

New Icon, Old Wounds

Contributed by PC Vinoy Kumar
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As part of an overall strategy to infuse young blood and enrol new members, the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is making an all-out effort to woo the Thevar community, which has a strong presence in the southern districts. The party has taken advantage of the centenary celebrations of the Thevars' iconic leader and freedom fighter, Muthuramalinga Thevar (1908-1963), to inch closer to the community.

The move, hailed as a masterstroke in DMK circles, has however created fresh tension between the Dalits and the Thevars, and has brought back memories of the bloody caste clashes between the two communities that rocked the state in the 1990s. Chief Minister M Karunanidhi is personally leading the DMK's efforts to win over the Thevars, a dominant OBC community. The CM, who had avoided paying homage at Thevar's memorial on his birth anniversary celebrations for nearly two decades, was among a galaxy of political leaders who attended this year's centenary celebrations in Pasumpon on 30 October 2007. At a function organised by the government to mark the event, Karunanidhi announced that he would request the Central government to name the Madurai airport after Muthuramalinga Thevar.

His announcement has triggered protests from Dalit outfits. Posters appeared in Madurai opposing the move. This was followed by an eruption of violence after the police removed the statue of Dalit hero and freedom fighter Veeran Sundaralingam. Several buses were damaged in stone throwing incidents. Karunanidhi had earlier unveiled the statue of Maruthu Pandiar in Madurai after returning from his visit to Pasumpon. The Maruthu Pandiar brothers - who were generals in the army of the Raja of Sivagangai in the 18th century - were known for their bravery in battles against the British and are heroes for the Thevar community.

While installation of statues of leaders is not uncommon in the state, Dalit leaders argue that the protests are only a sign of the simmering anger of Dalits against the DMK government for its alleged appeasement of Thevars.

'Karunanidhi wants to snatch the Thevar vote bank from Jayalalithaa,' says K Krishnasamy, leader of Puthiya Thamizhagam (PT). The PT is a Dalit-based party, which derives its strength from the Pallars - the largest Dalit subcaste in the southern districts.

Karunanidhi's announcement comes as a surprise, considering that in his previous tenure (1996-2001), his government had passed an order that did away with the names of leaders conferred on districts and transport corporations in the state. The decision came in the wake of severe caste clashes between Dalits and Thevars in the southern districts. About 251 people had died in the clashes between August 1995 and October 1998. The situation reached a flashpoint when Thevars protested the naming of a division of the state transport corporation after Veeran Sundaralingam. As a result, the districts got back their old names and Pasumpon muthuramalingam district reverted to the name Sivagangai. 'Why is the DMK government reviving the old practice? The naming of the airport after Muthuramalinga Thevar is not going to solve people's problems. It would only create trouble,' says Krishnasamy. He contends that the land for the airport was acquired from the Dalits in the 1920s and if at all the airport has to be named after some leader, it has to be named after Thyagi Immanuel, a Pallar leader, who was killed in the 1957 Mudukulathor riots.

There are clear signs of growing tension between Thevars and Dalits. On 4 November 2007, a life-size statue of Thevar was vandalised near Sankarankovil in Tirunelveli district. Villagers disrupted vehicular traffic on the Tirunelveli-Rajapalayam road for several hours. The district administration is under pressure to keep the situation under control and has reportedly prevented some Thevar leaders from visiting the troubled spot. Actor Karthik, state leader of the All India Forward Block who has emerged as a Thevar leader, is camping in Tirunelveli, determined to visit the spot. Such incidents have increased the insecurity among Dalits.

On 23 October 2007, an Ambedkar statue was desecrated in Madurai. About 19 state transport corporation buses were damaged in the ensuing violence. On 30 October 2007, a Dalit schoolteacher - said to be an Ambedkarite - was killed in Mudukulathor in Ramnad district. On the previous day, Congress state president Krishnasamy was stabbed. His convoy was stopped and a mob attacked him in Keezhakanniseri near Mudukulathur. It was later found that the mob had been waiting to attack a Thevar leader, BT Kumar, who heads an outfit called Dravidar Vizhipunarchi Kazhagam. Kumar allegedly made anti-Dalit speeches in the area.

Thevar-based party All India Moovender Munnani Kazhagam leader, N Sethuraman, accuses Karunanidhi of playing politics with the name of Muthuramalinga Thevar. 'It is clear he is wooing the Thevars. He will never name the airport after Muthuramalinga Thevar. He knows well that the Dalits would oppose the move and it would never happen. His motive is to drive a rift between the Thevars and the Dalits. The DMK is afraid that if the two communities come together, they would emerge as a powerful political force,' he says.

Sethuraman claims Karunanidhi had split an emerging Thevar-Dalit alliance. 'I had declared that we would make (Dalit leader) Thirumavalavan as CM, but political manoeuvrings by Karunanidhi have now put us in opposite camps,' he says. Sethuraman had left the DMK alliance over differences during seat sharing talks in the last Assembly elections. He is now with the AIADMK alliance. (Thirumavalavan, who contested the election as part of the AIADMK alliance, is now with the DMK.) Dalit leaders say the DMK wants to expand its base among Thevars because the community has the money and muscle power.

'The Thevars have the ability to organise big meetings and gather crowds for political rallies. Whichever government is in power, they bag most of the government contracts in the village panchayats and municipalities in southern districts,' says OP Chandra Bose, founder leader of the Thyagi Immanuel Peravai in Paramakudi.

DMK's overtures are also seen as an attempt to placate the Thevars, who are said to be angry with the party over the murder of senior DMK functionary and former state minister T Kiruttinan in 2003. Karunanidhi's son and the party's southern strongman, MK Azhagiri, is the prime accused in the case.

The refrain among DMK leaders is that the party is not the only one that is practising so-called 'caste politics'. The Thevar-wooing exercise is also being seen in the context of the mega youth conference that the DMK is planning in Tirunelveli next month. The conference is expected to officially showcase youth wing leader MK Stalin as the party's future leader. Karunanidhi has been writing a series of articles in party organ Murasoli on youth-centric themes. He has hinted that it is time the older leaders make way for the youth in the party. The DMK's Thevar wooing has rattled AIADMK supremo Jayalalithaa. In a strong reaction, she said Karunanidhi did not deserve to participate in the Thevar Jayanthi celebrations since he did not believe in Thevar's spiritualism or nationalism. She said the DMK government had not enforced her government's order that the Thevar subcastes of Maravar, Kallar and Ahamudayars be given the common name of Mukulathor Thevar. Jayalalithaa also claimed her government had sanctioned Rs 3 crore for Thevar's centenary celebrations, but the DMK government has allocated only Rs 50 lakh. The AIADMK could be expected to safeguard its turf more aggressively in the coming days. (Courtesy: Tehelka dated 23 November 2007)