



Research Article

J. Jayalalithaa and the Politics of Charismatic Leadership: A Historical-Biographical Study of Her Transformation from Actress to Political Icon in South India (1965–2016)

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**Abstract**

The study in this article looks at the political trajectory of Jayaram Jayalalithaa (1948-2016) a prominent Tamil movie actress, the longest serving woman Chief Minister in the history of India from the perspective of Max Weber's theory on charismatic authority. The study uses a historical-biographical approach which relies on triangulated primary and secondary sources (judicial documents, election data, contemporaneous journalism, and existing biographical scholarship), to chart the ways in which Jayalalithaa transformed through six overlapping phases: construction of an image as a film star (1965–1980); political apprenticeship under her mentor M. G. Ramachandran (1982–1987); the succession crisis after his death and the consolidation of an autonomous charismatic claim (1987–1991); institutionalisation of the "Amma" cult during her first years as chief-minister (1991–2001); routinisation of charisma into a populist welfare machine while under repeated judicial cognisance (2001–2016); and the crisis of succession that ensued upon her death. The analysis suggests that although the authority of the actor Jayalalithaa is a historically particular form of charismatic leadership in which a film star, a gendered maternal representation and welfare populism served as alternatives to the dynastic and traditional legitimations provided to many of her rivals, the Indian judiciary acted as a consistent rational-legal counterpoint to her charismatic assertions. The study makes a contribution to the historiography of Dravidian politics, and to the comparative theorizing of gender and charisma in South Asian democracies, and warns against a hagiographic and reductively cynical reading of her legacy. In doing so, the study extends Weber's framework in two specific respects: it shows how charismatic validation crises become mass-mediated, performative events that can be narrated and contested by rival political actors over decades, and it demonstrates that charismatic and rational-legal authority can coexist as continuous, mutually constraining structural forces rather than as successive historical phases. Because the analysis relies on published documentary and secondary sources rather than private archives or oral-history interviews, and because Jayalalithaa's own long-standing suppression of unauthorised accounts of her life has narrowed the available public record, its conclusions about her early personal history remain necessarily provisional.

Keywords

Charismatic Leadership, J. Jayalalithaa, Dravidian Politics, Political Transformation, Historical Biography, Gender and Populism.

1. Introduction

When Jayaram Jayalalithaa, the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu's sixth successive Chief Minister, passed away on 5 December 2016, there was public mourning that most people could not have imagined in a modern parliamentary democracy: crowds of people filled the streets of Chennai for days and some of the grieving supporters even allegedly took their own lives, while women across the state did a traditional Hindu ritual of head-tonsuring that is normally reserved for immediate family (Vaasanthi, 2016). That such devotion should be attached to a woman who was born into a Brahmin family, who is, so far as one can tell, never wed and who belongs to a party whose ideology has been an unabashed anti-Brahmin one, is one of the oddest things that has happened in the political history of independent India. Her political career does not easily fit into the usual explanations of how political power is generated in South Asia, which is based on either dynastic inheritance, such as that of the Nehru–Gandhi family, or ideological movement; that is, one that was inherited through a cadre-based movement such as the Dravidian parties from which the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the party of which she was the leader, sprang up (Spary, 2007). Both these categories fail to encapsulate the story of a trajectory that started on the sets of films in Chennai and Madras in the mid-1960s and ended 50 years later as the Chief Minister for an unprecedented second full term in a row.

This article examines Jayalalithaa's career as a classic example of historical sociology of charismatic leadership, based on Max Weber's classical typology of traditional, legal-rational and charismatic authority (Weber, 1978). Weber's concept of charisma – the attribution, by followers, of extraordinary and often quasi-supernatural qualities to a leader, which are validated not by formal office or by his or her inherited position, but by his or her demonstrated capacity to prevail over adversity, danger, or suffering – provides a useful, though flawed, lens through which to examine how a screen actress with no inherited political base, no dynastic claim and no formal apprenticeship in the Dravidian movement's founding generation could construct and sustain, over 30 years, one of the most enduring personalist political authorities in recent Indian history.

This study has three objectives. First, it aims to trace, using triangulated historical evidence, the main stages over which Jayalalithaa's public image was constructed, challenged and reimagined from her days as a screen star to her political apprenticeship and succession crisis to the institutionalisation of a populist welfare structure firmly tied to her image. Secondly, it is intended to evaluate this course critically from the perspective of the origin, the gendered conformation and reutilisation of charisma in a present-day electoral democracy in which the judiciary is assertive, and the party system is competitive. Thirdly, it places this analysis in the context of the historiography of Dravidian politics and female political leadership, to show the continuities between Jayalalithaa and her cinematic and political predecessors, especially her mentor M. G. Ramachandran, often referred to as MGR, and also the innovations, most notably in the performance of power, that set her apart from that lineage.

The time frame of the article (1965–2016) covers the period from when Jayalalithaa made her Tamil film debut in *Vennira Aadai* till the end of her last term of office and her death in office as Chief Minister. This is intentional periodization. It argues that one needs to look at Jayalalithaa not just as a politician, but as an actor and a political actor; that her stay in the cinema and as a politician is not connected in its chronology or geographical location; and that her film and political career are not separable, but are actually a continuous construction of the public image of her persona (Pandian, 1992). Not at the same time, however, is the article a celebrations or a hagiography of that project.

Corruption charges were a recurring theme in Jayalalithaa's years as chief minister, as were by-products of the disproportionate-assets prosecution, which twice briefly interrupted her rule and led to her dismissal from office over the course of a decade. These features—true and well documented popular feeling for her, the high level and carefully deployed strategies of image management that she employed to create and maintain it, and the ongoing pressures of judicial institutions which challenged her charismatic power in service of legal rationalist accountability—were all integral to a critical historical biography.

The rest of the article goes on like this. Section two sets the study in the context of literature on charismatic leadership theory, the historiography of the Dravidian cine-politics and comparative literature on gender and populist leadership in the South Asian context, highlighting the lacuna this study with a historical emphasis and charisma focus can fill. The historical-biographical method and the sources used are outlined in Section three. The results of the historical reconstruction (historical results) are presented in section four, which is divided into six chronological phases. These findings are discussed analytically, in the context of, and in contrast to, Weber's theory, in section five; a summary of the contribution of the study and its implications for future study in section six.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Charismatic Authority: Theoretical Foundations

The tripartite typology of legitimate domination (traditional, legal-rational, charismatic) developed by Max Weber is the starting point for any research on personalist political domination (Weber 1978). In Weber's view, charismatic authority is not based on custom or codified rules, but on followers' acceptance of extraordinary qualities on the part of a leader, which are usually demonstrated and substantiated by the leader's ability to handle crisis, danger or suffering. Most importantly, Weber argued that charisma is inherently unstable: it "must be continuously re-validated by results" (success) (Weber, 1978); it attaches to a person, not an office; and it has a particular succession problem, as it quickly becomes routinised either through hereditary succession or the establishment of a bureaucratic structure, or the institutionalisation of the charismatic leadership's programme (Weber, 1978).

Weber then identified a number of concrete ways in which reutilisation usually takes place, such as by hereditary succession, in which the charismatic role is assumed by a natural successor, or through ritual or institutional selection for a new charismatic bearer, or by transforming the charismatic role into a rationalized, bureaucratic party or state structure, or by the progressive loss of the charismatic role into the rationalised and bureaucratized party and state structure. (Weber, 1978). Jayalalithaa's career exemplifies the absence of these classic patterns of reutilisation before her death, as her results section shows, and this too is an important element in the analysis of the political crisis that ensued.

Further research has elaborated and applied Weber's ideal type in empirical political and organizational studies. In an effort to make charismatic authority observable in specific instances, rather than simply retrospective to the subject, House (1977) set forth a list of observable leader behaviours and follower responses that might permit identification of charismatic authority in concrete cases: Symbolic conduct, deliberate image-building, articulation of an ideological vision, and communication of high expectations of followers. This behavioural theory was extended by Conger and Kanungo (1987), who claimed that charismatic leadership arises from followers' beliefs that the leader has a vision that is different from the norm, and that this vision is generated in an unconventional and self-sacrificing manner, especially in situations of crisis in the organization or society. That these are refinements which are directly relevant to a study of Jayalalithaa, who constructed her political persona in large part through the deliberate cultivation of publicly legible symbols, such as the widow-like austerity of the later sari and cape, the maternal honorific "Amma", the recurrent public staging of suffering followed by vindication, which meshes closely with the behavioural indicators these theorists single out, is not a coincidence.

2.2. Dravidian Politics, Cine-Politics, and The Historiography of Tamil Nadu

The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu in the scholarly literature has yielded much that is relevant to the ideological landscape onto which Jayalalithaa's charisma was cast. Its roots go back to the non-Brahmin self-respect politics of the early twentieth century of E. V. Ramasamy popularly known as Periyar (Kannan, 2010; Pandian, 2007) which became organised in the form of the Dravidar Kazhagam and from 1949 the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) led by C. N. Annadurai (Kannan, 2010; Pandian, 2007). Pandian's genealogical study (2007) on the categories 'Brahmin' and 'non-Brahmin' is relevant from a broader political perspective, and of particular significance to Jayalalithaa's own career because her rise to lead the explicitly 'non-Brahmin' AIADMK – a breakaway from the DMK founded by MGR in 1972 – is a good illustration of the kind of 'categorical instability' that Pandian charts at the level of political discourse in general. The non-Brahmin movement itself grew out of earlier colonial-era social and political conflicts in the Madras Presidency (Washbrook, 1976), including an organised non-Brahmin politics whose origins Irschick (1969) traces to the 1916–1929 period, and it later drew much of its populist force from a linguistic nationalism that fused Tamil identity with cultural pride (Ramaswamy, 1997); this broader cultural-nationalist current, of which the Dravidian movement was one expression, is set out by Barnett (1976). This longer institutional and cultural genealogy is the backdrop against which Jayalalithaa's own, more personalist, charismatic claim later emerged.

The other, closely related, field of scholarship is one that has looked at the historical close link between Tamil film and Dravidian party politics. The study of the relationship between Pandian and Jayalalithaa's mentor and former AIADMK supremo MGR by Pandian (1992) is the most significant account of the relationship. Pandian claims MGR's political power was derived from his "constructed biographies": the film narratives that embedded an actor's political character in the on-screen version of MGR as a righteous, plebeian saviour of the poor, and so inculcated a political identity in his audience, lending an already established interpretive lens to the actor's political role. This is confirmed by the ethno-

graphic account of how cinema can create lasting non-rational attachments that can be channelled into electoral mobilisation by the urban poor for Tamil Nadu as described in Dickey's (1993) study. While the case was distinct from the template, as this article has suggested, in many ways it was also within it, in so far as it is a literature that has been, and continues to be, a product of cinema celebrity morphed into political capital — within which the transition of the political from film star to political icon must be set, though this article has suggested that the case was also distinct in that regard.

2.3. Biographical Scholarship on Jayalalithaa

There are, in comparison, very few biographical writings on Jayalalithaa, and these have a very peculiar legal history. The journalist and novelist Vaasanthi has authored two book-length studies, the first being a full-length biography, which was permanently enjoined from being released by the Madras High Court prior to its publication in English language in 2011 by Penguin, and the second a revised and shortened version titled *Amma: Jayalalithaa's Journey from Movie Star to Political Queen* (Vaasanthi, 2016) along with an earlier study on the film-politics nexus in Tamil Nadu titled *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars* (Vaasanthi, 2006). In a review of the 2016 volume for *Economic and Political Weekly*, Karthikeyan (2018) applauds its presentation of Jayalalithaa as a "self-created public figure", and highlights that it is more muted in its coverage of her less charismatic later years, an editorial caution that is likely to be linked to the previous injunction. This is a significant censorship episode, as it is an instance of the power Jayalalithaa developed to restrict outsider accounts of her own life, a power over the historical record which a critical biography has to study and, in essence, use as a tool of analysis rather than be an incidental footnote.

2.4. Gender, Populism, and Comparative Female Leadership in South Asia

The third strand of literature related to the gendered aspect of female political leadership in South Asia is also relevant. In Spary's (2007) comparative exploration of the roles of political women in India, she argues that the path to power has been confined to a limited number of recognisable routes: dynastic paths, such as Indira Gandhi's or Sonia Gandhi's, and symbolic paths, such as victimhood or purity, based on nationalistic and religious narratives. Jayalalithaa's career is analytically instructive precisely because it was not a dynastic career at all, but was nevertheless a career that drew on idioms of feminine suffering, humiliation, and ultimately maternal authority to create a legitimacy that was neither inherited nor simply a replication of the style of rule of her male cinematic and political predecessors. Comparative studies of the populist leadership style of Indian regional women leaders, including Banerjee's (2004) comparison of Jayalalitha with Mamata Banerjee from West Bengal, also highlight the significance of a materialist/paternalist or populist idiom of the leadership, where the leader is represented as a protector or benevolent father/mother outside and above the political and social hierarchy, as compared to one that is based on an ideological programme or an institutional structure.

2.5. The research Gap

As a whole, this literature provides the conceptual instruments, Weberian charisma theory, historiography of Dravidian cine-politics, and comparative gender and populism scholarship, that can enable an analytically sound account of Jayalalithaa's career. No study has yet systematically analysed the use of charisma from her debut in the movies to her death in office, to track how charisma was first borrowed from a patron, then developed on her own through crisis, then institutionalised as a welfare apparatus, only to be brought into the standard Weberian problem of charismatic succession by her death. What is missing is an analysis of Jayalalithaa as the main character of an extended historical narrative, while most existing biographical treatments are journalistic in character and other existing scholarship on the concept of 'charisma' in Indian politics have not engaged with her at length. This article aims to fill that void.

3. Methods

The study applies historical-biographical approach with critical historical analysis rather than historical narration/Celebrative biography approach. The orientation has three methodological commitments.

For first, the study is based on clear periodization. The study does not treat Jayalalithaa's political career as a linear sequence but rather segments it into six overlapping phases, marking the turning points, which are independently attested in multiple sources, such as her entry into Tamil language film industry in 1965, into party politics in 1982, to the death of MGR in 1987–1989, her first tenure as chief minister from 1991, extended period of electoral victory and judicial sanctions from 2001, and the succession crisis after her death in December 2016. This periodization is not only

descriptive it aims to make these particular historical mechanisms visible – patronage, crisis, institutionalisation, judicial contestation, and the lack of institutional resolution of charismatic authority – in a way that resonates directly with Weber's theory of the reutilisation of charisma.

Secondly, the study was based on triangulation among primary and secondary sources of information. Primary sources consist of judicial records and judgments on the disproportionate-assets and TANSI land-allotment prosecutions, such as the judgment issued by the Karnataka High Court in May 2015 in Selvi J. Jayalalitha v. State, contemporaneous election results and legislative timelines, and journalistic accounts of key events, including the incident at the Legislative Assembly on 25 March 1989, from several independent sources reporting at the time. Secondary sources comprise the existing biographical literature about Jayalalithaa (Vaasanthi, 2006, 2016), the scholarly literature on MGR and Dravidian cine-politics (Pandian, 1992, 2007), general histories of the Dravidian movement (Kannan, 2010), and comparative political-science scholarship on gender, populism, and charismatic leadership in South Asia (Spary, 2007; Banerjee, 2004). Where at least two independent sources report conflicting information, for example on dates, election results, or judicial verdicts, the study records the disagreement rather than adjudicating it. Such disagreement is itself treated as historical evidence of the politically motivated construction and contestation of charismatic narrative. The assembly incident of 1989 illustrates this: AIADMK sources frame the episode as an assault, whereas DMK sources have at times downplayed it as a stage-managed affair. The study does not attempt to resolve this conflict but records it.

Third, the analytical framework that is employed to examine this evidential base is Weber's typology of authority realised through the behavioural indicators proposed by House (1977) and Conger and Kanungo (1987); the attribution by followers of extraordinary personal qualities to the leader; the public demonstration by the leader of a capacity to prevail over crisis or adversity; the development by the leader of a distinctive symbolic and rhetorical repertoire; and, over the longer-term, the reutilisation of personal authority into durable institutional or material forms.

These indicators are not employed to impose a narrative on the evidence; they are, rather, also used as a heuristic for organising and interpreting an otherwise unwieldy historical record spanning two public careers and fifty years.

Other than that, the study has some limitations. Some of the key early events, such as those involving her family, her relationship with MGR and the exact character of her family life, are left unrecorded in the public record, or are only loosely known and subject to caution in meaning rather than speculation, due to Jayalalithaa's notorious silence on her personal life, and the subsequent judicial injunction banning Vaasanthi's initial biography in 2011. A good deal of what is available as biographical information comes from party-affiliated hagiography, which is overly enthusiastic, or from journalism that is politically hostile, which is also overly hostile; this study tries to land somewhere between the extremes without being uncritical, rather than being uncritical on either side. Finally, because the study is a historical-biographical one, without access to private archival collections or original oral history interviews, this analysis makes use of published documentary and secondary sources without claiming to offer new primary-source documents and discoveries; rather it provides a new, analytical synthesis of the historical record from a charismatic leadership theory perspective.

4. Results

4.1. *The Construction of a Cinematic Persona, 1965–1980*

Jayalalithaa, born Komalavalli on 24th February 1948 in Mysore, in a family by birth belonging to the Tamil Iyengar Brahmin community (Vaasanthi, 2016). When she was two years old, her father passed away, leaving the family in dire straits; her mother, who took to the stage under the name Sandhya, went to Chennai to keep the family going by acting and thus the young Jayalalithaa was caught up into the mesmerising embrace of the Tamil film industry from her childhood. She studied at Bishop Cotton Girls' School in Bangalore and then at Church Park Presentation Convent in Chennai where she has been described on numerous occasions as a "gifted student" who wanted to pursue a career other than acting (Vaasanthi, 2016). She entered films as a teenager at her mother's persuasion and though her first film was the Kannada film Chinnada Gombe as a leading actress, she made her debut in Tamil at C. V. Sridhar's film Vennira Aadai (1965). In the same year she was paired with MGR in Ayirathil Oruvan, a partnership that would last for over two dozen movies and would eventually make her one of the two screen giants of the late '60s and '70s, along with her rival with Sivaji Ganesan.

In the next fifteen years, Jayalalithaa can be seen in over a hundred and forty films in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi, Malayalam and English, and won several regional film fare awards for Best Actress, as well as the state award Kalaimamani, conferred by the government of Tamil Nadu in 1972. She was feted in contemporary media as the "Queen

of Tamil Cinema", taking up her place in the crowded repertoire of popular cinema in an idiom of rural pathos and plebeian heroism, that is, against — and thus made more remarkable within — the pervasive idiom of popular cinema at the time (Pandian, 1992). In a way, this set of attributes is analytically important because it sets in place, more than 10 years before she was formally active in politics, the template for "extraordinariness" – a public career defined as extraordinary compared to the social norm, which in this case is the gendered norm – that would subsequently inform her political charisma. Soon after her mentor MGR took up the political field and became the Chief Minister for three years, her attention turned to politics and she ceased to be an active film actor around 1980, her last release being *Nadhiyai Thedi Vandha Kadal*.

4.2. Political Apprenticeship Under a Charismatic Patron, 1982–1987

The DMK had split from MGR in 1972 and, since 1977, MGR had been the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and, as Pandian (1992) notes, had become the singular charismatic figure in the state's politics through the very combination of cinematic and political personae that he embodies. Jayalalithaa entered the AIADMK in 1982, and in January 1983, she was nominated the party's propaganda secretary, a role that would give her public speaking skills — which had proven her from her film career — a direct focus on the party's mobilisation apparatus. In 1984 she was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament, serving till 1989 and reportedly attracting good comments from then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

In terms of Weber, this is a time when Jayalalithaa's political power was still significantly dependent on — borrowed from — MGR's charisma. Her role within the party was not institutionalised and depended on her own person and skillset rather than the party structure: contemporary reports indicate that she had constant conflicts with high party officials who resented her quick rise to the top and the death of MGR would prove to have an impact on her political future because he never clearly named her as his successor (Vaasanthi, 2016). In 1984, as MGR was undergoing an extended medical regimen in the United States, the internal dynamics of the party began to shift, as various factions jockeyed for position without the party having established any formal party structure and she had no official mandate of her own, only the personal endorsement of her husband.

4.3. Crisis, Succession Struggle, and the Founding Charismatic Claim, 1987–1991

MGR's death on 24 December 1987 brought in the scenes of mass public mourning that too is an evidence of the extraordinary depth of cinematic-political devotion that is documented in Pandian (1992) – a devotion Jayalalithaa stood to inherit, contest, or lose. There was a sudden succession row between Jayalalithaa and MGR's wife V. N. Janaki Ramachandran. The AIADMK divided into rival factions and in January 1988, backed by some defectors in the legislature, Janaki led a government which lasted for several weeks before more defection led to the dismissal of the government and a state of President's Rule. At the assembly elections that took place in the wake of MGR's death in 1989, the two factions of the AIADMK were separated, and neither managed to defeat the resurgent DMK under Karunanidhi, thus proving that the two would not be able to draw his charisma as their own in the immediate aftermath of MGR's death. Later in 1989, the AIADMK began to reunite its factions under Jayalalithaa's leadership, securing for her the first time her undisputed leadership of the party.

As Leader of the Opposition, in a still-shaky oppositional position, Jayalalithaa was manhandled by ruling DMK members on the floor of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly during the budget session on 25 March 1989. Her sari was pulled and torn, leaving her dishevelled and crying as she was escorted out of the Assembly. This article treats the incident as the first occasion on which Jayalalithaa founded a charismatic claim of her own, independent of MGR's legacy. She compared it publicly to Draupadi's disrobing in the Mahabharata and declared that she would not return to the Assembly until she became Chief Minister (The News Minute, 2021; Caravan, 2014). The DMK's leadership and allies went on to describe the incident as being staged for political purposes, which remains a matter of debate today – as evidenced by a parliamentary debate in 2023, decades after the incident, when the episode was brought up by other parties with conflicting views on the event (ThePrint, 2023). Whether the true cause of the episode was what it was say, the function of the politics of a story of humiliation and suffering, publicly announced to be "redeemed" in this context through future "vindication," was clearly Weberian: to validate Jayalalithaa's claim to exceptional status that was not conferred by the institutional office. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited her in the hospital a few days after the incident, giving a fillip to an alliance between the AIADMK and the Congress party that helped them to win all Lok Sabha elections in the state in the years to come. After Gandhi's assassination during the general election campaign in 1991, the AIADMK–Congress managed to form a government in Tamil Nadu on 24 June 1991, making Jayalalithaa the youngest Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, at the age of forty-three, and the second Indian woman to hold the position.

4.4. Institutionalisation of The "Amma" Cult and The Turbulent First Decade, 1991–2001

During Jayalalithaa's first tenure, the highly personalised model of authority, seen in the ubiquitous cardboard cut-outs and garlanded portraits typical of Dravidian political culture, and in the rhetorical formula, "Puratchi Thalaivi" (Revolutionary Leader), a deliberate feminine version of MGR's own "Puratchi Thalaivar. It is a visual idiom that had already been exploited around the figure of MGR and was inherited and adapted, not invented afresh, by the political culture of Jayalalithaa's party; it is a continuity that shows the extent of the continuity of the political culture of the AIADMK in general and not just of its leader. Both the contemporary and the historical sources paint a picture of a very centralised government that over time grew to be more intolerant of internal party opposition (Karthikeyan, 2018). This time period was also marred by serious controversy; the long and ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the forest brigand Veerappan received constant criticism, and most importantly for her later career, the lavish and widely-reported wedding in 1995 of her foster son, V. N. Sudhakaran, was the immediate cause of a formal complaint filed in 1996 by the Janata Party leader Subramanian Swamy that Jayalalithaa had amassed disproportionate assets in relation to her known income; based on court records, this was the source of an 18-year long disproportionate-assets prosecution (Karnataka High Court, 2015).

The AIADMK was beaten resoundingly in the assembly elections held in 1996 and the ensuing years saw a series of legal proceedings, one against them in the disproportionate-assets case and another for the allotment of land by the Tamil Nadu Small Industries Corporation (TANSI). In October 2000, Jayalalithaa was found guilty in the TANSI case and briefly barred from holding office but the AIADMK came back to power in the May 2001 assembly polls. Her standing conviction was such that she was prevented from taking up the chief ministership directly and a party loyalist ruled in her place till her conviction was overturned on appeal in February 2002, when she won a legislative bypoll from Andipatti to resume her office. The decade demonstrates with great clarity a pattern which was repeated in Jayalalithaa's career and was continued and accentuated in the discussion below: There is a constant rift between a growing institutionalization of her charismatic authority, manifested in electoral dominance and organized mass devotion, and a countervailing rational-legal constraint which has been consistently exercised and effective through the independent judiciary.

4.5. Charisma Under Legal Siege and Populist Welfare State-Building, 2001–2016

The disproportionate-assets case was moved out of Tamil Nadu to Bengaluru in neighbouring Karnataka in 2003. This followed an appeal by K. Anbazhagan of the DMK, who argued that a fair trial was not possible in Tamil Nadu given the pervasiveness of Jayalalithaa's political authority there; the Supreme Court agreed and ordered the transfer. Prosecuting took place for a decade more, with constant changes of special public prosecutor, due to accusations of political manipulation. On 27 September 2014 Jayalalithaa was convicted by a special court in Bengaluru, sentencing her to four years in prison and a huge fine, and thus becoming the first sitting Chief Minister of any Indian state to be disqualified from office as a result of having been convicted of a crime. She resigned, was temporarily jailed and her former faithful O. Panneerselvam was appointed interim CM. On 11 May 2015, her and her co-accused were acquitted by the Karnataka High Court, which found that the prosecution had not succeeded in proving disproportionate assets beyond the margin legally allowed, and she was reinstated as the chief minister within a few weeks (Karnataka High Court, Selvi J. Jayalalitha v. State, 2015). The case was never conclusively settled at national level; the Supreme Court eventually decided the case in 2017 after her death, and her conviction was restored to the trial court against the co-accused V. K. Sasikala and relatives, whereas her death abated the prosecution against her — her legal status has been permanently (and historiographically) uncertain.

It was in this context of constant judicial disputes that Jayalalithaa's government built up a generous and personalised welfare system. The Cradle Baby Scheme, which was instituted in 1992 to stem female infanticide by giving unwanted babies to the state anonymously, was one of the early examples, followed by subsidised 'Amma Unavagam' (for mothers) canteens for urban poor in 2013, cheap-to-buy 'Amma'-branded goods and services, including salt, cement, pharmacies, mineral water, baby-care kits, marriage-assistance grants, free household goods and educational incentives, especially for girls and women. The welfare branding had a double function of central importance to the analysis developed in section five, in that it routinized charismatic leadership into the form of material benefits that were personal and tangible, reaching deep into the lives of the poor and lower middle class, and also prevented the reutilisation from becoming divorced from the person of the leader; the material goods were nearly always named after her and not after an impersonal institution or program. She was re-elected for a second consecutive full term in the 2016 assembly election, which was closely fought with her main competitor, the DMK; in the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey results, she received extremely high and decisive support from women voters, who rated her welfare performance and personal

trustworthiness higher than her chief competitor (Verma & Ramajayam, 2016). She was sworn in for her sixth and eventual last term on 23 May 2016.

4.6. *Death and The Crisis of Charismatic Succession, 2016–2017*

On 22 September 2016, following a long illness, Jayalalithaa was admitted to the Apollo Hospital in Chennai, and was reported to be suffering from an unspecified ailment to the public in a vague manner throughout her hospitalisation. She passed away on 5 December 2016 while continuing to serve as Chief Minister. The magnitude of the public outpouring – mass processions, self-harm and even suicide reports among distraught fans and an official state funeral – suggested the depth of the charismatic relationship she had built with the people over nearly three decades in public service. At the same time, however, her passing revealed the classic Weberian weakness of a largely personalist political sovereignty. She had not left behind an institutionalised mechanism for succession; and she had been holding the combined post of Chief Minister and General Secretary of the AIADMK for over two decades without nominating a successor or having a party-approved candidate. Her lifelong aide, V. K. Sasikala, quickly moved in to take over the party's general secretaryship and for a brief while in February 2017, looked like a potential Chief Minister until her conviction in the same case in which Jayalalithaa was acquitted, and the disproportionate-assets case, was restored to her hands by the Supreme Court, which led to her arrest and imprisonment. This led to an intra-party conflict between O. Panneerselvam and Edappadi K. Palaniswami which further divided the AIADMK and was later reconciled in 2017. This uninhabitable and contested succession, and the party's subsequent electoral decline in the years after her passing, demonstrates with greater historical clarity than the typical case the reutilisation problem Weber identifies as being inherent in charismatic authority: It cannot be transferred to another parallel person who is similarly legitimated; without a formalized office, a codified line of succession, or an anointed heir with comparable legitimacy, charisma in the form of a single human being cannot simply be passed down to the next in line.

5. Discussions

The following analysis of the nature, sources and limits of Jayalalithaa's charisma is grounded in the above reconstruction of history and can thus be considered as extensions and qualifications to the Weberian framework introduced in section two.

5.1. *Charisma Retrieved, Charisma Detained*

It is important to understand the early years of Jayalalithaa's political career (1982–87) as a borrowed charisma in which her public image came from being close to MGR's pre-existing charisma. While this reflects Pandian's own analysis of how MGR's "living celebrity" can be extended to "close friends," it also reveals the conditions of such extension: MGR's reluctance to put Jayalalithaa in an official successor position, and the fact that the initial demand for her leadership was rejected by other AIADMK factions and the Tamil Nadu electorate in 1989, suggest that borrowed celebrity does not translate into autonomous authority as easily as one might assume, especially after the patron's death. The singular thing about Jayalalithaa's case that is analytically significant is the particular historical process by which this transformation was finally effected: not through an unchallenged inheritance of MGR's mantle, but through a unique, personally experienced crisis – the assembly incident of 1989 – that became its own fresh, newly invented charismatic origin myth. It is completely in line with Weber's (1978) insistence that charismatic authority is substantiated by the leader's ability to overcome difficulties, and it suggests, as an improvement of the Weberian theory, that in mass mediated democratic societies such validation crises can be made to be quite public, performative and rhetorically created; that is, they can be narrated, contested, and reinterpreted by competing political actors for decades to come in ways that Weber's largely pre-media age formulation did not predict.

5.2. *Reconstitution of The Charisma of the Dravidian Gender*

The second closely related discovery relates to the notably gendered nature of the charismatic idiom that she built, distinct from her male Dravidian predecessors. While Annadurai and Karunanidhi built power through the idiom of literary and oratorical excellence, and MGR built power through the idiom of plebeian heroic rescue from his screen, Jayalalithaa progressively built a new idiom of power, that of maternal and matriarchal power, which could be encapsulated in the honorific "Amma. This was an active and ongoing process of re-doing her self – Vaasanthi (2016) records how the glamorous self-presentation of her acting career was discarded over the years of the 1990s and 2000s, and how this entailed a minimalist approach to sari and to ornament, alongside an altogether more severe public expression. This change can be described, according to Conger and Kanungo (1987), as an ongoing process of symbolic behaviour, suited

to a particular audience, chief among them poor and lower-middle-class women, for whom the image of the stern but protective, and sometimes fearsome, mother was more legible than a young, glamorous woman or a mere mimicry of male Dravidian oratory. This welfare branding strategy, as outlined in section 4.5, where the state supported goods and services were sold under her own brand of maternal honorific, extended this line of reasoning to the material apparatus of governance, and can account for her surprisingly high vote share from women in the 2016 general election (Verma & Ramajayam, 2016).

5.3. *The Brahmin Paradox and The Boundaries of Ideology-Determinism*

The fact that Jayalalithaa, who led an avowedly anti-Brahmin and non-Brahmin party, was also a Tamil Brahmin is another very significant finding that directly challenges Pandian's (2007) genealogical argument that the categories in which Tamil Nadu's ostensibly caste-based Dravidian politics are organized are not sociologically grounded but only discursively constructed and historically contingent. The case shows that charismatic authority, which is legitimated through the followers' perception of the leader's superlative personal attributes, has a special ability to challenge or subvert the ideologies and social structures that would be expected to be followed more strictly in a purely programmatic or traditional form of authority. This discovery renders any political account which equates the "caste ideology" with a structuring constraint on political leadership problematic; it indicates that charismatic political leadership can operate for a considerable length of time and under specific historical conditions as a partially autonomous political logic which can coexist with, and even challenge, the formal ideological commitments of the movement or party it comes through.

5.4. *Charisma Vs. Rational-Legal Authority: The Judiciary as a Counterweight*

A fourth finding, particularly relevant to the study of the judiciary as a rational-legal constraint on charismatic authority in constitutional democracies generally, is the repeated involvement of India's judiciary in checking Jayalalithaa's towering power. The TANSI conviction of 2000 and the eighteen-year disproportionate-assets prosecution, culminating in her conviction, resignation and subsequent acquittal in 2014, provide a revealing example of how such a dynamic worked in practice in the modern constitutional order, one not fully theorised by Weber, because he developed his account around historical and largely pre-democratic cases. That the two forms of government have reversed each other's fortunes twice upon judicial determination and twice upon a new electoral victory reflects not the unblemished supremacy of one over the other, but rather the existence of a long-term and historically important balance between the two, which in fact appears to have imposed some real, though not complete, constraints on the unchecked power of Jayalalithaa's personal rule, while at the same time proving her charismatic legitimacy to be more resilient than it had been given credit for in the past.

5.5. *Reutilisation Without Succession*

Lastly, the trajectory laid out in section 4.5 and 4.6 provides a very illustrative example of a partial and ultimately incomplete reutilisation of charisma in the particular sense of Weber. Her government did institutionalise her personal authority in a permanent body, but not primarily as a mechanism for passing on power or as a stable hierarchical structure removed from her personal influence. Instead, this institutionalisation took the form of material welfare provision, delivered through the many "Amma" schemes. It is a hybrid or incomplete reutilisation: charisma was successfully institutionalised within the realm of everyday, materially discernible governance, producing lasting policy legacies and a long-lasting popular legacy of her name and image, but it was never institutionalised within an agreed line of succession or an institutionalised office that would endure after her death. The effect, as detailed in section 4.6, was an acute succession crisis and a destabilising one when she died, just as Weber's theory predicts for charismatic authority that hasn't yet been institutionalised in a hereditary or a bureaucratic-legal form. The fast-track removal of her presumed successor Sasikala by the judiciary and the division of the AIADMK into factions only underscore the argument made in 5.4 that the judiciary, throughout Jayalalithaa's career and even after her death, was the only consistent oppositional voice to the personalist charismatic leadership that she and her immediate political successors had tried to build and sustain.

5.6. *Comparative and Critical Perspectives*

In comparison with other significant examples of female political leadership in South Asia, such as Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in India, Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, and, to a certain degree, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal's regional politics, the lack of dynastic legitimation in Jayalalithaa's case is striking (Spary,

2007; Banerjee, 2004). Of these, the legitimacy of most of them was acquired, often as a first, through the process of political inheritance from their predecessor, whereas Jayalalithaa was granted authority through a series of events that included most significantly her cinematic celebrity, her political apprenticeship (as a result of electoral contests), and the narrative of crisis and vindication that she constructed and traced in section four. It is a comparative distinctiveness which should not diminish the significance of the well-documented, and in some ways strikingly so, charges of widespread corruption against her, which have been substantiated by credible evidence and carefully considered in court; the allegations of her own party members that she was intolerant of dissension; or the pattern of her legal and administrative suppression of views which were unfavourable to her in historical or journalistic works, most obviously in the injunction issued in 2011 against Vaasanthi's initial biography. A critical historical biography, unlike the hagiography or polemic, must have the substance and depth of her popular legitimacy and the equally well-established authoritarian and corrupt aspects of her rule in a single, historically accurate analytic framework.

5.7. *Historiographical Significance*

The above analysis, in addition to its contribution to charisma theory in its more limited sense, has a more general implication for the historiography of modern political history of South India. As is common in existing writing on the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, there is an institutional and electoral chronicle (the institutional development of the Dravidian parties and the electoral results of such parties) and a personal narrative (popular biography), with comparatively little sustained interaction between the two registers. This historical-biographical approach, in which the chronicle and personal narrative are read together on the basis of an explicit sociological framework, implies a fruitful middle way in the historiography of personalist regional political power in India more broadly, one that can be extended to comparable types of personalists whose careers span both popular culture and formal political office, such as MGR himself, and to other personalists from other Indian states, whose power rests on a combination of celebrity and populist welfare provision and personally branded political symbolism.

6. Conclusion

Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority as developed by his followers, the behaviouralists of charismatic leadership, has been the main analytical framework used in this article to highlight the shift of Jayaram Jayalalithaa's personalist political power from a celebrated Tamil film actress to the most enduring one in the recent history of Tamil Nadu. The historical reconstruction provided in section four makes it clear that Jayalalithaa's charisma was a personal quality that was continually shaped and re-shaped across a series of six overlapping historical phases: a first cinematic image of glamorized and educated extraordinary individual; an early period of politically dependent, borrowed charisma when she was under the patronage of MGR; a period of crisis of succession, marked by a painfully exposed and re-narrated episode of humiliation and vindication; the institutionalisation of a maternal, matriarchal charisma during her first years as Chief Minister; the institutionalisation of the charisma into a vast welfare network during her recurrent and serious judicial sanctioning; finally, an unresolved succession crisis on her death, which revealed the structural vulnerability of a charismatic authority that depends so strongly on the personality of a single individual.

The key innovation of the study is to identify South Indian cine-politics, as well as Jayalalithaa's political career, as a historically singular form of charismatic leadership in which the construction of an authoritative maternal discourse has replaced the dynastic legitimation that others in South Asia have enjoyed and in which an assertive, institutionally autonomous judiciary acts as a constant and historically significant rational-legal challenge to the charismatic claims that could otherwise be largely unchecked. In this point, the case validates the classical Weberian framework's analytical significance for the modern electoral democracies and proposes some modifications to it: focus on the mass-mediated, performative and gendered creation of crisis narratives that validate charisma, and focus on the coexistence of charismatic and rational-legal authority as continuous, mutually constraining structural forces, rather than as historical phases. These conclusions should nonetheless be read in light of the study's evidentiary limits: the analysis rests on published judicial, journalistic, and secondary sources rather than on private archives or oral-history testimony, and Jayalalithaa's own suppression of unauthorised biographical accounts of her life has left important early episodes thinly and unevenly documented. The historical reconstruction offered here is therefore best understood as an analytical synthesis of the available public record rather than a definitive or exhaustive account.

Future work may usefully further explore the phenomenon of charismatic authority in three ways: the systematic comparison of the construction of charismatic authority among female political leaders across South Asia, in a manner that systematically goes beyond the existing published record; a media-historical study of the visual/ iconographic techniques and processes through which charismatic authority has been materially constructed and circulated, in the

process tracing the phenomenon in greater empirical detail; and, as archival and oral-history sources are increasingly available as the years pass, biographical scholarship that moves beyond the constraints of the published record by Dravidian activist Jayalalithaa's own lifetime suppression of unauthorised accounts of her life. This would also provide a more nuanced understanding of Dravidian politics and the comparative theorisation of charisma, gender, and populism in the world's largest democracy.

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Not applicable as it is a thematic literature review paper.

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