spin off effect. The project has political significance for the United Progressive Alliance government as all the concerned ministries like finance, environment and forests, shipping are manned by members of parliament from Tamil Nadu the project was cleared in a fast tract basis.

All the political parties of Tamil Nadu have identified with the project in the past intensively. This project was visualized first in 1860 when the British Commander A.D. Taylor of British Navy first suggested it. As many as nine proposals were mooted in the pre independence period. In 1986 the legislative assembly passed a resolution for the implementation of the canal project when ADMK under the chief ministership of M.G. Ramachandran favoured it.\textsuperscript{72}

The project received a new lease of life when the MDMK leader Vaiko extracted an assurance from the prime minister when the later participated in the birthday celebrations of C.N. Annadurai. When DMK joined the congress led UPA in 2004 it demanded the implementation of the scheme. It received the portfolios of shipping, road
transport and high ways as it wished so that implementation of the project could be achieved and expedited. The fruition of Sethu Samudram Project like the classical language status for Tamil underscored the recognition of congress led UPA government towards the concerns of the region of Tamil Nadu.

**Reservation in Unaided Educational Institutions**

The third most important decision of the UPA government with significance for regional politics in Tamil Nadu is the passage of the 105th constitutional amendment law that inserted clause 5 in the article 15 of the constitution to ensure admission to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and educationally and socially backward classes in all educational institutions, both private and public except minority run ones.  This amendment was passed to nullify the order of the Supreme Court exempting the private unaided educational institutions from abiding the constitutional provisions regarding reservation that was delivered in the middle of the year 2005.

The judgment of Supreme Court stirred a hornet’s nest in Tamil Nadu as the strategy of reservations historically shaped the evolution of politics itself. It is pertinent to recollect that the first constitutional amendment law was passed to safeguard reservation scheme of Tamil Nadu government which had been undermined by the Supreme Court judgment in Champakam Dorairajan case. So when the Supreme Court exempted the unaided institutions from the constitutionally mandatory provisions on the ground that they are not utilizing tax payer’s money, the political parties in Tamil Nadu reacted swiftly and loudly. The allies of UPA like DMK, PMK, MDMK and Tamil Nadu Congress Committee impressed upon the centre to bring a constitutional amendment to nullify the Supreme Court judgment. The swiftness and promptness with which the amendment was passed again reiterated the prime position of region of Tamil Nadu in the politics of the country.
Marginalized Congress

The generous accommodation of Tamil region in the political ambience at the centre had not contributed to any tangible enhancement in the electoral or political strength of the congress party. The state congress leaders frequently voiced concerns and reservations about the overbearing and big brotherly attitude of regional parties like DMK. The TNCC (1) had expressed its disappointments about the regional allies who have taken entire credit emanating from the achievements of the UPA government. They feel aggrieved at the perceived over representation given to the political leaders of regional allies and deliberate sidelining of the contribution of congress to the regional development of Tamil Nadu.74

The mounting disgruntlement of the state unit culminated in the expression of a controversial demand by E.V.K.S. Elangovan, the union minister and former president of TNCC (1). He articulated that like at the center in Tamil Nadu too the idea of coalitional government should be promoted and implemented and TNCC should ask for a share in governance in the forthcoming legislative assembly elections. The TNCC president G.K. Vasan convened a meeting of the party and in the intense deliberation there the members of parliament, members of legislative assembly, presidents and other office bearers of district congress committees advocated a new alliance strategy with DMK on the basis of participation in governance after the elections.75

This demand for a share in power in the state immediately elicited an angry response from DMK that convened a high power meeting to issue a warning to congress not to promote the idea of coalitional rule in the state. The DMK said that as Tamil Nadu is its strength it can not guarantee power sharing to congress and if congress insisted in its designs, DMK will withdraw from central government. Alarmed at this possibility the congress president Sonia Gandhi personally spoke to the DMK president to assure that congress does not support a coalitional rule in Tamil Nadu.76 The AICC too swiftly and decisively distanced itself from the views of the union minister. In other words the
autonomy, ambition and prospects of the state unit again came to be sacrificed so that national level interest of the party could be safeguarded.

In summary we can say that the Dravidian movement in the last two decades had undergone the interrelated processes of ideological deradicalization and coalitional disintegration resulting in the creation of many disenchanted social groups available for political mobilization. But the congress party had not capitalized on those opportunities arising from the breakdown of Dravidian political coalition. Its response was reluctant and tentative.

Nationally the last two decades are dominated by the conspicuous processes of regionalization and federalization of parties and politics. The Bharatya Janata Party was in the forefront in providing recognition to the forces of regions and consequently arrived at the echelons of power at the centre through the strategy of National Democratic Alliance. The Congress party after its initial failure to recognize the increasing significance of regions symbolized by Kolkatta, Pachmarhi resolutions came forward to provide recognition and representation to the forces of region after the Shimla sankalp. This changed strategy brought into existence United Progressive Alliance Govt. at the centre under the leadership of congress. Among the various regions Tamil Nadu finds the greatest recognition in the UPA regime. Nevertheless congress marginalization in the state politics remains unaltered as the rewards of UPA dispensation are pocketed by the dominant regional allies.
NOTES

4. Ibid
6. Kanagaraj, p. op-cit, p
8. Ibid
10. Ibid
14. Ibid; p. 62
18. Ibid; p. 69
20. Ibid
27. Ibid
34. Indian Express, 22 November 1988.
37. Ibid.
41. Suresh, V. op-cit, p.231.
42. Palanithurai, op-cit, p.117.
43. Frontline, 08-21 January 2000.
44. Ibid
46. The Hindu, 17 February 2006.
47. The Hindu, 10 January 1999.
54. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Frontline, 01-14 February 2003.
64. Frontline, 16-29 August 2003.
68. The Hindu, 10 July 2003.
69. Ibid
71. Ibid.
74. The Hindu, 26 February 2005.
75. Ibid.
76. The Hindu, 27 February 2005.