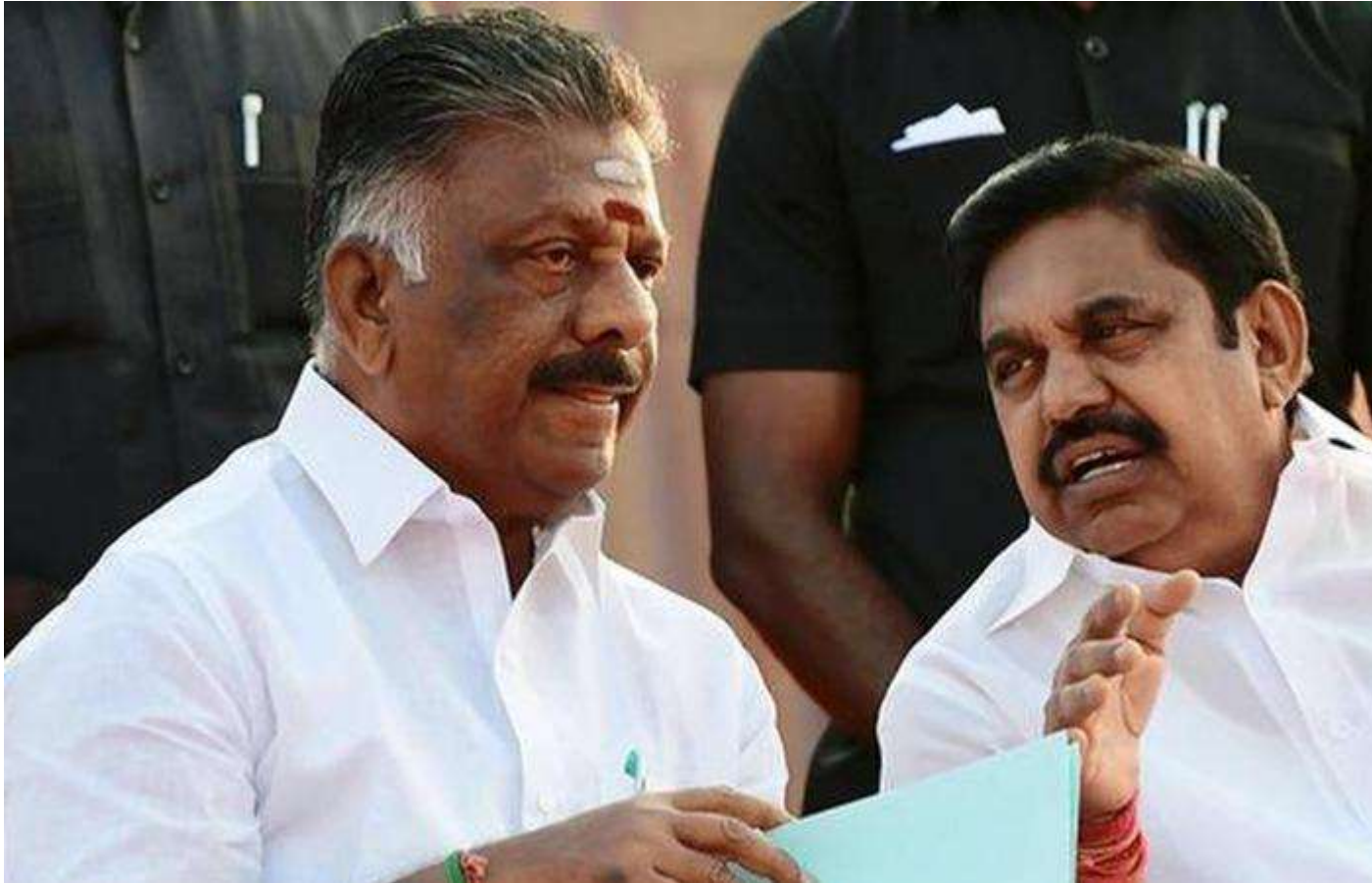


By-election and the duo: What next in AIADMK?



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The history of the AIADMK cannot be written, bypassing certain elections. M. G. Ramachandran aka MGR, who launched the AIADMK after expulsion from the DMK in 1972, laid the foundation for his party's phenomenal growth by fielding his candidate in the Dindigul parliamentary by-election and winning the first election the party faced. After his demise, his party split and its election symbol of Two Leaves got frozen.

The two AIADMK factions, each led by Janaki and Jayalalithaa, faced the 1989 elections separately and yet bit the dust. Learning

lessons from this debacle, the factions got united back into the single entity. The new-found unity brought back the Two Leaves symbol as well to the party which consequently tasted success in the Marungapuri and Madurai (East) Assembly elections which could not be held earlier for technical reasons, but held on March 11, 1989. The electoral victory that the AIADMK, though an opposition party then, pulled off, gave a shot in the arm to the party unified under the leadership of Jayalalithaa.

The 2017 RK Nagar by-election held after Jayalalithaa's demise in 2016 also holds an important place in the AIADMK's electoral history. That was the first election the party faced without its charismatic leader Jayalalithaa when it was very much in power. The two factions each led by Edappadi K. Palaniswamy and O. Panneerselvam had struck a semblance of unity and got back the party's famous symbol of Two Leaves before contesting the election. But the party lost the seat, not to its principal foe DMK, but to its rebel TTV Dhinakaran who contested the polls as an independent candidate.

The AIADMK, riddled as it was with factionalism, had since been in a downslide. The 2021 Assembly elections scripted its downfall. Now the Erode (East) Assembly by-election scheduled for Feb. 27 has triggered speculations over what the party's scourge of factionalism will lead to.

Strange precedents

The AIADMK has now witnessed certain developments which have no precedent. The party has got its General Council members' consent to contest the by-election and got the signature of its presidium leader approved by the general council on the Election Commission's 'B' form to get back the party's election symbol. All these incidents were unknown to the AIADMK in the past. These will likely be shown as precedents down the line in case political parties across the nation get mired in dissension and factionalism. Though all these happened on the basis of the

Supreme Court verdict, it was OPS and EPS who moved the party into the weird situation.

Generally, the judiciary does not interfere in the electoral practices and procedures after an election date is announced. As the original case pertaining to the AIADMK general council is still pending, the Supreme Court allowed the petition filed by EPS ahead of the Erode by-election, terming it as a 'strange case.' It was the court's verdict that has made it possible for the AIADMK candidate to contest the by-election on the Two Leaves symbol.

Setback to OPS

Of course, the outcome of this by-election will not trigger changes whatsoever in the Tamil Nadu political configurations. But symptoms have already started surfacing of an end to the AIADMK's leadership issues.

By virtue of the court case filed to get back the Two Leaves symbol, it has become manifest that the by-election candidate sponsored by EPS has got the support of 2,501 members in the 2,665-strong General Council of the party. It is a testament to the fact that the General Council has decided to throw in its lot with EPS.

While the original case is pending in the Supreme Court, OPS has adopted several strategies in connection with the Erode (East) by-election. For one, he tried to get the BJP support and in case the support was not forthcoming and if the BJP contested the by-election on its own, OPS was ready to support the national party and thereby put EPS in a dilemma. But none of his strategies has hit the spot, going by the outcome of his efforts.

Though both EPS and OPS are accused of conducting the AIADMK in the BJP shadow, the way OPS went out of his way to gain the BJP backing has brought to light the loss of the party's faith in him.

OPS had no other go but to follow the BJP high command's advice, "withdraw your candidate." Now he has announced openly that he has withdrawn his candidate only for the sake of protecting the party's magical symbol and he is determined to canvass votes for the symbol.

Mysterious puzzle

The activities of OPS have raised several questions. The first setback to him is that he had to toe line of the General Council regarding the selection of party candidate for the by-election – the same General Council that had expelled him from the party. It is puzzling and baffling that even the General Council members supporting OPS have neither opposed the candidature of Thennarasu announced by EPS nor come up with an announcement of their own candidate.

None forgets the fact that it is OPS himself, who now says openly that he will not end up being responsible for the freezing of the party symbol, who played a vital role in getting the symbol frozen.

OPS, the modern Bharathan

It is 10 days since the DMK front has taken a plunge into the run-up to the Erode (East) by-election. Whereas the AIADMK has all along been tied up with the arduous exercise of getting back its election symbol. By the time the party got the symbol back, it was fully exhausted. Now that EPS has had his way, the doors to OPS seem to have been closed. Let alone the pending Supreme Court case... What is it OPS is going to do when it is EPS-supported candidate who is very much in the fray in the by-election? Now that EPS has got the better of OPS, what are the options for the latter?

Harking back to the similar old story, it is one of poignant political ironies that V. R. Nedunchezhan, who made an open vow not to accept the leadership of M Karunanidhi after former Chief Minister C. N. Annadurai passed away, had been forced to accept

not only Karunanidhi but also MGR and Jayalalithaa later on. In his political career, it was the second-in-command position he had to be content with.

There are no two opinions that OPS, who has called himself Bharathan (insofar as he is not after power), has sacrificed very much for the sake of EPS. Now OPS has accepted the EPS-supported candidate. Then why did he oppose EPS when the latter tried to don the mantle of an undisputed leader as MGR, Jayalalithaa had done?

OPS may be willing to play the role of Bharathan. But will 'Ramar' (EPS) be magnanimous enough to accord OPS the status of Bharathan? That is a million dollar question.

Translated by V. Mariappan.