

# 'Learn Thoroughly': Primary Schooling in Tamil Nadu

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*The Tamil Nadu legislature has adopted the Compulsory Education Act. Complaints have been aired in this context about the nature of the instruction imparted by the state's Tamil medium schools: complaints of excessive reliance on textbooks, of the use of a version of Tamil that alienates lower caste pupils and of failure adequately to facilitate career-building or higher education.*

THIS paper examines the conditions of learning in Tamil medium schools in Tamil Nadu. It uses the research the writer has undertaken for her doctoral work and draws on her continuing work in a Tamil medium school. This is more of a report on the perceptions of students, teachers and parents and a response to them than an assessment of the state's efforts in the field of primary education. It also raises questions about compulsory education in the context of these perceptions.

Tamil Nadu is one of the 'middle-level' states so far as literacy rates are concerned: it ranks 12th in the Indian union in male literacy with 73.7 per cent, and 13th in female literacy with 51.3 per cent [Sharma and Retherford 1993]. Though the dropout rate at the primary stage is less than the national average, it is still troubling at 21 per cent [Ramanujam 1993]. The state has pioneered a number of incentive schemes to retain children at the primary level. The hugely popular midday-meal scheme reaches over 80 per cent of the students in rural areas [Tilak 1996] and is credited with having reduced stagnation and wastage [Rajan and Jayakumar 1992]. Free books and stationery are received by 70 per cent of the students in the rural areas [Tilak 1996].

Just 2 per cent of the 29,960 primary schools in the state are single-teacher schools. Over 88 percent of the habitations in the state have been provided with primary schools within a distance of a kilometre [Ramanujam 1993]. Besides, Tamil Nadu is the only state to have enacted a law providing for compulsory schooling.

These are no mean achievements; however, there is uneven development. Thus, while the statewide literacy rate for women is nearly 52 per cent, this figure masks wide interdistrict disparities: in Dharmapuri the literacy rate for women is 38 per cent while in Kanyakumari it is 76 per cent [Ramanujam 1993]. The

Compulsory Education Act has yet to be operationalised. Though the number of children in schools keeps increasing, child labour continues to sap the life force of millions of children: no countermeasure has been adopted except the commissioning of survey after survey. We need to begin by looking at the structural arrangement of public education to resolve these contradictions.

## STRUCTURE OF SCHOOLING AND ACCESS

The Constitution envisages free education up to the age of 14; that is, up to the eighth standard. This implies that primary schools (up to the fifth standard) should be equal in number to middle schools (between the sixth and eighth standards). Yet there are 29,960 primary schools and fewer than 6,000 upper primary schools in Tamil Nadu [NCERT 1992]. Even if we include those high schools with middle grades, the number of middle schools falls far short of 29,960. In this respect Tamil Nadu reflects the national picture.

Moreover, most middle and high schools are far away from habitations than primary schools as they are expected to serve a larger circle of habitations. Primary, middle, high and higher secondary schools are located in ever-widening circles. Since most schools in the interior or rural areas are run by the government they lack transport facilities, thus accentuating the problem of physical access.

While the state has tried to counter such problems through the provision of free bus passes, the public transport infrastructure is organised around the needs of adults rather than those of school children. Bus services are not geared to meet the timings of schools or the convenience of students. In districts like Dharmapuri and Arcot, therefore, many students have to choose between arriving late at school and walking anywhere between 3 to 6 km to reach a middle or high school. Since the

educational structure is pyramid-shaped, the higher the grade the steeper the incline a student from a marginalised community has to traverse.

Access is often seen in terms of the physical distance covered by a student to reach a school. Tamil Nadu is one of the states that has reduced this distance for the vast majority of primary school students. However, measuring access merely in terms of physical distance masks more than it reveals. For example, it ignores qualitative dangers such as 'eve-teasing' and caste-based harassment on a day-to-day basis. In many habitations, the school is situated in the localities inhabited by upper castes, who are hostile to students belonging to lower castes and minority groups. Comparing the one km distance for students in such habitations to the one km that students may have to travel in a city like Chennai is socially myopic. In Chennai students have free bus passes and can board buses to reach schools without fearing physical and psychological injury on account of their birth.

A related issue in access is the question of 'decent dress' to be worn by girls in the hope of escaping sexual harassment. The issue of free uniforms of the right sizes and in good condition has eased matters for a large number of poor students. Such welcome measures as the midday-meal schemes and the distribution of free uniforms and books need to be administered sensitively to provide relief to the lower-income families and facilitate education.

I now present the concerns and difficulties within the schools once students have entered the classrooms. First I deal with students' views and then with teachers' problems and finally with parents' views. Students' concerns centre overwhelmingly on the curriculum and therefore I begin with this area.

## SYLLABI AND TEXTBOOKS

It is a truism to say that the entire syllabus for each grade is taken to be represented by the textbook. As students move up the grades, the textbook dominates their academic lives to the exclusion of everything else. Most students point to the fragmented ways in which textbooks deal with concepts, skills and other forms of 'knowledge'. As a tenth-grade student pointed out to the Tamil Nadu Committee on Curriculum Load: "The concept of poverty line has real-life implications. But we are given a 100-word definition of it in the social studies textbook and asked to reproduce that. Instead, if we are asked to do a project on the consequences of

living under the poverty line, we internalise the concept in the course of learning research methods. What we see and learn will stay with us lifelong. Textbook-level learning deters meaningful internalisation of knowledge."

Another group of students argues that the language textbooks are overloaded with grammatical items and categories which do not in any way improve their communication competence in that language. This is especially so in English. "We can reproduce the textbook version of a gerund, but how to use it effectively is beyond us", says one student.

Another complaint from students about language textbooks has to do with the representation of their concerns. "My Tamil textbook harps on chastity of women in ancient Tamil Nadu, yet not a single lesson in all my 10 years has touched on the hurdles faced by women like my mother or classmates or sisters in the 1990s", a tenth grade girl laments. "We have never come across a lesson on career options open after the 10th grade. We are rarely given an opportunity to sample the variety of writings that have come out in recent years: almost no short stories or plays appear in textbooks."

Many other students who work part-time in such industries as automobile repairs or work with family-centred production processes such as fish preservation feel that the pattern of instruction focused as it is on the official textbook, does not encourage them to correlate the concepts found in science textbooks with their work experience.

Textbooks could be supported and supplemented by story-telling, learning by doing, extra reading, the use of appropriate audio-visual aids and field visits. However, most Tamil medium schools, especially at the primary level, are impoverished in respect of these learning aids. Even in schools where such aids as alphabet charts and wooden blocks are provided, they are not put to active use: the teachers are afraid to use them daily as they are answerable for damage and/or loss of any item.

In some cases the physical structure of the schools does not permit the hanging of charts or other visual materials. A school near Sivakasi has no pukka walls; in another, the granite walls require special drills. Teachers of yet another school told me that there was no provision, financial or material, for hammering nails into the wall! Repeated petitions to the educational officers have produced no results. Another school had huge holes in the roof and the teachers had no cupboards for storing the

charts even if they hung them up during instruction; the charts are rolled up and locked up in the only damage-proof cupboard in the school – in the headmaster's room.

No school I visited in the rural areas around Sivakasi had an electricity connection, thus precluding the use of electronic media such as radio and television. The teachers are preventing from creating audio inputs to foster learning by the high student-teacher ratio and their lack of training in the use of theatre or musical skills.

Teacher empowerment is yet another facet of this issue: many of these teachers felt that taking any initiative towards remedying these physical drawbacks would only backfire on them, inviting ridicule from their peers and/or their superiors' wrath. A few others were not interested in their schools and were waiting for transfer orders. Some teachers who were commuting from other places, most of them women, said they did not know how to go about enlisting local help to remedy these situations.

The idea of a school library was often greeted with a blank stare. No teacher I met could envision the purchase of books and other materials for the school library. "There are rules about these things, proper channels to go through", said an otherwise enthusiastic teacher. "It takes enormous amount of time and effort to clear these channels. I have no money to invest in anything like books." Infrastructure constraints act as another deterrent: space, personnel, storage space and facilities for maintenance and proper care are unavailable. A teacher who asks for a library is usually saddled with additional tasks related to these areas, which also means that he or she will have to pay for damage or loss.

The textbooks are supposed to come with a teacher's guide that elaborates on ideas to connect the texts with real life. These are rarely distributed to all schools. When they are, a single copy arrives mid-year, regardless of the size of the school. There is also the pressure of "finishing the portions", which allows little time or energy to invent creative teaching or evaluation methods. Given all these constraints, total reliance on textbooks becomes inevitable and spells frustration for both teachers and learners.

Another way of understanding access emerges in this context: access as a ladder to ownership of knowledge and individual empowerment. The official version of knowledge and the language to be used to convey this knowledge are approached

by students with a certain sense of awe and alienation, especially at the primary stage. To understand this distance we need to turn our attention to the question of diglossia and the official 'standardised' Tamil which has become the hallmark of an educated person.

Diglossia, a linguistic phenomenon common to a number of south Asian languages, is a well-recognised feature of Tamil from the Sangam period. Over the past 150 years, a spoken and written version of the language has emerged as the only version worthy of public discourse, marginalising the dialects of regional and caste groups. As Ilaiyah (1996) points out in the case of Telugu, bahujan speech forms are embedded in dialects, which are discounted in favour of a "purer" (standardised) form of language. A girl who has been isolated within her own community until the age of five due to class and caste reasons encounters the official version in a consistent fashion for the first time in the classroom. Though her exposure to this form is usually limited to occasional outputs of radio or other mass media, she is expected to use it for intelligent interaction in the classroom.

Well-meaning teachers begin correcting every speech/act she commits so that her speech can correspond to the standardised version. This linguistic disciplining becomes brutal, though unintentionally, when the girl belongs to a lower caste or tribal community, since standardised Tamil is closer to upper caste speech. One solution to this was suggested by some teachers: the appointment of teachers who belong to the same speech community as the majority of the students. However, the current recruitment policies do not seem to favour this solution.

The alienation that begins by a public disavowal of one's speech pattern grows as the student moves up the grades. By the middle grades, the increasing complexity of conceptual and linguistic terminology furthers the distance between what is deemed to be 'knowledge' worthy of being conveyed to students and the

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'knowledge' students bring from their participation in the lives of their families. The instructional method most prevalent in schools – that of chalk and talk – also reduces the sense of affinity students need to develop in order to make use of their education.

Another dimension that is lost due to the rigid conception of 'good' Tamil is the cultural capital accumulated in dialects. Speech communities in Tamil Nadu have well-developed production processes, and the speech of each of them is a rich repository of production-related terms and knowledge. By correcting the speech of the children belonging different communities, we dispossess them of their cultural capital.

A poignant example of the sort of loss was observed by me in a Chennai school where there were a number of children from fishing communities. When their teacher introduced the word 'champanki', these first standard children insisted it was a variety of fish. The teacher, who was an upper caste vegetarian, did not agree. The powers vested in her by the state and society ensured that her contention – that it was a flower – prevailed. For a six-year-old such an event is full of hidden lessons about her community's use of a common language.

Thus, when access is interpreted to mean the distance between the lessons from one's life experiences and the lessons couched in the textbook and purveyed by teachers, we find that Tamil classrooms offer a slippery slope for children belonging to lower class and caste groups to scale.

#### PARENTS AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

To parents, all the above issues converge on a single major concern: where does ten years of general education in Tamil lead their children? Most parents I interviewed were categorical about the importance of literacy and education. However, they also expressed the view that the primary education provided by these schools was inadequate for career and character building. They insist that merely depending on school education would leave their children in limbo when they complete school. They observe that school graduates emerge as people incapable of dealing with day-to-day encounters with the larger world of work. A commonly cited example was that of a school graduate's inability to interpret a government letter or fill in any official form from a bank or other business establishment.

Besides, the level of literacy and familiarity with numbers a 10th standard

student achieves is not adequate for securing jobs with middle class prospects. "We are unskilled in the sense we are not trained in a specialised trade, and end up doing any kind of physical labour. But a school graduate is unskilled for practically all available work: his education is not enough for white-collar jobs, he has no training for blue-collar jobs, and psychologically he is handicapped for taking up physical labour. You tell me, why should I send him to school for ten years?" asked an agricultural worker near Sivakasi.

To parents like him, the opportunity cost of education is not just the wages lost during the years the child is in school. It also includes the money, time, information network and emotional energy needed to find a suitable career or higher educational opportunity for the school graduate. As Drury's ethnography of parents from Kanpur shows, the social and economic capital required to acquire either of these opportunities is closely tied to one's caste, class and gender positions. Planning for access to professional training, Drury points out, requires a wide-ranging information network. This network is generally an informal one [Drury 1993].

First-generation learners in government schools lack this social capital. There are no official structures in place to offer guidance to this group of students. "Preparation for post-secondary education requires a certain kind of training but for my classmates and me, even information about options at the higher secondary level is scarce", a 10th grade student in Chennai laments. "Do we have the skills and the knowledge base to cope with the various specialisations offered in a higher secondary course? If we don't, how do we acquire them? Where do we go for information on the possibilities for scholarships or educational loans? We need to pester our parents or their friends for such information. Many of us have parents who are menial labourers who barely read. Their friends do not have access to this kind of information either. We don't even have access to information on caste-based scholarship programmes, though we read fiery anti-reservation letters in the newspapers."

The search for such an information network takes parents and students in urban areas through extraordinary social acrobatics. Mothers who serve as maids in middle class households take their school-going children to their employers on a regular basis and seek their guidance. They seek help on issues ranging from

supervision of homework to reprimanding the students for not doing well in examinations. Many children end up doing unpaid labour in these houses in return for the employers' help. Girl children are particularly vulnerable: they are likely to end up taking on their mothers' duties and dropping out of school.

Other parents look to employers in the unorganised sector for help. Hence their insistence on part-time jobs for their school-going children. For a parent lacking in social and economic capital the only resort is to combine schooling with job training. Many parents in Chennai, for example, select after-school jobs for their children very carefully. Auto repairs, carpentry and plumbing are preferred for boys, while shop assistant jobs or packaging in grocery stores are favoured for girls. For a parent without a social network providing access to information, the unorganised sector establishment that employs his children part time serves many purposes: it is seen as a beginning in the setting up a network of contacts, it keeps the adolescents off the streets, places them under trusted adult supervision, inculcates punctuality and teaches social skills such as how to interact with customers of different classes.

This regimen of three to four hours of work after six hours of school spells enormous physical stress for the students. Their parents are aware of this strain. To many parents, child labour is a hateful proposition; yet they engage their children in apprentice positions to ensure a more secure economic future. A contract match worker-parent asked me bitterly, "Would any parent willingly force his child to work with these chemicals for just his own financial gain? Our socio-economic situations are always talked about in the abstract by educated people like you. Facing these situations every day and trying not just to survive but to facilitate a slightly better position for my child cannot be understood even by well-meaning middle class folks."

Despite their scepticism about the utility of public education in the job market, none of the parents I met denied the importance of education *per se*. "Un-educated persons will die a thousand deaths every day in this society", said a mother. A 13-year old labourer argued that he preferred adult literacy classes to going to school, since such classes combined meaningful activities with instruction on reading and writing. According to him, his work as a child labourer in a match factory gives him skills that cannot be learnt in any school, and this training plus adult

education would open more doors for him. "When I am 16 I am going to be in a better position to start my own unit than any school graduate. I know where to go to get loans, who to hire and what to invest in. You show me one school graduate who can match this." In this folk theory of possibility, school-based education has no firm place.

This ambiguous attitude towards public education is made sharper by the common perception of a middle class flight from it. To many parents, the public education we as a society have planned and built is a luxurious accessory. "Literacy without a sense of empowerment is what is on offer in schools, and we cannot afford it", said a parent. Obtaining this education in a meaningful and empowering way is deterred by the very system – its pyramidal structure. The socio-economic conditions of the majority of families make the incline of this pyramid steeper. We need to rethink primary education in the context of parental aspirations as well as children's propensity to learn. Very sensitive localised adaptations to accommodate the socio-cultural

milieus of the marginalised groups are called for.

#### CONCLUSION

The dilemmas faced by students, teachers and parents within the current system of public education raise very troublesome questions about compulsory education. There can be no doubt that all children need to be in school. However, without meeting the children's needs and parental aspirations and empowering teachers, how 'effective' can our schools be? How do we ensure that schooling empowers the learner, even as it equalises educational opportunity?

A corollary to this question is about the way public education policies are made. How well do the processes of policy-making reflect and/or incorporate the voices of that segment of society which has been denied educational access for so long? Even as we demand compulsory education, don't we need to create processes that are people-inclusive?

Finally, how well does our educational system, and by extension our society,

facilitate self-actualisation, another goal of education, apart from individual mobility? True empowerment is built on both these aspects of education, and unless we ensure that the current system is capable of advancing these goals, "learning thoroughly" – the motto of the Tamil Nadu Textbook Committee – is likely to remain a chimera.

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