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THE FOUNDING OF THE D.M.K. AND THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF C. N. ANNADURAI

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ABSTRACT

The D.M.K. was founded by a group that broke away from the Dravidar Kazhagam (D.K.), led by E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (Periyar). Periyar's authoritarian leadership style and his decision to combine active electoral politics with social reforms led to growing discontent among the party's younger members. Tensions reached a breaking point in May 1949 when the Periyar married Maniammai, his forty years junior who was his secretary. Annadurai and like-minded members viewed this personal decision as a betrayal of the movement's rationalist and social reform principles, prompting them to establish an independent political platform.



The newly formed party was named the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, meaning 'Dravidian Progressive Federation'. While it embraced core Dravidian ideals inherited from the Justice Party and Periyar's movement such as social justice, rationalism, and reform against the caste system, the D.M.K. chose to participate in democratic electoral politics. Although the party initially advocated for an independent Dravidian homeland (Dravidanadu), it eventually evolved to prioritize regional autonomy, federalism, and the steadfast preservation of the Tamil language and culture.

KEYWORDS: E.V.Ramasami, C.N.Annadurai, E.V.K.Sampath, M.Karunanidhi, D.M.K., D.K., Dravida Nadu, C.Rajagopalachari, Maniammai.

INTRODUCTION :

For E. V. Ramasami, the 'masses' in question were defined on an ideological basis. He sought a party composed of individuals who were firmly committed to ideas of social reform and who would subsequently persuade the rest of society. He deemed elections unacceptable until social restructuring had been achieved. This distinction between C.N. Annadurai and E. V. Ramasami was fundamental to understanding both the internal rifts within the Dravida Kazhagam and the divergent paths taken by the two organizations of the Dravidian Movement—the Dravida Kazhagam (D.K.) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.), following the 1949 split.

August 15th, 1947

Conflicting political views that had existed within the D.K. since its inception came to a head in 1947 over the party's stance regarding India's independence. E. V. Ramasami declared August 15th (Independence Day), a day of mourning.¹ Outraged at the British betrayal of the Dravidian people in turning the bureaucracy over a Brahmin oligarchy, E.V.Ramasami boycotted the Independence Day celebrations.² Annadurai publicly expressed his disagreement with this position held by E. V. Ramasami. While some party newspapers supported Annadurai's stance, others sided with E. V. Ramasami. In the publication '*Dravida Nadu*', Annadurai stated that Dravidians had insisted since 1939 that they should not remain under British rule. Even during a turbulent period marked by anti-Hindi protests, they had demanded full freedom and autonomy at the Madras conference. For years, their greatest efforts and highest aspirations had been to free themselves from foreign yoke. However, after foreign rule ended, the Congress Party sought to impose Aryan hegemony. It was precisely for this reason that the Dravidians opposed the Congress.³

Salem Resolutions

Annadurai also decided to take the Congress Party as a model in the struggle to secure 'Dravidam' for the Dravidian people. He said that it was right and proper for Dravidians to respect and appreciate them, so as to be worthy of emulating them.⁴ By 1947, the consequences of the Salem resolutions had made their impact felt on E. V. Ramasami. He was too closely associated with the British to support the Congress Party's attainment of independence without the prior secession of Dravida Nadu or the realization of radical social reform. His stance was that reform had to precede independence. Although his closeness to the British had been implicitly criticized in the Salem resolutions, he had accepted this situation in order to purge the party of unproductive elements. While the 1944 Salem resolutions aimed to capitalize on public opposition to the British, they did not call for direct support of the independence movement. However, by 1947, maintaining a middle ground was no longer feasible for Annadurai, who sought to mobilize the masses. Politically, it was imperative for him to openly declare his support for independence.

Although the split within the D.K. did not occur until 1949, internal tensions persisted following the events of 1947. Opposing views became clearly defined, and a formal rupture was merely a matter of time. Meanwhile, the D.K. was garnering increasing support. Its membership rose from an initial 7,369 in 1944 to 49,574 in 1946, reaching 75,000 in 1949.

Partial Reconciliation

Following the incident on August 15th, 1947, when E. V. Ramasami and C. N. Annadurai publicly disagreed on the stance the party should take regarding India's independence, Annadurai scaled back his political activities. He did not even attend the major D.K. conference held in October 1947, which focused on the secession of Dravida Nadu. However, between October 1947 and October 1948, E. V. Ramasami and C.N. Annadurai reached at least a partial reconciliation. At the 1948 Dravida Kazhagam conference held in Erode, Annadurai was named E. V. Ramasami's successor.⁵ At that conference, E. V. Ramasami noted that he had been involved in public life for over forty years and was then past the age of seventy. He could no longer remain active for much longer. His health was steadily declining, whereas the D.K. was expanding beyond the limits originally envisioned. Until then, he had borne the responsibility of running the organization's affairs alone, and he did not wish for this situation to continue. There were many within the organization ready to serve it tirelessly. Annadurai alone was up to the task. He was a cultured man of great intellect, a prolific writer, and a tremendous orator. Above all, he had captivated everyone and was young and fully equipped to lead them. As for himself, the toll of age was beginning to show, and the right course of action was to hand over his responsibilities to another, just as a father would to his son. Thus, in the presence of that distinguished gathering, he handed over the keys of the organization to C.N. Annadurai.⁶

E.V.Ramasami's Marriage Issue

Despite this praise, in early 1949, due to a new internal party dispute, E. V. Ramasami changed his mind. In a June 1949 issue of the *Viduthalai* newspaper, he announced that he would marry a 28-year-old party activist (while he was 72) and declared her his new successor.⁷ The thoughts he expressed on that occasion were highly illuminating. He possessed an excellent grasp of mass psychology, particularly the psychology of the lower strata of society. Although he adopted a conciliatory attitude regarding practical matters, he was uncompromising when it came to politics and ideals. While this stance alienated many of his friends, it was precisely this trait that enabled him to successfully lead the organization without regard for what others thought of him. Deeming it unnecessary at that stage to try and convince those who did not trust him or his actions, he decided not to dwell on the matter further. Consequently, consistent with the views, E.V.Ramasami had expressed at various public events over the preceding four or five months and his conversations with C. Rajagopalachari, he decided to designate Maniammai as his legal successor. He had maintained a close relationship with her for five or six years, and she had fully embraced both his personal interests and those of the movement.⁸ P. Spratt wrote that E. V. Ramasami consulted C. Rajagopalachari, and that Rajagopalachari, a quintessential Victorian, told him it was his duty to marry the woman because her reputation had been tarnished.⁹

Autocratic Approach of E.V.Ramasami

This excerpt highlighted several interesting aspects. First, it underscored E. V. Ramasami's autocratic approach to party leadership. This autocratic control over the organization became a source of significant discontent, grievances that appeared at least partially justified, for Annadurai and other lower-ranking leaders. Second, it was noteworthy that E. V. Ramasami consulted C. Rajagopalachari on this matter. Rajagopalachari was a Brahmin, the former Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency, and a figure who had been a target of the anti-Hindi protests in 1938. He was both a lawyer and a friend to E. V. Ramasami. Although this apparent contradiction between personal attitude and public ideology might seem baffling, it revealed a vital truth about the D.K. It was crucial to take seriously the party's stated goal of abolishing the caste system rather than targeting Brahmins themselves. E. V. Ramasami repeatedly stated that his objective was not to attack individual Brahmins but to dismantle the caste system. While other leaders employed much harsher rhetoric and adopted an openly anti-Brahmin stance, E. V. Ramasami's character was more complex. He famously remarked that if one were to encounter a Brahmin and a snake on the road, the Brahmin should be killed first. Such metaphorical statements aimed to simplify the movement's complex ideas for the broader public, serving as a way to personalize an abstract cultural and ideological struggle. E. V. Ramasami's conviction that he possessed a deep understanding of mass psychology, particularly the psychology of the lowest strata of society, was reflected in his theoretical approach, which aimed to garner support from diverse segments of society.¹⁰

Statements made in an article in *The Hindu* offered clues regarding his views on Brahmins and Brahminism. E. V. Ramasami had written that Dravidians possessed a distinct social origin and that their language was independent, falling into a separate category. The terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' were not his own invention. They referred to historical realities that could be found in any school textbook. The idea that the *Ramayana* epic was an allegory symbolizing the conflict between the Aryans arriving in the region and the Dravidians already settled there had been accepted by historians like Pandit Nehru and reformers like Swami Vivekananda alike. His aim was not to perpetuate this division but to unite these two opposing elements of society. He did not subscribe to the racial theory advocated by Germany's late Nazi leader. After all, no one could divide the population of South India into two races based on blood analysis. Such an approach would have been not only self-defeating but also extremely reactionary. Nevertheless, no one who closely examined the daily lives, habits, traditions, and literature of these two distinct groups in South India could deny the fundamental difference between Aryan and Dravidian cultures.¹¹

Unlike other leaders of his time and indeed many contemporary Tamils, E. V. Ramasami did not argue that Brahmins constituted a separate race. Until recently, the belief that the differences between Aryans and Dravidians were racial in nature had been widespread.

A significant aspect of the article published in the *Viduthalai* newspaper in 1949 was E. V. Ramasami's emphasis on remaining uncompromising regarding principles and ideals. This stance was particularly important in the context of debates surrounding participation in electoral politics. As early as 1936, during his active involvement with the Justice Party, he believed that assuming public office and participating in elections had a detrimental effect on the party. He foresaw that the organization's ideology would inevitably have to change in order to succeed in electoral contests.

'Aryan Illusion' of C.N. Annadurai

One should not assume that Annadurai was ideologically more conservative than E. V. Ramasami simply because he was willing to participate in elections and wished to adopt a different political style. Annadurai's speeches and writings from the 1930s, 1940s, and part of the 1950s were radically progressive in nature. Perhaps the finest example of Annadurai's work as a propagandist is his book *'Aryan Illusion' (Ariyamayai)*. Penned in 1943, this work became one of the foundational texts articulating the movement's ideology. This work was a collection of essays in the daily *'Dravida Nadu'* by C.N. Annadurai.¹² Even among circles outside the Dravidian movement, *'Aryan Illusion'* had attained the status of a minor classic of modern Tamil literature.

Although the main arguments of *'Aryan Illusion'* had been presented elsewhere previously, examining Annadurai's ideological approach was worthwhile given the significance of his radicalism. In this work, Annadurai offered a comprehensive exposition of the cultural foundations of the Dravidian movement. Taking a critical stance toward the *Puranas* and other Hindu epics, he argued that Dravidians should not define themselves as Hindus. One of the reasons for this was their reluctance to accept the ribald narratives found in the *Puranas* as the playful antics of their gods.

As for the Tamil and Aryan peoples, he asserted that it was an indisputable fact that, in ancient times, the Tamils distinguished themselves through their intellect, productivity, and aptitude for trade and craftsmanship. The history of many nations bears witness to this. However, the Aryans who later arrived in the region corrupted Tamil culture, resorted to various ruses to maintain their own grandeur and superiority, and thereby relegated Tamil civilization to the background.

Over time, a baseless propaganda spread by the Aryans gained traction. This claim held that the Aryans had defeated the Tamil people in war and driven them south, beyond the Vindhya Mountains, and that civilization and culture in India only began to spread after the arrival of the Aryans. There was no concrete evidence proving that the Aryans had invaded India and destroyed the Dravidians. To support this thesis, the Aryans cited the Vedas which they themselves had created as proof.¹³

Excavations in the Indus Valley laid the groundwork for a different historical interpretation. Findings in the plains of India and at Mohenjodaro revealed the existence of a civilization that predated the Aryan civilization.¹⁴ Consequently, it became necessary to seriously consider whether there was any validity to the hypothesis that civilization might have spread from south to north, from east to west, or in the reverse directions. Analyses of ancient findings confirmed that the Aryans had arrived in India at a much later period. The Aryanization of the south was undoubtedly a slow process spanning several centuries.¹⁵

Ancient Dravidian Civilization

As for the nature of the ancient Dravidian civilization, the traditions and practices of the people living in the south pointed to the existence of a southern subcontinent, much of which was submerged, where an extraordinary civilization had once flourished.¹⁶ It was an irony of fate that those who had arrived in desperation, seeking a place to settle with their livestock, eventually rose to become rulers and masters. The Aryans deceived and corrupted the Dravidians with fanciful tales, dragging them into the misery and darkness created by Brahmanism.¹⁷ Ultimately, a call to action was issued. The Dravidians would only be able to cleanse themselves of ignorance on the day they broke free from the Aryan illusion. Success was inevitable for the Dravidians.¹⁸

Annadurai's ideological approach addressed four issues: defining and exposing the nature of oppression; explaining the causes of this oppression; formulating an alternative, namely, the 'good society' and, finally, proposing a programme and a call to action. The work titled, *The Aryan Illusion* masterfully addressed these four issues. The fundamental oppressive structure was the Hindu caste system. The primary reason for the persistence of caste oppression was the false consciousness held by Dravidian, that was, the belief in the *Aryan illusion* or hierarchical Hinduism. The proposed alternative was an egalitarian society modeled on the idealized ancient Dravidian society. A prerequisite for this was the rejection of the *Aryan illusion*, which entailed abandoning the belief in Hinduism and Aryan (Brahmin) supremacy. Achieving these goals required the dissemination of rationalist propaganda (opposing both the caste system and Hinduism) and the establishment of an independent Dravida Nadu where Dravidians could organize a rational society.

D.M.K.'s Commitment to D.K.

After founding the D.M.K., Annadurai repeatedly reaffirmed his commitment to the principles of the D.K. However, the question of his radicalism and sincerity and, by extension, the resolve of the D.M.K.'s top leadership was too critical to be resolved merely by accepting public statements. It was argued that Annadurai was not sincere about the issue of Dravida Nadu.¹⁹ The demand for Dravida Nadu had been raised at least initially to facilitate the implementation of social reforms. The division of a nation did not necessarily imply a fundamental shift in cultural models or behavioral patterns. In contrast, demands for social reform such as the abolition of the caste system, the rejection of Hinduism, and the restructuring of philosophical beliefs and historical assumptions for instance, introducing egalitarianism into a hierarchical society were revolutionary in nature. Consequently, in 1949, the issue of allegiance was taking shape around the axis of social reform.

Exit of E.V. K.Sampath

Convincing evidence was obtained from two political leaders who had no reason to misrepresent the leadership's commitment to social reform and whose interests might even have been served by discrediting the intentions of D.M.K. leaders. Both had been prominent figures in the party until around 1960 but had left following internal disputes.²⁰ The first of these was E.V.K. Sampath, a nephew of E. V. Ramasami who left the D.M.K. on April 9th, 1961.²¹ Sampath had been a follower of Annadurai since 1949 and held the second-highest position in the D.M.K. hierarchy. He stated that the D.K. and D.M.K. shared the same principles and that the D.M.K. criticized the same issues as Periyar but adopted a more moderate language and approach. When asked whether the D.M.K. criticized Hinduism, he replied that the party questioned Hinduism itself, just as Periyar had done. He denied suggestions that the leadership had begun to sideline social reform as early as 1953 or 1954, maintaining instead that the D.M.K. demonstrated a firm commitment to social reform even in 1959 and 1960.²²

Admission of V.P.Raman into D.M.K.

Another and perhaps even more compelling corroboration came from V. P. Raman, a Brahmin who joined the D.M.K. in 1957. Since Raman was not among the party's founders, he had no motive to misrepresent its stance. In his view, if the D.M.K. leadership held clear views on any subject, that subject was undoubtedly social reform. They had two primary goals, namely, the abolition of the caste system and the promotion of a rational approach that included the eradication of superstitions. Many of the leaders were prominent writers who carried out significant work in this field.²³

The D.M.K. was founded following a tour of the Madras Presidency undertaken by E.V.K. Sampath in 1949 to gauge potential support. Reflecting on that period, Sampath claimed to be the primary driving force behind the D.M.K.'s establishment, as no one else had dared to defy Periyar or organize a party. In fact, Annadurai had encouraged Sampath to go to the United Kingdom for advanced studies while he himself planned to devote time to the film industry.²⁴ It was Sampath who insisted on the necessity of forming a party and teaching Periyar a lesson. He took on the task of sounding out key centers to determine the feasibility of establishing a new political organization. Ultimately, following

this personal assessment conducted across the state, they decided to remain in politics. This inquiry took place in 1949.

The final rupture stemmed from disagreements regarding participation in elections and political style. While Annadurai avoided a confrontational stance, E. V. Ramasami frequently resorted to a mocking tone and scathing satire. Other key issues included the designation of a successor and allegations, particularly concerning the management and accounting of party finances, that E. V. Ramasami was authoritarian. Although E. V. Ramasami refused to disclose the organization's overall financial status, he allocated very limited budgets to party leaders while demanding strict accountability from them. However, D.M.K. leaders at least publicly cited the fact that E. V. Ramasami had married a 28-year-old woman at the age of 72, a move that contradicted rationalist ideals regarding social reform, as the reason for the split.²⁵

Split in D.K.

When the final separation occurred, approximately three-quarters of the D.K.'s 15,000 members joined the D.M.K. The founding of the new party was marked by angry rhetoric and mutual resentment. E. V. Ramasami dismissed those who left as mere 'tear drops', predicting they would achieve little to no success.²⁶ Annadurai, for his part, emphasized (alluding to the financial issue) that the defectors had taken nothing with them other than the towels draped over their shoulders. More importantly, he insisted that the D.M.K. and the D.K. would operate in tandem, like a double-barreled shotgun. Following the founding meeting held in Royapuram (Madras City) on September 17th, 1949, Annadurai strongly emphasized that he had left the D.K. not because of political disagreements, but because of E. V. Ramasami's marriage.²⁷

The Rise of C. N. Annadurai

The D.K. and the D.M.K. pursued the same goals. Seventy-five percent of the party's grassroots base broke away with Annadurai. There were various reasons for this. Many were genuinely disturbed by E. V. Ramasami's marriage. Among the more intellectually inclined members, the majority rejected the idea of Maniammai being accepted as E. V. Ramasami's successor. Debates regarding electoral politics had taken root within this more educated segment, and many agreed with Annadurai that the path to social reform lay in using politics to raise awareness or in seizing power through control of the Legislative Assembly. Others parted ways with E. V. Ramasami due to his authoritarian demeanor. A significant factor was the personal bond formed with Annadurai. Many left simply to follow him. Beyond his charisma, Annadurai was a talented writer, playwright, actor, and master of propaganda. He had played a pivotal role in winning over many young D.K. members, and it was primarily these young people who followed him.

In 1949, the D.K. and the D.M.K. shared the same ideology but differed in their organizational structures. While E. V. Ramasami adopted an authoritarian approach to party organization, Annadurai, at least in theory, advocated for intra-party democracy. In the newly formed D.M.K., the office of president was left vacant reserved for E. V. Ramasami in the event he changed his mind, and Annadurai assumed the role of general secretary.²⁸ Decision-making authority rested with the General Council, whose members were to be selected through indirect means. The party's fundamental organizational unit was the local branch. In practice, Annadurai assumed the role of strategist and central decision-maker, while E. V. K. Sampath held the second position in the party hierarchy. It was Annadurai who groomed Sampath as a politician and a parliamentarian.²⁹

In the early days of the D.M.K., most leaders focused heavily on propaganda activities rather than on being effective organizers. Speeches were delivered and interest in the party was generated, yet little effort was devoted to organizational follow-up. Many local branches were established on the initiative of individuals who recruited twenty-five members and paid the required dues. An exception to this trend was M. Karunanidhi, who grasped the importance of strong grassroots organization. From the very beginning, he leveraged the interest generated by public rallies, theatrical performances, and other events to establish new branches.

To conclude, drawing upon his extraordinary talents as an orator, strategist, and cultural icon, C. N. Annadurai founded the D.M.K. on September 17th, 1949. Affectionately known as Anna ('Elder Brother'), Annadurai transformed a radical social reform movement into a highly successful, mainstream political force in Tamil Nadu. His unique gifts not only laid the foundations of the D.M.K. but also permanently altered the political landscape of South India. Annadurai revolutionized political communication in Tamil by bridging the gap between classical literature and the ordinary citizen. Prior to his time, formal political speeches in Tamil often employed an overly academic or rigid style. He, however, successfully captivated millions by developing an oratorical style characterized by alliteration, rhythm, and profound emotional resonance. As a talented playwright, journalist, and screenwriter, he utilized cinema and theater as powerful vehicles to disseminate his political ideology. By penning scripts that addressed themes of Dravidian social reform, he transcended traditional media barriers and garnered a massive, loyal following among the working class. Under Annadurai's charismatic leadership, the party gained significant momentum through impassioned oratory, rationalist publications, and fierce opposition to the imposition of Hindi. Having begun participating in elections in 1957, the D.M.K. achieved a historic victory in the 1967 Madras State legislative assembly elections, ending the Congress's decades-long dominance and ushering in a new political era in Tamil Nadu.

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