

Intra-Family Political Strife Shakes DMK



By D.B.S. Jeyaraj

Today the DMK is in the eye of a storm. This crisis is not caused by differences of political ideology or methodology but due to the politics of intra - family political strife. The DMK's ruling family headed by Muttuvel Karunanidhi, chief minister of Tamil Nadu, is embroiled in a family feud. His children are clashing with his grand nephews, the sons of Karunanidhi's late nephew "Murasoli" Maran. The uncles and nephews are fighting.

The innocent casualties in this internecine warfare were three employees attached to "Dinakaran" newspaper in Madurai. They were killed when an enraged mob attacked the paper's offices during a political demonstration. The mob led by Madurai city's DMK woman mayor Ms. Thenmozhi was protesting against the results of an opinion poll published in the newspaper. The poll stated that Karunanidhi's son and political heir apparent, MK Stalin was endorsed as future CM of Tamil Nadu by 70% of respondents. The survey also said that MK Azhagiri another son of the chief minister and a power to reckon with in Madurai was supported as CM by only 2%. This result being made public seemed to be the immediate provocation for the demonstration and attack on the "Dinakaran". Many of those in the forefront were prominent lackeys of Azhagiri like the city's first citizen. In the background hovered Azhagiri the DMK satrap of Madurai. Many of Azhagiri's supporter goondas were identified by newspaper employees and it was widely alleged that Azhagiri instigated the attack.

The reason for this bizarre situation lies at the door of Tamil Nadu state's politics of byzantine intrigue. If one is to understand the unfolding political drama a brief excursion into recent history of the DMK and the politics of Chief Minister Karunanidhi's extended family becomes necessary.

Karunanidhi first became chief minister in 1969 after the death of CN Annadurai the party's founder and first chief minister. Karunanidhi known popularly as "kalainjer" amended the party constitution and became its first President in the same year. He has been President since then and has over the years turned the party into his family fiefdom. Karunanidhi has been chief minister four times earlier from 1969 - 1971; 1971 - 76 ;1989 - 91;1996 - 2001. The Octogenarian became CM for the fifth time last year.

The late "Murasoli" Maran was Karunanidhi's elder sister's son. The nephew was a lawyer who engaged in journalism, cinema and politics like his maternal uncle. The newspaper "Murasoli" was started by the uncle but later run by the nephew whose name had the prefix "Murasoli" affixed to his name. In 1967 Maran became MP for South Chennai at the Lok Sabha. Unlike Karunanidhi who contested seats to the state legislature successfully from 1957 onwards, Maran set his sights on New Delhi. He has been since 1967 elected frequently if not regularly to both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (upper house). Maran was the man most trusted by Karunanidhi who once called him his "conscience". The nephew was the party's chief political strategist and drew up election manifestoes. He was also the DMK point man at New Delhi for decades. Maran was also central minister at different times in the cabinets of VP Singh, HD Devegowda,

IK Gujral and Atal Behari Vajpaayee. After Maran's death in 2003 his second son Dayanidhi became political heir.

"Murasoli" Maran and his siblings were beholden to their maternal uncle for their upward mobility. Maran's younger brother Selvam who manages "Murasoli" now is married to Karunanidhi's elder daughter Selvi. Maran and his siblings first managed and then owned the Murasoli newspaper and also the Mekala pictures film company. The family enlarged its media empire over the years. With Karunanidhi being in active politics Maran's siblings and sons were in a sense fronts or "benamis" for his extensive wealth.

It was Kalanidhi eldest son of "Murasoli" Maran who pioneered into TV and radio. He started with a monthly video magazine "Newstrack" in English and "Poomalai" in Tamil in the early nineties. With economic liberalisation in 1993 Kalanidhi Maran ventured out into running his own TV shows and stations. The "Sun" TV was the flagship. Today the family owns 19 TV and cable networks and also seven FM stations. Most of these are in the Southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu the "Sun" has a



virtual monopoly of cable TV.

The Maran media empire would not have been possible if not for Karunanidhi's backing. Just as the "Murasoli" became party organ the "Sun" too was promoted ardently by DMK cadres. The cable monopoly for instance was made possible through political pressure at high levels and party goondas intimidatory thuggery at low levels. The family also acquired a hold over broadband when Dayanidhi as IT minister was in charge. There was a conflict of interest in this but Manmohan Singh and Sonia dared not displease Karunanidhi.

"Murasoli" Maran's proximity to Karunanidhi aroused envy and resentment amidst DMK circles. Yet Maran had been around for a long time and earned his political colours by going to prison during the anti - Hindi struggle of 1965 and the Indira Gandhi emergency of 1975 - 77. As a powerful writer and orator in Tamil the man enjoyed some support among sections of the rank and file.

There was however no denying that "Murasoli" Maran owed his political clout and position to his uncle. There have also been allegations that he used his central minister status to accumulate wealth through dubious methods. Nothing was proved. Likewise his son Dayanidhi was also accused of misusing his cabinet berth and promoting the family's business interests. Again nothing has been proved. Dayanidhi by marrying Priya Rangarajan also married into the prestigious media family owning "The Hindu".

Karunanidhi will complete 83 years on June 3rd. It is obvious that the DMK patriarch will not be around for long. In a region where dynastic politics is the rule rather than the exception his successor has to emerge from the family. Karunanidhi has four sons and two daughters from three wives. Stalin his second son from wife Dayalu ammaiyaar has been selected to be political heir. Though Azhagiri is elder to Stalin he was not regarded as eligible due to perceived character flaws.

This has led to some tensions between the brothers. In a bid to patch up sibling rivalry Azhagiri was "banished" to the Southern City of Madurai. Azhagiri using his father's

influence and his own brand of patronage politics has established himself as a "power" in the region. He also commands some violent and lawless elements. Azhagiri was once implicated in the cold - blooded murder of T. Krishnan a veteran DMK party stalwart. Again his father's political pull has saved him so far from retribution.

Stalin however was shamelessly promoted by sycophantic party men as Karunanidhi's successor. He headed the youth league, became Chennai mayor, Member of legislative assembly and then state minister. He now waits for his father to step down or pass away peacefully to become party leader and state chief minister.

Whatever the attempts to make him chief minister the reality is that Stalin is poor material as future CM. If it were not for his pedigree the man would not have risen beyond a seat in a local authority. Stalin is not of leadership potential. He lacks charisma and mass popularity. It was to eliminate threats to his leadership that the ebullient Vai. Gopalaswamy (Vaiko) was pushed out of the DMK. Many political analysts feel that an inefficient Stalin would be an easy pushover when his father is no more. The DMK's future under Stalin is not rosy.

It is against this backdrop that the Maran family began eyeing political dominance in the state. The Harvard educated Dayanidhi is seen as a capable, dynamic leader. He is credited with bringing in much investment in telecommunications and the IT sphere to Tamil Nadu and India. Chennai and suburbs are witnessing a hi - tech boom. Dayanidhi's brother Kalanidhi had ambitious plans for his sibling. Kalanidhi is India's 24th richest man with a personal fortune of 1.9 \$ billion US dollars.

The media machinery under Kalanidhi's control began enhancing Dayanidhi's image to larger than life proportions. A recent opinion poll conducted by Sun and Dinakaran "voted" Dayanidhi as the most efficient cabinet minister from Tamil Nadu in New Delhi. This aroused hostility in political ally Dr. Ramdoss the leader of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). Ramdoss's son Anbumani is minister of health in New Delhi. The Maran gameplan seemed to be that of waiting for Karunanidhi to "go" and then strike. It could have been either a play for immediate succession or to let Stalin mount and then bring him down. Stalin by himself was considered weak and therefore easy prey. The stumbling block however was Azhagiri the party strong man. The potential



danger to the Maran family political ambitions was a rapprochement between Azhagiri and Stalin. If both brothers united then the nephews would have found it difficult to overcome the uncles.

It is therefore with insidious design that the "rigged" opinion poll was publicised. The idea was to provoke Azhagiri and incite further dissension between brothers. Given Azhagiri's penchant for strong arm tactics some violence was anticipated. Initially Azhagiri played into the Maran family hands by instigating violent demonstrations resulting in three innocent lives being lost. The Maran controlled media began clamouring for legal action against Azhagiri. The idea was to divide Azhagiri and Stalin and further isolate and weaken the stronger brother. Dayanidhi went to the extent of telephoning the state's home secretary and urging Azhagiri be arrested. This was too much for the Karunanidhi clan. Unfortunately for the nephews the unexpected happened. The grand uncles family closed ranks against the perceived usurpers. Stalin, Azhagiri and even sisters

Selvi and Kanimozhi bonded against the Marans. Karunanidhi backed his prodigal son Azhagiri and ensured no police action was taken against him. He ordered a CBI inquiry to tie the hands of state police. The CM made use of his personal contacts to cool down protests from the journalist fraternity. Compensation was promptly paid the families of three victims.

The veteran Karunanidhi had in recent times been indecisive and vacillating. But in a remarkable turn - around he was firm and aggressive in this case. His wrath was directed against his scheming grand - nephews who were seen as ungrateful traitors. The DMK's general council was



urgently summoned. A resolution censuring the "Sun" media group and calling for removal of Dayanidhi Maran as cabinet minister was passed unanimously. The Sun group was also given notice to quit its premises in "Anna

Dayanidhi tried to use his relationship with Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi to help out. But they were powerless in an intra - party dispute. Also Karunanidhi was more important than Dayanidhi Maran to the Congress. When Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi came to Chennai for the function felicitating Karunanidhi's golden anniversary of entering the Legislature, Dayanidhi Maran was a conspicuous absentee.

Realising that the game was up Dayanidhi tendered his resignation and took it to grand - uncle. He was kept waiting outside for hours. He was then called in and kept standing. When he tried to hand over his resignation letter to Karunanidhi the latter refused to take it. Snapping "Am I a postman"? Karunanidhi asked Dayanidhi to forward it to New Delhi.

Later Karunanidhi sent power minister Arcot Veerasamy as special emissary to New Delhi with a letter announcing removal of Dayanidhi as minister and substituting A. Rajah instead. There are rumours of Dayanidhi being asked to resign his Central Chennai MP seat. Also Karunanidhi's daughter Kanimozhi is likely to be appointed as Rajya Sabha MP this June. Speculation is rife that she may become a Central minister then. Even Dayanidhi was a first - time MP who became central minister.

Kalanidhi and Dayanidhi have gone to Switzerland and Ooty with their respective families. Their mother Mallika Maran is in the USA with her daughter. It is very likely that she would return soon and help reconcile the two families. There is a possibility of both families getting together again. This is not due to blood being thicker than water but more because of mutual interests. The Maran group needed the DMK in the past to build up a media empire. But now the DMK needs the "Sun" media to boost its politics. It is also imperative to block the "Sun" group being co-opted by a third party.

The "Sun" media has suspended its anti - Azhagiri tirade. Karunanidhi continues to get top billing in newscasts. Dayanidhi conducted a press conference where he professed innocence and re - iterated his loyalty to party, family and pater familias. He called his "thatha" Karunanidhi his guru and expressed hope that his resignation would make grand - uncle and family members happy. Such abject humility indicates that the Maran brothers have thrown the towel in and are ready for rapprochement.

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