



## The 1960's Student Revolution in Tamil Nadu: Language, Identity, and the Rise of the DMK

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**Abstract :** This paper examines the pivotal role of the student movement in Tamil Nadu during the 1960s, specifically focusing on the anti-Hindi imposition agitations of 1965, as a catalyst for a seismic shift in regional politics. While the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had long articulated a platform of Tamil cultural nationalism, it was the mass mobilization of the student community—filling the vacuum left by the pre-emptive arrest of political leaders—that transformed linguistic anxiety into a potent revolutionary force. By analyzing archival accounts, oral histories, and election data, this study argues that the 1965 agitation was not merely a reactionary outburst against the Official Languages Act but a sophisticated assertion of regional identity that successfully delegitimized the Indian National Congress in the state. The research highlights how the student-led "language revolution" reconfigured the public sphere, linking the Tamil language inextricably to political self-respect (*Suyamariyadhai*), and directly paved the way for the DMK's historic landslide victory in the 1967 Legislative Assembly elections. The paper concludes that this period marked the permanent entrenchment of Dravidian ideology in Tamil Nadu's governance, ending Congress dominance and establishing a unique model of sub-national political identity in independent India.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Indian democracy, the year 1967 stands as a watershed moment. It was the year the "invincible" Indian National Congress—the party of Gandhi and Nehru—was swept out of power in Tamil Nadu, never to return. While political analysts often attribute this seismic shift to the charismatic oratory of C.N. Annadurai or the strategic alliances of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the true engine of this revolution was found not in the legislature, but in the lecture halls. This political earthquake was the culmination of a decade-long student uprising that redefined the relationship between youth, language, and power. Between 1960 and 1970, the students of Tamil Nadu transformed from passive learners into a potent political force, driven by an existential anxiety over the imposition of Hindi and a fierce devotion to their mother tongue. This article explores the trajectory of that "Student Revolution." It traces the journey of the Tamil student from the quiet breeding grounds of literary associations in the early 1960s, through the violent explosion of the 1965 Anti-Hindi Agitation, to their ultimate role as the "kingmakers" of the 1967 election. It argues that the rise of the Dravidian movement was not merely a political transfer of power, but a cultural assertion engineered by the youth - a phenomenon where the campus effectively became the battlefield for Tamil identity.

### II. THE BREWING STORM: ANXIETY AND THE RISE OF TAMIL MANRAMS (1960–1964)

The roots of the 1967 revolution were buried deep in the constitutional anxieties of the early 1960s. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, had stipulated a fifteen-year transition period during which English would continue alongside Hindi as an official language. The deadline for this transition was set for January 26, 1965—a date that loomed over Tamil Nadu like a dark cloud as the decade began. For the students of Tamil Nadu, this was not merely a linguistic debate; it was an existential crisis involving two distinct fears: economic survival and cultural erasure. The student community, particularly those from the emerging middle classes, realized that if Hindi became the sole language of administration and central service examinations (like the UPSC), they would be rendered second-class citizens in their own country. They feared that non-Hindi speakers would be permanently disadvantaged in the job market against native Hindi speakers, effectively locking Tamil youth out of central government employment. While the political leadership of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) articulated these fears in the legislature, the mobilization on the ground was happening in a quieter, more organic venue: the college **Tamil Manram** (Tamil Literary Association). In the early 1960s, overt political activity was often discouraged or banned in university campuses. To circumvent this, students utilized literary associations as "sleeping cells" for political organization. Under the guise of debating ancient Sangam literature or analyzing modern poetry, students were actually discussing Dravidian ideology, rationalism, and the impending "Hindi danger." These *Manrams* created a network of communication between colleges across the state—from Presidency College in Madras to Annamalai University in Chidambaram—that operated independently of mainstream political party structures. C.N. Annadurai (Anna), the founder of the DMK, keenly understood the potential of this demographic. He broke with traditional political hierarchies by directly addressing the youth, famously referring to them as *Thambis* (younger brothers). Through his writings and speeches, he validated their anxieties, framing the defense of the Tamil language not just as a political stance, but as a moral duty of the educated youth. By 1964, the campuses of Tamil Nadu were no longer just centers of learning; they were powder kegs waiting for a spark.

### III. THE FLASHPOINT: THE 1965 ANTI-HINDI AGITATION (JANUARY–MARCH 1965)

The spark that the students had been waiting for finally ignited in January 1965. As the Republic Day deadline approached, the DMK announced a day of protest on January 25, designating it a "Day of Mourning." While the political leadership envisioned a symbolic protest, the students were prepared for a revolution. The agitation began in Madurai, a city that would become the nerve center of the resistance. On January 25, a procession of students from Thiagarajar College was jeered at and allegedly attacked by local Congress party workers. The news of this confrontation spread via the student grapevine with electric speed. By the next morning, what was meant to be a one-day protest had metastasized into a statewide insurrection. For the first time in the state's history, student unions from rival institutions put aside their differences. The formation of the **Tamil Nadu Students' Anti-Hindi Agitation Council** was a watershed moment. This body coordinated strikes across Madras, Annamalai, and Madurai universities, effectively shutting down the state's educational machinery. It was a demonstration of organizational capacity that stunned the ruling government; the students were operating not as a mob, but as a disciplined parallel administration. The conflict turned tragic and violent within days. The ferocity of the student sentiment was matched by the brutality of the police response. In a shocking turn of events, students began to use their own bodies as sites of protest. The self-immolation of a young activist named Chinnasamy in Trichy sent shockwaves through the nation, inspiring a grim wave of copycat suicides. These acts of "martyrdom" transformed the agitation from a political demand into an emotional crusade. The central government responded by deploying paramilitary forces, leading to police firings that claimed dozens of lives (unofficial estimates ran much higher). For the average Tamil citizen, seeing young college students—the hope of their families—being beaten or shot in the streets was the breaking point. The moral authority of the Congress government collapsed completely during these fifty days. The students had successfully shifted the narrative: they were no longer just anti-Hindi agitators; they were now the defenders of Tamil life against a hostile state machinery.

### IV. FROM AGITATORS TO CAMPAIGNERS: THE STRATEGIC PIVOT (1965–1967)

When the dust of the 1965 agitation settled, the student leadership made a critical realization: street protests could disrupt governance, but only political power could change policy. The anger that had fueled the riots was not allowed to dissipate; instead, it was systematically channeled into the electoral machinery of the DMK as the 1967 general elections approached. This period witnessed one of the most unique phenomena in Indian political history: the **"Cycle Brigades."** Realizing that the anti-Hindi sentiment was strongest in urban centers but weaker in rural areas where the Congress had a traditional stronghold, students took it upon themselves to bridge this gap. Thousands of college students formed volunteer squads, traveling to remote villages on bicycles. They functioned as translators of complex political issues, simplifying the abstract constitutional debate into a potent, tangible message for the rural electorate: *a vote for the Congress was a vote against the Tamil language*. This massive, decentralized contact program gave the DMK a distinct advantage. While the Congress relied on its established hierarchy and financial resources, the DMK relied on this army of unpaid, ideologically driven youth. The students effectively became the "foot soldiers" of the opposition. They went door-to-door, distributing pamphlets, organizing street corner meetings (*thinai pracharam*), and countering Congress propaganda. The relationship between the party and the students also deepened during this phase. C.N. Annadurai famously refrained from treating the students as mere subordinates. In his letters and public addresses, he positioned them as the "vanguard" of the movement, entrusting them with the responsibility of safeguarding Tamil identity. This psychological empowerment was crucial; it transformed the students from aggrieved victims of police brutality into confident political stakeholders. By the time the election dates were announced, the universities had effectively converted into campaign war rooms, with the single objective of unseating the Congress.

### V. THE VICTORY AND THE 'RECIPROCITY OF POWER' (1967-1969)

The results of the 1967 Legislative Assembly election sent shockwaves through the Indian political establishment. The DMK alliance won a decisive landslide, capturing 179 out of 234 seats. But the most potent symbol of this revolution was not the number of seats won, but a specific contest in the Virudhunagar constituency. Here, K. Kamaraj, the President of the All India Congress Committee and a titan of the freedom movement, was defeated by P. Seenivasan—a young student leader who had been actively involved in the anti-Hindi agitation. This "David vs. Goliath" moment perfectly encapsulated the zeitgeist: the student had toppled the statesman. For the new Chief Minister, C.N. Annadurai, the victory was unequivocally a product of student labor. In a gesture of profound political significance, he publicly acknowledged that the DMK owed its ascent to the sacrifices of the student community. This was not empty rhetoric; it was followed by the "reciprocity of power"—a period where the new government actively institutionalized the demands of the student movement. The most significant policy outcome of this student-government pact was the **Resolution of 1968**. The Annadurai administration officially scrapped the three-language formula in Tamil Nadu, eliminating the teaching of Hindi in state schools and solidifying the "Two-Language Policy" (Tamil and English). This was the direct fulfillment of the students' core demand. For the first time, the anger of the streets had been successfully translated into the statute books of the state. The atmosphere in universities during these two years was one of triumph and proximity to power. Student leaders had direct access to ministers, and the barrier between the government and the campus dissolved. However, this period was short-lived. The death of Annadurai in February 1969 brought this euphoric chapter to a close, marking the end of the "familial" phase of the relationship and the beginning of a more structured, bureaucratic era.

### VI. CONSOLIDATION AND TRANSITION: THE BIRTH OF THE "MANAVAR ANI" (1969–1970)

The death of C.N. Annadurai in February 1969 marked the end of the emotional, familial phase of the Dravidian movement and the beginning of a more pragmatic era under M. Karunanidhi. The funeral of Annadurai served as a poignant final act for the student volunteers of the 1960s. Millions gathered in Madras to bid farewell to their "Anna," it was the students who managed the crowds, directed traffic, and maintained order, acting as the de facto stewards of the state's grief. However, the political vacuum left by Annadurai necessitated a structural change. The spontaneous, decentralized student activism that had characterized the 1965 agitation was no longer suitable for a ruling party that needed stability. Under the new leadership, the relationship between the party and the students was formalized. The loose coalition of campus associations was crystallized into the **DMK Student Wing (Manavar Ani)**. By 1970, the transformation was complete. Student politics was no longer an insurrectionary force outside the

system; it was now a feeder line *into* the system. This period saw the rise of a new generation of leaders who would dominate Tamil Nadu politics for decades to come. Figures like M.K. Stalin, who began his political journey in the late 1960s with the Gopalapuram Youth Wing, represented this shift—from the agitator on the street to the organizer within the party structure. The "Student Revolution" had successfully institutionalized itself.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The decade from 1960 to 1970 in Tamil Nadu remains a singular case study in the power of student mobilization. In many other contexts, student movements are transient flashes of anger that eventually dissipate. In Tamil Nadu, however, the movement did not just protest power; it captured it. The students of this era achieved what few youth movements in history have managed: they altered the linguistic policy of a nation, toppled a monolithic national party, and installed a regional ideology that continues to govern the state to this day. The history of this decade serves as a powerful reminder that when the classroom becomes a battlefield for identity, the students inevitably emerge as the architects of the future.

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