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Health Policies of the DMK Government and its Impacts in Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

The state of public health in Tamil Nadu during the late 1940s was alarming, marked by rampant contagious diseases like malaria, smallpox, chickenpox, leprosy, tuberculosis, and polio. The healthcare infrastructure was notably insufficient, with traditional medicine serving as the principal treatment method. The situation was further exacerbated by a scarcity of nutritious food and inadequate medical facilities, compounded by poor transportation infrastructure. Amidst these dire circumstances, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was founded by CN. Annadurai along with four other individuals on September 17, 1949. After CN. Annadurai, Mr. M. Karunanidhi succeeded him and served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for five terms, during which significant developments were made. The DMK's administration recognized the inextricable link between sound public health and genuine social empowerment. Consequently, a multitude of health-improving measures were enacted, such as the expansion of medical facilities, the offering of free or low-cost medical care to economically disadvantaged populations, the distribution of preventive tools like mosquito nets to combat vector-borne diseases, immunization campaigns, and public health education. These multipronged approaches led to a notable decline in contagious diseases, reduced mortality rates, and increased life expectancy. This research aims to explore the impact and scope of the health policies implemented by the DMK, particularly during Mr. M. Karunanidhi's tenure, and their enduring influence on the socio-economic landscape of Tamil Nadu.

Spreading of Contagious Diseases at the Time of DMK's Foundation

At the time of the DMK's foundation, the health and sanitary conditions in Tamil Nadu were alarming, characterized by frequent outbreaks of contagious diseases. A host of diseases like

cholera, malaria, smallpox, chickenpox, leprosy, tuberculosis, and polio also wreaked havoc on the population, with several people succumbing to these illnesses annually. Steps taken to control the spread of these diseases were not adequate to control them. The surviving populace became unwitting carriers of multiple diseases, mainly due to the absence of proper treatment, perpetuating the cycle of poor health.

Infant Mortality and shortage of medical professionals

As the DMK was founded, Tamil Nadu was grappling with a myriad of social issues that directly impacted public health, such as poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, and inadequate medical care. Among the most concerning health statistics was the rate of infant mortality. The health department's data revealed that maternal mortality was a concern not only in rural regions but also within urban areas. Additionally, the dearth of multi-specialty hospitals, transportation facilities, public awareness, and prevalent illiteracy combined with deep-seated beliefs in fate played pivotal roles in this tragic loss of life.

The healthcare sector in Tamil Nadu was characterized by a severe shortage of medical professionals and cultural restrictions during the early years of the DMK. At that time, there were only four medical colleges in the state, all of which were located in major cities. This meant that there was a limited number of doctors available to serve the rural population. Additionally, the majority of doctors were male, which presented challenges for women who needed medical care. The DMK government, which came to power in 1967, recognized the need to address these issues. They implemented several reforms, including the expansion of the public healthcare system, the introduction of free or low-cost medical care, and the training of female doctors. These reforms helped to improve the availability and quality of healthcare in Tamil Nadu, and they had a positive impact on the health of women in particular.

Lack of Adequate Hospitals and sanitation facilities

Due to poverty and financial constraints, many could not afford the travel costs to reach faraway hospitals, exacerbating their health risks. Moreover, the state also grappled with insufficient road and transportation infrastructure, further isolating rural communities from

essential healthcare services. When complications arose during pregnancies, many women opted not to seek medical help simply because they had no reliable way to get to a hospital. These limitations in hospital accessibility and transportation were significant factors contributing to high rates of maternal mortality, commonly known as matricide, as well as infant mortality in Tamil Nadu during that period. The lack of adequate sanitation not only compromised individual well-being but also contributed significantly to the spread of contagious diseases. The population suffered considerably due to these conditions, highlighting the state's urgent need for better sanitation infrastructure.

Establishment of Primary Health Centres: A Lifeline for Rural Tamil Nadu

Taking to heart Mahatma Gandhi's observation that "India lives in its villages," the DMK government embarked on a critical mission to enhance rural healthcare in Tamil Nadu. The DMK government in Tamil Nadu took a transformative approach to improve rural healthcare. To address this issue, the DMK government established Primary Health Centres (PHCs) in even the most remote corners of the state. Between 1996 and 2000, a total of 28 new PHCs were constructed. Each center was staffed by at least one doctor, supported by trained nurses, and well-stocked with essential medicines.

In rural areas, expectant mothers often had to travel long distances to seek quality medical care, which could lead to tragic outcomes, including death during childbirth. To mitigate this risk, the DMK government introduced caesarean facilities in every PHC. These visionary steps had a transformative impact on maternal health in rural Tamil Nadu. The DMK government launched an ambitious program between 1996 and 2000 to build 261 new hospitals across the state. This massive expansion aimed to increase the number of healthcare facilities and bring them closer to the people who needed them the most. The DMK government also understood that improving the quality of medical care was essential. Existing hospitals often lacked modern, scientific equipment, which meant that residents had to travel to other states for treatment. The DMK government also invested in providing 26 new ambulances to medical college hospitals. This enhanced the emergency response capabilities of these hospitals, ensuring that patients could receive timely treatment.

Organizing Free-Eye Camps: A Vision for Health Empowerment

In recognition of the critical importance of eye health and its impact on overall well-being, the DMK government, led by Mr. M. Karunanidhi, initiated a transformative healthcare project focused on combating blindness in the state. The project, named the 'Chief Minister Kalaigal Karunanidhi Free Eye Camp Project,' was first introduced on June 3, 1972, with the primary aim of providing surgical treatment to visually impaired individuals. One of the standout initiatives was the implementation of mobile eye hospitals in 26 districts across the state. The project's holistic approach significantly improved eye health and reduced preventable blindness throughout Tamil Nadu. The success of the initiative also symbolizes a notable step towards health empowerment, as thousands regained their vision and, with it, the ability to lead fulfilling lives. The project's holistic approach significantly improved eye health and reduced preventable blindness throughout Tamil Nadu. The success of the initiative also symbolizes a notable step towards health empowerment, as thousands regained their vision and, with it, the ability to lead fulfilling lives.

Establishment of Blood Banks

In a first-of-its-kind initiative in India, the DMK government established a blood bank at the Vellore Primary Health Centre. The immediate impact of this move was transformative: countless women were able to receive the right type of blood during emergencies, significantly reducing maternal mortality rates.

Providing Financial Assistance for Heart Surgery

In a society where healthcare is often seen as a privilege rather than a right, the DMK government led by Mr. M. Karunanidhi took transformative steps to change this narrative," particularly for impoverished children suffering from serious heart conditions. With a budget allocation of Rs. 1.05 crore, the scheme has successfully provided life-saving heart surgeries for 200 poor children, many of whom were of school-going age or even younger. Thus, by funding free heart surgeries for children in need, the DMK government made a pivotal contribution to the broader vision of healthcare empowerment in Tamil Nadu.

The Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy Memorial Delivery Assistance Scheme

Mr. M. Karunanidhi introduced the Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy Memorial Delivery Assistance Scheme on June 3, 1989. Named in honor of Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, a pioneering female

medical practitioner and social reformer, this scheme has had a transformative impact on women's health in Tamil Nadu, especially those from financially constrained backgrounds. The scheme aims to provide financial assistance to pregnant women from low-income families during the advanced stages of pregnancy and immediately post-delivery. Initially, the scheme provided women with a sum of Rs. 200, which was later increased to Rs. 500 in 1998, a testament to the government's ongoing commitment to the program. The scheme is a glowing testament to the DMK government's determination to uplift and empower the women of Tamil Nadu.

Kalainger Kaippidu Thittam

In recognizing that good health is the cornerstone of social empowerment, the DMK government took a groundbreaking step in 2007 with the introduction of the Kalainger Kaippidu Thittam. Named after Mr. M. Karunanidhi, fondly known as "Kalainger," this healthcare scheme was crafted to respond to the critical health issues plaguing the people of Tamil Nadu, including diseases affecting the kidney, heart, and liver. It provided free treatment up to Rs. 1 lakh, allowing people from all socio-economic backgrounds to access high-quality healthcare without financial strain.

Varummun Kappom Scheme

Launched by the DMK government in 1996, the Varummun Kappom Scheme aimed to address the stark healthcare disparities between rural and urban areas in Tamil Nadu. Designed to bring medical services directly to the villages, the initiative has been a monumental success, significantly elevating the healthcare standards in rural communities. Under the scheme, mobile medical units comprising a team of skilled doctors and equipped with essential medical facilities, visit villages to organize free medical camps. These units provide a range of medical services, from basic healthcare check-ups to specialized consultations, all free of charge for the community members. By any measure, the Varummun Kappom Scheme stands as one of the DMK government's most impactful healthcare initiatives. It reflects a commitment to equitable access to healthcare services and has laid down a strong foundation for improved health and well-being, particularly among the rural population of Tamil Nadu.

Vazhvoli Scheme

The Vazhvoli Scheme, introduced by the DMK government in 1999, was a groundbreaking initiative aimed at early detection and treatment of diseases among school- aged children in Tamil Nadu. The scheme targeted students from 1st to 12th standard attending government and government-aided schools, and mandated compulsory free medical check-ups for all. According to the scheme, any student identified with a serious medical condition during these check-ups would be referred to a government medical college hospital. There, they would receive top-tier medical treatment completely free of cost, ensuring their return to a healthy state.

Recognizing the dire need for more healthcare professionals, especially in the underserved areas of Tamil Nadu, the DMK government led by Mr. M. Karunanidhi embarked on an ambitious plan to establish more medical colleges across the state. The underlying principle was simple yet transformative: more medical colleges would mean more doctors, and more doctors would lead to better healthcare for all.

Free 108 Ambulance service

The inability to reach medical facilities in time during emergencies has often had tragic outcomes, especially for women in rural areas. Acknowledging this critical gap in healthcare, the DMK government led by M. Karunanidhi launched the Free 108 Ambulance Services in 2008. With just a call to the toll-free number 108, residents could have an ambulance at their doorstep in a matter of minutes, completely free of charge. Each ambulance comes equipped with a doctor, a nurse, two attenders, and essential emergency medicines, ensuring immediate first-aid and stabilization as the patient is transported to the nearest healthcare facility.

Financial Assistance for marriage

In a commendable effort to elevate the social standing and well-being of physically challenged individuals, the DMK government not only rebranded the term "Handicapped" to "Physically Challenged Persons" but also implemented financial policies to encourage inclusive marriages. Starting from the year 2000-2001, the financial assistance for those marrying physically challenged persons such as those who are deaf-mute or have lost a limb-was increased from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 7,000. This lump-sum payment serves dual purposes.

Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam scheme

This scheme was introduced by DMK Government on 5 August 2021. The initial amount allocated for this scheme sanctioned was 258 crores. According to this scheme, the specialized medical facilities were sent to the people directly in the post-COVID scenario. Another scheme known as Inuyir Kaakum Thittam was introduced by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on 17.12.2021. The main purpose of this scheme is to save people from road accidents. The initial treatment which is very necessary to save precious lives is being given by the medical facilities made available by this scheme.

Conclusion

The advent of the DMK government in Tamil Nadu marked a turning point for public health and social welfare in the state. Prior to the DMK's interventions, the healthcare landscape was bleak, with inadequate medical facilities, high maternal and child mortality rates, and widespread contagious diseases. However, the DMK's systematic and multi-pronged approach ushered in an era of remarkable progress and transformation. In summary, the DMK's unwavering focus on healthcare and social welfare has revolutionized the lives of the people in Tamil Nadu. The transformative changes are not just statistical figures, but they are also reflected in the improved quality of life and expanded opportunities for the people. The strides made in healthcare and social welfare are a testament to the DMK's effective governance, underscoring its lasting impact on creating a healthier, more empowered Tamil Nadu.

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