

## Praise for the Book

‘For several decades, “Kalaingar” Muthuvel Karunanidhi was political India’s senior-most statesman, one of its most consequential figures, with a legendary reputation for versatility, political resilience, legislative acumen and administrative capability, lifelong literary and cultural engagement, emotional intelligence, empathy with the socially and educationally backward, and fighting spirit. Vaasanthi’s biography of the multifaceted man and the politician, warts and all, is a must-read for anyone interested in the political history of independent India.’

**N. Ram**

‘This is the story of a public figure known for his political longevity, administrative acumen, literary accomplishments, oratorical skills and personal magnetism. A well-known writer in Tamil herself, Vaasanthi has written a very engaging and informative account of Karunanidhi’s multifaceted personality. His accomplishments are detailed but so also are his errors of judgement and failings. She has enriched our understanding of a man who had a pivotal place in both state and national politics for almost half a century.’ **Jairam Ramesh**

‘The celebrated Tamil writer Vaasanthi has told the life story of a multifaceted and towering leader, Kalaingar Karunanidhi, in her breezy and eminently readable style. To those who do not know Tamil, this book will be an introduction to a political colossus.’ **P. Chidambaram**

‘A gripping and forthright biography of Kalaingar Karunanidhi, the artist-leader whose life is inextricably interwoven with the modern history of Tamilians. To truly understand the Tamil psyche you need to unravel the mind of Karunanidhi.’ **T.M. Krishna**

‘Karunanidhi spun a certain magic around his name. Vaasanthi illuminates that spell with feeling and – that which is important – sifted facts.’ **Gopal Gandhi**



Karunanidhi



# Karunanidhi

The Definitive Biography

Vaasanthi

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS

C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,  
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2020

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353451042

E-ISBN: 9789353451059

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Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

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## Timeline

**1916:** The Justice Party is formed. The first major institutional manifestation of the Dravidian movement, it was composed of members of the regional elite – merchants, landlords and professionals. They came together under a non-Brahmin banner in opposition to what they regarded as Brahmin dominance in public life.

**1924:** Karunanidhi is born in a backward caste community on 3 June in Thirukkuvalai village, Thanjavur district. Experiences caste-based discrimination from his childhood.

**1925:** The Self-Respect Association is launched by social reformist E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, known as Periyar, to work together with the Justice Party for the social and cultural advancement of all Dravidians.

**1938:** At the age of fourteen, Karunanidhi leads an anti-Hindi agitation in Thirukkuvalai. Comes under the spell of Periyar.

**1939:** Karunanidhi starts a fortnightly handwritten magazine for students called *Manava Nesan*.

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**1944:** Merger of the Justice Party and the Self-Respect Association into the Dravida Kazhagam (DK). Lured by its opposition to Brahminism and the caste system, Karunanidhi joins the DK.

Karunanidhi is married to Padmavathi from Chidambaram.

**1945:** Karunanidhi writes plays to make a living. Gets acquainted with Periyar and C.N. Annadurai (Anna), a brilliant speaker and member of the DK. Periyar invites Karunanidhi to work for his paper *Kudiyarasu* for a monthly salary of Rs 40. Karunanidhi works there for a year and thereafter joins Jupiter Films, a famous production house, to write film scripts.

**1947:** India attains freedom.

**1948:** M.K. Gandhi is shot dead in January.

Karunanidhi's wife, Padmavathi, dies after giving birth to a boy, Muthu.

Karunanidhi's second marriage to Dayalu Ammal takes place in September.

**1949:** Differences arise between Periyar and younger members of the DK. The DK splits and Annadurai forms the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK).

Karunanidhi joins the DMK, becomes close to Anna and emerges as a very active member and organizer.

**1967:** The DMK defeats the Congress in Assembly elections and comes to power, winning a majority of seats. Annadurai is sworn in as the chief minister. Karunanidhi becomes the public works department (PWD) minister.

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**1968:** Karunanidhi's relationship with Rajathi, a theatre artist, comes to light when a girl is born in a Chennai nursing home and the father is named as M. Karunanidhi. He admits in the Assembly that 'Rajathi is the mother of my daughter, Kanimozhi.' From then on, Rajathi was publicly acknowledged as his partner and Dayalu Ammal as his wife.

**1969:** Annadurai dies. Karunanidhi becomes the chief minister at the age of forty-five.

The Tamil Nadu Agricultural Fair Wages Act is passed to enforce payment of fair wages to agricultural labourers in the Kaveri delta region and penalize landowners who exploited them.

**1970:** The Tamil Nadu Land Reforms Act is passed, reducing the land ceiling limit from 30 standard acres to 15 standard acres.

The Rajamannar Committee is set up to suggest measures to secure autonomy for the state in the executive, legislative and judicial branches. Its recommendations laid out a comprehensive roadmap for a more federal Constitution.

Sattanathan Commission is constituted to give recommendations on improving the welfare of backward classes. On the basis of the report the government increased the reservation quota of the backward classes in educational institutions and government employment from 25 per cent to 31 per cent and for the scheduled castes from 16 per cent to 18 per cent.

**1972:** Crisis in the DMK. The party treasurer, Assembly member and matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) publicly accuses members of his party of corruption. He is expelled from the DMK.

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MGR forms the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) on 18 October, later renamed as All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). This would change the political landscape of Tamil Nadu.

**1975:** Indira Gandhi declares Emergency. The DMK, under Chief Minister Karunanidhi, which was at the time in alliance with Indira's Congress, is one of the most strident voices condemning the Emergency.

**1976:** Indira Gandhi dismisses the DMK government, citing corruption allegations on the basis of MGR's letters to the President of India. Karunanidhi's son M.K. Stalin and several DMK members are arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) and put behind bars.

**1977:** Indira Gandhi forms an alliance with MGR's ADMK. The DMK joins the Janata Party headed by Morarji Desai.

Morarji Desai becomes prime minister but Karunanidhi loses in the state Assembly elections. MGR wins and becomes the chief minister until his death in 1987. Karunanidhi remains in Opposition until 1989.

**1987:** MGR dies on 25 December. The AIADMK splits into two groups: one under his wife, Janaki, and the other under J. Jayalalithaa, his erstwhile co-star in films and later his political protégé. Janaki is propped up as the new chief minister but her government is dismissed for want of numbers. Jayalalithaa is more popular and the two groups merge, making her the undisputed leader of the AIADMK.

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**1989:** The DMK wins the Assembly elections and Karunanidhi returns as chief minister after thirteen years out of power.

The Hindu Succession (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act addressing gender inequality is passed, providing equal succession rights to women.

**1991:** The DMK government is dismissed on 30 January on the grounds that it allowed the Sri Lankan terrorist organization Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to operate freely and carry out terrorist activities in Tamil Nadu.

Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated on 21 May by an LTTE suicide bomber near Chennai, shortly before the state and parliamentary elections.

The AIADMK–Congress alliance wins a decisive victory in the state Assembly elections and Jayalalithaa comes to power as chief minister.

**1993:** V. Gopalasamy, better known as Vaiko, who was emerging as a forceful leader in the DMK, is expelled from the party in November. Though it was officially said that he indulged in anti-party activities with the help of the LTTE, according to many insiders he was expelled because he was becoming a threat to Stalin, who was being groomed to succeed his father, Karunanidhi.

**1994:** Vaiko forms a new party called Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK).

**1996:** The Tamil Nadu Congress under G.K. Mooppanar revolts in March against the Centre's decision to align with Jayalalithaa whose regime had become unpopular due to alleged corruption.

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Mooppanar quits the Congress and forms a new party called Tamil Manila Congress (TMC).

In the Assembly elections held in May the AIADMK crashes to a humiliating defeat. Jayalalithaa is defeated in her own constituency. The DMK, with its strong alliance partners, including the TMC, wins with a comfortable majority. Karunanidhi is back as chief minister.

Jayalalithaa is arrested on 6 December on charges of corruption in the colour TV scam.

**1997:** The Dr Ambedkar Law University is set up in Chennai, and Periyar University in Salem.

The Jain Commission indicts the DMK in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. The DMK is a partner in the United Front government under Prime Minister I.K. Gujral at the Centre. The Congress demands the DMK's dismissal, withdraws support to the Gujral government and the United Front government falls.

**1998:** Jayalalithaa joins hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which comes to power at the Centre under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, but she soon withdraws support, bringing the Vajpayee government down.

**1999:** The DMK's Golden Jubilee year. Karunanidhi makes a momentous policy decision to join hands with the BJP, going against the party's cherished secular ideology.

**2001:** The AIADMK comes back with a big majority in the Assembly elections, though Jayalalithaa is debarred from contesting, having been convicted for two years in a case. The DMK is routed.

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Karunanidhi is arrested on 30 June on charges of corruption. He is released later when there is widespread criticism of his arrest.

**2004:** Karunanidhi forms a strong alliance with smaller parties in Tamil Nadu and the Congress for the Lok Sabha elections. This alliance sweeps all the forty Lok Sabha seats from the state, including Pondicherry.

**2006:** The DMK and its alliance partners are victorious in the Assembly elections. The DMK does not get a majority but forms the government with alliance partners, including the Congress, supporting it from outside. Karunanidhi becomes the chief minister once again.

An ordinance is passed to enable the appointment of priests from all castes. On 29 July 2018, a few days after Karunanidhi's hospitalization, the first non-Brahmin government-trained priest is appointed to a Madurai temple by the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.

**2007:** All is not well in Karunanidhi's family. On 9 May supporters of M.K. Alagiri, Karunanidhi's elder son, burn down the office of the daily *Dinakaran*, run by Karunanidhi's grand-nephew Dayanidhi Maran, because of a poll survey that showed Alagiri in poor light. Three people are killed. The DMK suspends Dayanidhi for his 'anti-party' act while Alagiri is not held responsible for the violence. Dayanidhi, who is Central minister for information and technology, resigns. But within a year all differences in the family are settled and Dayanidhi is back in the party and the family fold.

Kanimozhi becomes a member of the Rajya Sabha. She is

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nominated again for a second term in 2013. She is elected to the Lok Sabha in 2019.

**2009:** Continuing with the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at the Centre, the DMK wins eighteen seats in the Lok Sabha elections and the Congress comes to power at the Centre. Karunanidhi bargains with the Congress to get a Cabinet post for Dayanidhi Maran and A. Raja, who was in the previous UPA government. Karunanidhi surprises partymen by also getting a Cabinet post in the Central government for Alagiri even though he speaks neither English nor Hindi.

2G spectrum scam explodes in October. The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) tabled in Parliament implies that A. Raja, minister for information technology, deprived the government of a staggering Rs 1,76,000 crore in 2G spectrum allocation. Raja resigns. He is later arrested, stays in jail for over a year.

**2010:** Anna Centenary Library built in Chennai on 8 acres of land, a state-of-the-art nine-floor structure housing 1.2 million books. This was one of Karunanidhi's most prized projects.

Another pet project of Karunanidhi, the new secretariat-cum-assembly building, is inaugurated. When Jayalalithaa comes back to power in 2011 she converts it into a multi-speciality children's hospital.

**2011:** Kanimozhi, a director of Kalaaignar TV, is arrested on 21 May and sent to Tihar Jail because of the channel being linked to the 2G scam. She stays in jail for 190 days.

Jayalalithaa comes back to power in Tamil Nadu with an absolute majority in the Assembly elections held in May.



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**2014:** After a souring of relations with the Congress over the 2G scandal, Karunanidhi decides to contest the parliamentary elections aligning with neither the Congress nor the BJP. The DMK loses power in the state as well as the Centre. The Modi wave sweeps the country and the BJP comes to power at the Centre.

Jayalalithaa is convicted on 27 September in the disproportionate assets case and awarded a four-year jail term and a Rs 100 crore fine by the Karnataka special court. O. Panneerselvam of the AIADMK takes charge as chief minister.

**2015:** The Karnataka High Court acquits Jayalalithaa and her associates of all charges on 11 May. Jayalalithaa is released from jail. She wins handsomely from R.K. Nagar and within six months takes charge as chief minister.

**2016:** Karunanidhi tries his best to form a grand alliance against Jayalalithaa in the May Assembly elections, but fails. The DMK loses by 1 per cent votes to the incumbent AIADMK regime. Jayalalithaa is back in power.

Jayalalithaa is admitted to Apollo Hospital on 23 September. She stays there for seventy-five days and dies on 5 December. Karunanidhi is in Kauvery Hospital at this time. He loses his ability to speak and Stalin takes charge of the party.

**2017:** After seven long years of hearings on the 2G spectrum case, the CBI court in Delhi acquits all the accused on 21 December.

**2018:** Karunanidhi, ninety-four, is hospitalized due to age-related problems. A week later, on 7 August, he passes away.



## Introduction

I have been a Tamil writer for long but had never lived in Tamil Nadu till I moved to Chennai at the beginning of 1993 to take up the job of editor of the Tamil edition of *India Today*. The nine years I worked there were the most exciting years of my writing career. I was born into a Tamil-speaking family in Bangalore, and though I studied in an English-medium school, Tamil was the language I loved and chose to write in. Until my assignment with *India Today*, however, I had no knowledge of the colourful nature of Tamil politics.

I was, I admit, a little nervous about my challenging new assignment and certainly not prepared for the cultural shocks that awaited me in Chennai. The very first one was staggering. It came directly from M. Karunanidhi, leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). He was the leader of the Opposition in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, then headed by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and its young leader Jayalalithaa, perhaps the most fascinating that Tamil Nadu had yet seen.

In those days the Tamil edition of *India Today* published

translations of nearly 75 per cent of the articles from the same week's English edition.

That week the Tamil edition carried a piece on Karunanidhi's family, titled 'Karunanidhi's women'. Though I found the story to be in rather poor taste, I did not anticipate the reaction it triggered. The Tamil edition was on the stands on Saturday. The DMK party's journal *Murasoli* appeared on Sunday with a supplement devoted entirely to me – a big picture of me on its cover, an abusive heading, which put within brackets two letters in my name so that it read not as Vaasanthi but as Vaanathi, meaning vomit in Tamil. Every word, every page tore me to pieces and questioned my integrity. I was bewildered. After all, I was not the author of the *India Today* article, and surely they knew that? The write-ups against me in *Murasoli* did not have a byline. Was this the DMK's way of warning the new editor? Were the DMK and its supremo telling me what would happen if I carried articles that were critical of them?

I pulled myself together and decided to ignore it. I would not succumb to such pressures. But I also felt Karunanidhi was justified in being angry with my magazine.

The very next month the English edition of *India Today* wanted an interview with him, and my colleague Nirupama Subramanian, who worked for the English edition and was also based in Chennai, told me that Karunanidhi was not willing to give *India Today* an interview. I called Karunanidhi's personal assistant Shanmuganathan and requested an appointment with the thalaivar (leader). Shanmuganathan sounded surprised at my audacity, and slammed the phone down with an emphatic no. Nirupama looked worried. We knew our Delhi office would not take no for an answer from its correspondents.

And so I decided to gatecrash. The next morning Nirupama

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and I stood at the huge iron gates of the *Murasoli* office building, sweating under the burning sun. I knew Karunanidhi came there at ten every morning. As his car approached, it slowed down near us; Nirupama hid behind me as Karunanidhi lowered the window and asked, ‘*Enna venum?*’ What do you want?

I said, ‘We want an interview with you.’

He said, ‘Come to Gopalapuram [his residence] at nine-thirty in the morning.’ He rolled the window up and the car sped into the compound.

We were pleasantly surprised at his quick and positive reply.

The next morning we were at Gopalapuram well before nine-thirty. I tried to prepare a convincing rejoinder, as I expected him to admonish us over the *India Today* article. I was sure he was still angry. He entered the room in his starched white veshti, full-sleeved shirt, with his trademark yellow shawl over his shoulder, and sat down facing us. As I readied myself for an angry barrage, he looked at me and said, ‘Those articles in *Murasoli* got published without being sent to me to read. There is a man called Chinna Kuththoosi . . .’

I was taken aback. He was apologizing! Nothing could be printed in *Murasoli* without his knowledge, of course. Yet he wanted to express his regret and pacify me. He had charmed and disarmed me.

I met him several times after that day to interview him and always enjoyed those sessions, peppered with his quick wit, sharp arguments and clear reasoning – never once did he fumble for words even when I asked difficult questions. Off the record, he would even share with me his worries and fears. I became convinced he was a genuinely down-to-earth, intelligent politician with no airs, who had a vision for the state, but also the weaknesses of an

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ordinary mortal. He was always easily accessible – whether he was chief minister or not. You called his residence, and after being told who was at the other end, he would pick up the phone.

He regularly read the weekly column I wrote, in which I often censured him as well as Jayalalithaa. As soon as he had read it, I would get a call early in the morning. If he liked what I had written – he relished my criticism of Jayalalithaa – he would express generous appreciation. If he didn't, especially if it was critical of him, he would protest and present his side of the issue.

Once, at a big DMK party conference in Salem, he spoke vehemently against *The Hindu* which had carried an editorial severely criticizing him. He said the Brahmin paper was always critical of him because he was a 'Sudra'. I thought it was demeaning for a person, the chief minister of the state at that, to speak thus. I wrote a column that week strongly objecting to his claim that he was attacked because he belonged to a backward class. It was regrettable, I said, for a person of his erudition and intelligence to bring in the caste factor as the reason for a paper's criticism of him. The paper's right to freedom of expression was at stake if he showed no tolerance towards dissent – as he should surely be aware, since he himself had begun his career as a journalist. And the most disturbing question, my column went on to say, was why he suffered from such an inferiority complex after having risen to the most powerful position in the state. Shouldn't it be a matter of pride that he had done so despite the hurdles he must have faced as a person born in a backward community? I said all his reading and writing had not helped him overcome 'caste feelings'.

As expected, Karunanidhi called me the day the magazine was out. He asked me straight away, '*Ennammaa appadi ezudhitteenga?*' Why did you write such a column?

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I reiterated that what he had said at the Salem conference was unbecoming. He tried to justify his argument and insisted *The Hindu* was 'a Brahmin paper' that always criticized him, and its prejudice against him 'ran deep in its veins'.

I said, 'You too suffer from a prejudice. Even if what you say is true, which I think it is not, you are the chief minister. Most importantly, you are a writer, a poet, a scholar. It does not behove a person of your stature to speak as you did.'

He listened to me patiently and then said with a chuckle, 'You must be a different kind of Brahmin.'

Looking back, I am surprised I was able to express myself so frankly and plainly and that he did not get angry. I could never have spoken that way to Jayalalithaa and survived as a journalist in Tamil Nadu. Jayalalithaa kept journalists at a distance, never read the press except what was brought to her attention and certainly never deigned to come on the line if a journalist telephoned her. Karunanidhi, on the other hand, read the press closely and always had time for journalists; yet, ironically, he was the chief minister most criticized by the press.

To understand M. Karunanidhi, five-time chief minister of Tamil Nadu, president of the DMK for sixty years and a man who never lost a single election he fought, you have to understand the Dravidian movement. Karunanidhi's life story, which began in June 1924 and ended in August 2018, is as much the story of the most tumultuous and fascinating period in the annals of modern Tamil Nadu. It is also a remarkable success story in terms of the welfare and progress of its 72.1 million people (2011 census) over seventy years, much of it under the rule of Dravidian parties, compared to the other states of India during that period. Tamil Nadu has raced

ahead of most states on the parameters of growth, social justice and good governance.

Karunanidhi has been part of this success story to a great extent. He was at the forefront of important social justice movements and welfare schemes, a champion of state autonomy and protector and promoter of Tamil identity. From an early age, he was driven by the movement for a distinct Dravidian identity, language and culture that resisted domination by the 'Aryan' Brahmin-dominated culture of north India. And this movement has, from its very beginning, deeply affected and shaped politics in Tamil Nadu.



Under the British Raj, the Madras Presidency comprised the present-day states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and a part of Kerala.

When E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, who later came to be known as Periyar or The Elder, entered active public life in his thirties, in the early twentieth century (he was born in 1879), the political air was vibrant with new movements and campaigns. It was the time when Annie Besant called for home rule in India. This period saw, too, the formation of the South Indian Liberation Front, commonly known as the Justice Party. The Justice Party was composed of members of a regional non-Brahmin elite – mostly educated, English-speaking landlords, merchants and professionals. They united under the 'non-Brahmin' banner and were opposed to what they regarded as Brahmin dominance in public life: though Brahmins were less than 3 per cent of the population, they dominated government administration and higher education and perceived the non-Brahmin elite as low-caste Sudras.



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Since Brahmins were also members of the Congress and active in the Home Rule movement, the Justicites branded the Congress and the Home Rule movement as sectarian and casteist.

A silent storm had been brewing for a long time, and when it broke, it consumed the whole state and altered the course of Tamil history. The Justicites were not social reformers, but in a sense they echoed the feelings of the ordinary non-Brahmin against oppressive Brahmin domination.



There was another wind, 'Dravidianism', sweeping across the Madras Presidency. The European colonial scholars who came to the south and studied Tamil romanticized the idea of Dravidianism, sensing its political potential. When the Reverend Robert Caldwell developed the theory that Sanskrit was brought down to the south by Aryan Brahmin colonists, the underlying message was that the caste system and idol worship came along with it. Caldwell proposed that the term Sudra be dropped and, instead, the name Dravidian be used for native Tamils. Nothing was more welcome to the non-Brahmin elite, as this revelation vindicated their belief that caste hierarchies were introduced by outsiders.

Dravidianism was fuelled by a renewed interest in Tamil history and culture, an emerging 'classicism' in terms of a re-evaluation of the ancient Tamil literary and religious tradition. A linguistic chauvinism took birth which assigned to Tamil a status of pristine purity, the unique Dravidian language that was unrelated to Sanskrit, the language of classical Hinduism.<sup>1</sup>

Discoveries in language were linked to the theory of the 'superior Dravidian race' having been subdued and conquered by

the invading Aryans. Tamil Brahmins, who represented classical Hinduism, and whose dialect was marked by a profusion of Sanskrit words, were seen as descendants of the Aryan race, different from the Dravidians.

Later, C.N. Annadurai (Anna), Periyar's disciple, would regale audiences thus: 'How could the Dravidian Tamils, once the conquerors of the world, great navigators and traders who traded pearls and spices with the Greeks and the Romans, how could the Tamils who had a literary tradition 5000 years old, that saw the birth of five epics when the rest of the world was in mute darkness, a people who could produce a gem like Sangam poetry that has no parallel in the literature of the world, how could they allow themselves to be conquered and subdued by a race inferior?'

The educated non-Brahmin Tamils were thrilled to hear the British official Grant Duff say at a gathering, 'You are of pure Dravidian race and I should like to see the pre-Sanskrit element amongst you asserting itself rather more.'

It suited the British to divide and rule, a strategy to contain the growing strength of Indian freedom fighters.

And when Periyar jumped on to the anti-Brahmin bandwagon, the movement gained momentum and a certain legitimacy. There were already sporadic expressions of protest against caste and class discrimination and Periyar was quick to cash in on that. The Brahmins did not realize what was in store. Nor did the short-sighted Congress party, which failed to notice the radical churning taking place among Tamils. Caste-based prejudices and the obscurantism of the party leadership, fuelled by Gandhi's remarks on varnashrama dharma during a visit to Chennai (known as Madras until 1996), seen as a justification of the caste system,

were directly responsible for alienating the Congress from growing Tamil popular opinion. It was the beginning of the Congress's decline in Tamil Nadu.

The Congress had, however, become wary of the rise of the Justice Party, which it termed as 'selfish, unpatriotic and communal'. It was then that Periyar was persuaded to join the Congress by C. Rajagopalachari, a Congress leader. Rajaji, as he was popularly known, saw in Periyar a wealthy and popular landowner from Erode who had demonstrated amazing organizing ability, the potential to contain the influence of the Justice Party. The objectives of the Congress – of attaining national freedom, removal of untouchability and introducing prohibition – lured Periyar into it. Once he joined the Congress in 1919, Periyar, as was his nature, put his heart and soul into it.

However, he was not destined to remain in the Congress for long, and the final break came in the wake of the gurukulam controversy. V.V.S. Iyer, a well-known nationalist, was running a gurukulam on Gandhian principles at Sermadevi, a town near Tinneveli, a stronghold of Brahmin orthodoxy. Periyar received complaints that there were separate dining areas for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students at the gurukulam and that the quality of the food served to the two sections was different. The influential non-Brahmin parents of the wards were outraged that such discrimination should be practised in a school run on donations from non-Brahmins, and by a man who was expected to be liberal-minded.

The matter was taken to Gandhi, but his response was ambiguous and somewhat dismissive. The argument in favour of Iyer was that inter-dining was not practised in society or even in institutions run by the government, so a change in the tradition would hurt the feelings of the highly religious Brahmins.

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Periyar then broke with the Congress and soon after founded Suyamariyathai Iyakkam, the Self-Respect Movement, in 1925. He symbolized his cause by wearing a black shirt. He campaigned in a black shirt for nearly fifty years, till his death in 1973. Travelling at times by bullock cart, a hurricane lantern in hand, he railed against Brahminism, caste, the Congress, the Hindu religion and discrimination against women. He established the idea of 'self-respect marriages' for non-Brahmins – marriages conducted without Brahmin priests or religious vows. He offered a vision of a bright future without the need for God. Or Brahmins.

Periyar followed the line of the Justicites in supporting the continuance of British rule. But his rough style lacked polish and sophistication. A decade earlier the Justicites had attacked the caste system and Brahmin supremacy, but they radically differed from the Self-Respecters on the question of religion. They were deeply religious and were shocked at Periyar's atheistic speeches. They were also worried about the impact this would have on their support groups, mainly the affluent business communities. However, Periyar was careful not to impose his atheism on others. He asked people not to follow him blindly but think first and decide for themselves.

Periyar's Self-Respect Movement was another manifestation of the national freedom movement. The difference was in the poser, 'Who is to be feared? The white man or the Brahmin? If India got its freedom, who will benefit, the Aryan Brahmin or the subaltern Dravidian?'

Periyar later gathered a bunch of brilliant speakers to spread his message, like C.N. Annadurai and Karunanidhi, who created a new language of rhetoric, with catchy alliteration, rhymes and lilting rhythms, invoking the Dravidian glories of the past and the

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beauty of the Tamil language, pointing to Brahmin dominance as the reason for its decline.

In a society loaded with superstition and obscurantism, caste divisions and privilege, Periyar's revolt against Brahminical Hinduism and the inequities of the caste system, while it may have diverted people's consciousness from national issues, attracted an impressively broad base.

It was during this momentous period that Karunanidhi was born, in a backward caste community. A rebel at heart from childhood, keenly sensitive to caste-based discrimination, the young boy was swept away by the Dravidian movement. Periyar's words stirred in him a passion that propelled him towards a long and extraordinary political journey that began when he was just fourteen years old.



There is no dearth of material to document Karunanidhi's story. His own writings – six volumes of his autobiography *Nenjukku Needhi* (Justice for the Heart), his public speeches, the millions of words that went in the form of letters to the DMK cadres that he wrote every day in *Murasoli* – are enough to overwhelm a researcher. His followers have added a million more, regularly compiling and releasing special issues celebrating his speeches in the Assembly as well as speeches on non-political subjects, his witticisms and chronicles of his life. And then there are his literary works – his annotations, paraphrasings and interpretations of the epics, Sangam poetry and the *Thirukkural*; his historical novels and film scripts; and his script for the TV serial on the eleventh-century saint Ramanuja. His literary output alone would win Karunanidhi, or

Kalaignar (artist) as he was most popularly known, an exalted place in Tamil Nadu's cultural life.

Karunanidhi wrote every day. Writing was like yoga for him, says N. Ram, former chief editor, *The Hindu*. 'I do not know any other politician who dominated the scene like Kalaignar Karunanidhi in a cultural sense, in literature and poetry,' says Ram. 'And he was a great reader also. His literary output places him in a different category than most other Indian politicians.'<sup>2</sup>

But there was also Karunanidhi the consummate politician. As N. Ram observes, 'You could say many things about Karunanidhi. An able administrator, he was known to take very quick decisions; he was the first to get into alliances with the centre, with national parties [as a coalition partner]. I do not know if any other regional politician of his time could do that, so much so that no national party could aspire to lead the state ever since the Dravidian parties came to rule in 1967.'<sup>3</sup>

Karunanidhi indeed had a multifaceted personality. He was a visionary and a reformist pushing for social justice, the builder of modern Tamil Nadu. But he was also a man with human weaknesses and shortcomings. He failed to admonish those close to him when they did wrong, be they party workers or his own family. He trusted people perhaps too easily and then was shocked when they betrayed him. A series of such betrayals perhaps pushed him to put his family before able and loyal party members.

And then there were his failures of judgement. When it came to handling the Sri Lankan Tamil issue, his judgement was clouded by his emotional attachment to supporting the cause of his fellow Tamils across the Palk Strait, at the cost of law and order in his own state. When he allowed the infiltration of Muslim fundamentalists at Kottaimedu, his judgement was coloured by his desire to

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demonstrate secular brotherhood with Tamil Nadu's Muslims. He didn't do enough to stop corruption among DMK members. His detractors say he himself was corrupt, though none of the charges against him were ever proved in a court of law.

He was the Tamil Nadu leader most abused by the media, but that is because he gave them space to do so. I have in several columns and articles been very critical of him. But I never feared reprisal. Once when I was seated next to him at a function I told him, 'I write very critically about you. But I must tell you that I have great respect and regard for you.'

He looked at me and said, smiling, 'Don't I know that?'

This book looks at his life and work – the good and the bad – unsparingly, as a biography should. I am sure he would have understood and appreciated that I have tried in this biography to be true to my subject and also to myself and my ethics as a journalist.