The Iron Lady Of Tamil Nadu

By Bhargavi Kulkarni

Vaishanavi Satish of West Windsor, New Jersey, still remembers the day she met Amma, as she was affectionately known. It was at a meeting at the Secretariat in Chennai in 2002. Although the meeting was brief, Satish says it’s a “memory etched for life.” Satish was working as a news reader for Jaya TV and remembers how well-versed and witty Jayalalithaa was.

Jayalalithaa Jayaraman, the charismatic chief minister of Tamil Nadu, died after a long illness last week at the Apollo Hospital in Chennai, where she had been undergoing treatment since Sept. 22. Jayalalithaa, 68, was buried with state honors at Chennai’s Marina Beach on Dec. 6, next to her co-star and mentor M.G. Ramachandran or MGR. Hundreds of thousands of people paid their respects to the film actor-turned-politician who became one of India’s most influential politicians.

Tamil Nadu’s matriarchal leader and grand disciplinarian administrator, was revered and feared alike.

“It was a rude shock; the entire Tamil community in America is saddened to lose a well loved leader,” Dr. Veerappan Sundar, president of the American Tamil Medical Association or ATMA, told News India Times.
Tamilians across the U.S. conveyed their shock and sadness at the demise of their home state’s chief minister, despite Jayalalithaa’s long hospitalization. Several who News India Times spoke with, were hoping she would bounce back as she had in the past.

“Struggle was her middle name and victory was her last name,” American Tamil Sangam President Prakash Swamy said in a statement.

Her path, he said, was strewn with thorns and rocks but she overcame all with her unmatched grit and determination.

**Bouncing Back**

Despite her immense popularity, Jayalalithaa’s political career graph has seen many ups and downs. She was initiated into Tamil Nadu politics in 1982 by MGR, who was serving his second term as chief minister. She joined the AIADMK, the party MGR founded. Her political rise was rapid. Within a few years she was made AIADMK propaganda secretary and was elected to the Rajya Sabha.

After MGR’s death in 1987, Jayalalithaa proclaimed herself his political heir and, having fought off the faction headed by Janaki Ramachandran, MGR’s widow, she emerged as the sole leader of the AIADMK. Following the 1989 election, she became leader of the Opposition to the DMK government headed by Karunanidhi, her bête noire.

In 1991 Jayalalithaa became the state’s youngest chief minister. However, in the 1996 election, the AIADMK was nearly wiped out at the hustings when Jayalalithaa herself lost her seat. The new Karunanidhi government quickly filed several corruption cases against her which led to her incarceration. But soon her fortunes revived in the 1998 general election, as the AIADMK became a key component of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s government.

The AIADMK returned to power in 2001, although Jayalalithaa was personally disbarred from contesting due to the corruption cases. Within a few months of her taking oath as chief minister, in September 2001, she was disqualified from holding office. Upon her acquittal six months later, Jayalalithaa returned as chief minister to complete her term.

After being sworn in as chief minister for the fourth time in 2011, Jayalalithaa’s government immediately embarked on an ambitious program of social welfare and development. However, three years into her tenure, a trial court convicted her in a disproportionate assets case in September 2014, disqualifying her from holding office. After eight months, which included a 28-day stint in jail, Jayalalithaa was acquitted of all charges by the Karnataka High Court and once again sworn-in as
chief minister in May 2015. In the 2016 assembly election, she became the first Tamil Nadu chief minister since MGR in 1984 to be voted back into office.

Multi-faceted Actor

For Padmini Raman, Jayalalithaa was a household name. “It feels very personal that she's gone,” the San Carlos, California resident said. “She’s someone I remember right from early childhood. As an actress, Raman admired Jayalalithaa’s poise, grace and style, and as a politician, Raman was in awe of her tenacity and grit.

Charanya Kannan, a student at Harvard, in a Facebook post after Jayalalithaa’s death, has noted some lesser known facts about her career in politics and films. Kannan’s post, which has been shared over 30,000 times since it was posted on Dec. 6 morning, notes how the entire film crew stood up reverently when MGR walked into a set, but a 16-year-old Jayalalithaa kept sitting, reading a book. The “audacity” went on to define her political career, the post says. “Obviously, she was a charming, multi-faceted actor who was trained in various dance forms. But not so obviously, she was well read and witty, she was intelligent and she knew it,” Kannan wrote.

The Iron Lady

Kannan’s post also talks about the 1989 incident in the Tamil Nadu assembly when, on opposing M. Karunanidhi’s budget announcement, Jayalalithaa was allegedly manhandled, her clothes torn and her hair pulled. “This is probably the highest documented insult that a woman has ever faced in a state assembly,” Kannan wrote. She came out of that incident more guarded than ever before and succeeded at ‘desexualizing’ herself and branded herself as Amma, the post said.

According to Raman, two things stand out in Jayalalithaa’s political career. One, when she was pushed off MGR’s hearse, but struggled back up and took her spot. Two, the way she looked that infamous day in 1989 when she walked out of the assembly, sari torn, hair disheveled, crying, beaten but still not cowed. “She showed me that women don’t have to take any form of subjugation from anyone,” said Raman who grew up in Chennai and remembers how crimes against women and incidents of eve teasing were down during Jayalalithaa’s regime. “We were direct beneficiaries of that,” she said. Among her policies, Raman admires the “cradle baby” scheme for kids abandoned by their biological parents for various reasons and her Amma Canteens where she gave quality food at affordable prices.

Satish noted how the law and order in the state was “in the right place” under Jayalalithaa’s leadership. Even the smooth manner in which her funeral was conducted is a testament to her leadership qualities, Satish said. “The title of the ‘Iron Lady of Tamil Nadu’ befits her and it’s going to take a long time for people to come to terms with her loss,” Satish told News India Times.
Loving Mother

In her biography, “Amma: Jayalalithaa’s Journey from Movie Star to Political Queen”, noted journalist and writer Vaasanthi says the politician was nicknamed Ammu as a child. Being called ‘Puratchi Thalaivi’, the rebel leader, after the 1989 incident, Vaasanthi wrote that Jayalalithaa’s journey from a rebel to a mother, Amma, began after her 1991 swearing in as chief minister, The Daily Mail reported. This is when she launched a series of pro-poor schemes giving a message that she was there in the chief minister’s office for the welfare of people like a mother. Brands like Amma Canteens, Amma Salt, Amma Pharmacy, Amma Cement, Amma drinking water were launched.

It was her motherly aura which bought thousands to the streets after her death and during her illness where supporters held vigils and prayers for her recovery.

“The outpouring of support from people of all walks of life following the chief minister’s passing signified that she possessed a special bond with the people of her state,” Illinois Congressman-elect Raja Krishnamoorthi told News India Times. “I also sense that regardless of where people stood on her politics, she is widely admired for her ‘up by the bootstraps’ life story and her commitment to the uplift of the poor,” Krishnamoorthi added.

The organization, U.S. Friends of AIADMK’s President Koshy O. Thomas said Tamilians all over the world have lost a leader who was a mother to them. “We have become orphans and no words can console us,” he told Indo Asian News Service.

Dr. Sundar said it was her motherly nature that made her more accessible to the people of her state and those settled abroad. Although ATMA is not involved in state politics, Dr. Sundar said the association is currently handling more than 12 medically related projects in Tamil Nadu. “Our main goal at ATMA is extending our hand and helping people which was easier during Jayalaithaa’s tenure as our philanthropic mission coincided with her ideologies,” the Durham, North Carolina-based physician said. Established in 2005, ATMA has more than 700 active members, including physicians and those serving in allied health, all from Tamil Nadu, with 15 chapters in the U.S.

Supporter of Tamil Rights

Sivanandam Mariyappan, former president of the American Tamil Academy calls Jayalalithaa a vocal supporter of Tamil rights not only in Sri Lanka, but also in other countries. Mariyappan recalls how Jayalalithaa did not attend Prime Minister Modi’s inauguration as she wanted to register her opposition to the invitation extended to Sri Lanka’s president Mahinda Rajapaksa. “Diaspora Tamilians will miss her support,” Mariyappan said, adding that she passed a resolution in the state about the rights of Tamils outside India.
Mariyappan also recalled the chief minister’s promise to help with setting up a Tamil Chair at Harvard University. “Now we are concerned about the future of that and if a successor will carry that pledge forward,” he told News India Times. The ATA has more than 70 schools teaching Tamil with around 7,000 students all over North America.

A Paradoxical Mixture

However, Mariyappan said, Jayalalithaa’s “autocratic personality” was not appreciated in the diaspora. He recalls an incident when Jayalaithaa closed down one of the biggest libraries named after Annadurai, for political reasons.

Digital engineer Veerabadra Kumar of Bridgewater, New Jersey, says he is among Jayalalithaa’s critics, and says he might be one of the few Indian-Americans from Tamil Nadu who doesn’t support the former chief minister. Kumar feels her policies have not sustained the development in his home state. But his biggest issue with Jayalalithaa is the several lawsuits she’s filed against Tamil media, the latest being the 2015 suit against the Tamil weekly Ananda Vikatan, for running a comprehensive series on the governance of the AIADMK government. That said, Kumar concedes Jayalalithaa had “a remarkable career” and lauds her work for women and the poor in the state.

During her political career Jayalalithaa earned a reputation for a punishing work ethic and for centralizing state power among bureaucrats. There have also been reports saying that her council of ministers, whom she often shuffled around, were largely ceremonial in nature. Despite an official salary of only a rupee a month, Jayalalithaa indulged in public displays of wealth, culminating in a lavish wedding for her foster son in Madras in 1995, the Hindu reported.

But in spite of being a paradoxical mixture of a slick politician with a effervescent personality, a steely determination and superior administrative acumen, Jayalalithaa surpassed all odds to climb to the top of the political graph in her state and proved time and again that she was meant to rule.

In Satish’s words, the “void will never be filled again.”