

# Writer-turned-politician challenged India's caste system

**MUTHUVEL KARUNANIDHI**  
1924-2018

BY MARIA ABI-HABIB

**NEW DELHI** Muthuvel Karunanidhi, who parlayed his vocation as a prolific writer of films about the downtrodden into a political career that challenged the upper caste's hold on Indian politics, died on Aug. 7 in Chennai, India. He was 94.

Doctors at Kauvery Hospital, where he died, said Mr. Karunanidhi suffered multiple organ failure after being admitted in late July.

India's longest-serving legislator, Mr. Karunanidhi was elected to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly 13 times, serving from 1957 until his death. He was also the state's chief minister five times — for a total of 19 years — starting in 1969.

Although his political career was concentrated in Tamil Nadu, Indian's southernmost state, his influence was felt nationwide.

When India gained independence from Britain in 1947, it was struggling to achieve coexistence between its Hindu and Muslim populations while estab-

lishing central government control. Mr. Karunanidhi instead championed federalism as the best way to unify and protect India's multiple ethnic, linguistic and religious populations.

An atheist, he challenged the monopoly that India's upper castes had on politics and what he described as the elitism of the country's founding party, the Indian National Congress.

He promoted a caste-based quota system for government jobs and for students in government schools, as well as subsidies for the poor. His policies were replicated in other states across India.

His positions brought him immense popularity among the lower castes. The streets of Chennai were clogged with supporters bidding a tearful goodbye to the man they called Kalaigiar (Tamil for "the artist") as his body was taken for burial.

President Ram Nath Kovind of India mourned his passing on Twitter, writing, "Our country is poorer today." Flags flew at half-staff on Wednesday, the day after his death, which was declared a national day of mourning. Tributes poured in from the country's leading politicians, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Karunanidhi played a crucial role in



Muthuvel Karunanidhi in 2006, when he was chief minister of Tamil Nadu, after presenting a shawl to the president of the Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi.

bringing the downtrodden people to the social mainstream by giving them political space," said R. Rajagopalan, a Tamil journalist based in New Delhi.

Mr. Karunanidhi was born on June 3,

1924, in the village of Thirukkuvalai in Tamil Nadu. His parents belonged to the Isai Vellalar caste, a community of musicians who play at temples and social events. The tradition was passed down

for generations within his family, and he was expected to adopt it in India's hierarchical society. But he rebelled.

He became involved in politics at 14, as the country inched toward independence, when he organized a student movement in his state against the imposition of Hindi as the national language of India.

The student movement was a precursor to the larger anti-Hindi protests in Tamil Nadu that Mr. Karunanidhi went on to lead in 1965. Those protests, which at times descended into riots, forced the central government to scrap plans to enforce Hindi nationally. Tamil, Mr. Karunanidhi's mother tongue, is one of 22 languages officially recognized in India's Constitution.

He went on to lead the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party in 1969, a movement that originally wanted independence for Tamil Nadu from India. Under Mr. Karunanidhi, the party scrapped its separatist demands and embraced a strong federal system to preserve India's ethnic and linguistic differences across its many states, a system that persists today.

From an early age, Mr. Karunanidhi took part in theater productions, including writing plays. He later moved into

writing for the cinema.

His policies were a reflection of his screenplays, many of which took as their subject the uplifting of Tamil Nadu's most desperate citizens. His first movie, "Rajakumari," released when he was 23, tells the story of a love affair between a princess and a poor young man.

His scripts, which generally excoriated India's upper castes while creating heroes and heroines out of the impoverished and championing secularism, were considered pioneering.

"After the entry of Karunanidhi into film, Tamil cinema completely changed," Kaviperarasu Vairamuthu, a poet, writer and lyricist, said in an interview. "He brought Tamil cinema closer to the plight of the poor."

Mr. Karunanidhi's survivors include his wife, Dayalu Ammal, two daughters and four sons, among them his political heir apparent, M. K. Stalin.

The power of cinema in Tamil Nadu has led several of the state's most prominent actors and screenwriters to pursue political careers. One of Mr. Karunanidhi's biggest political rivals in Tamil Nadu was the famous actress Jayalalitha Jayaram of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party, who died in 2016.