

Reaching Global Goals in Primary Education

Some Gender Concerns for Tamil Nadu

In the context of India's commitment to reach the global goals in primary education, namely, to achieve universal access and completion by 2015 with elimination of gender disparities by 2005, this paper highlights some gender concerns in the primary education scenario in Tamil Nadu.

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I Introduction

That each child in every country should have the chance to complete primary education is one of the most serious goals currently supported across the world. Despite rapid educational improvement during the 1990s even in poor countries, thanks to the widespread education-for-all (EFA) efforts, India alone still holds about one-quarter of south Asia's out-of-school children, who are more often girls than boys.

Consequent to acknowledging the limitations in meeting this challenge, India has joined 189 countries to assert its commitment to a set of eight millennium development goals (MDGs) in September 2000, of which two goals are pertinent to note: goal 2 of the MDG is to achieve the completion of a full course of primary education for all girls and boys by the year 2015, and goal 3 is to promote gender equality and empower women by addressing elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005, and in all levels by 2015. An incentive to achieve these goals is that by crossing the minimum threshold level of five to six years of learning, countries may be able to trigger off more benefits of development through education.¹

But, so far, estimates of India's progress suggest that while it may possibly meet the goal of achieving primary school completion by 2015, it is unlikely that it will achieve the goal of gender equality by 2005, because both access and completion have been difficult to achieve for girls in some sections. Data for 1995 on a commonly used indicator of universal primary completion, namely, literacy status of the 15+ population, shows wide gender disparities, with 64 per cent of urban males and not even 15 per cent of rural females as those completing primary education [World Bank 2001].

Despite the reported gross enrolments of 100 per cent at the class one level in some of the major states, estimates still show that children who do not attend a school may be about 33 per cent of all children in the 6-14 age group, two-thirds of these being girls. Even among those who enrol, completion rates have been very low, especially among girls.

Currently, both domestic efforts (such as the SSA) and international ones (such as the DPEP) are promoting primary education in a big way, and the centre, state and civil society² have assumed greater responsibilities for meeting needs of disadvantaged sections. In the context of India's commitment

to reach the global goals in primary education, namely, to achieve universal access and completion by 2015 with elimination of gender disparities by 2005, this paper highlights some gender concerns in the primary education scenario in Tamil Nadu. It discusses the current status in Tamil Nadu, and highlights certain issues for attention regarding access to and completion of primary education among girls. The paper is divided into four sections. Section II sketches the education scenario in Tamil Nadu by providing current details on literacy, and particularly enrolment, retention and achievement at the primary education level. Section III discusses interventions that have produced results for the state, and issues that need further consideration. Section IV points out the state's financial commitment towards primary education, and the role of private schooling in terms of its implications for including girl children. Finally, some concerns are highlighted for policy attention.

II Tamil Nadu's Education Scenario

The 'education balance sheet' [Haq and Haq 1998] of India shows that it is still the world's most illiterate country, holding about 30 per cent of the world's illiterates. About 35 million children continue to be out of school. Even among those who enrol, about 37 per cent drop out before reaching class five. Girls lag behind even in states like Tamil Nadu that have had a tradition of successful formal schooling. Hence, in the context of the global goals in primary education, it may be useful to assess Tamil Nadu's literacy status³ and focus on issues in girls' primary education.

Literacy rates: The inter-censal period between 1991 and 2001 has been remarkable across the country for various breakthroughs. Importantly, but for the 'bimaru' states, all others have managed to achieve a literacy rate of above 50 per cent for women. Twenty-three of the 35 states and union territories, including Tamil Nadu have shown more than a 10-percentage-point difference in their literacy rates between 1991 and 2001.

Age-specific and gender-specific literacy: Although Tamil Nadu's overall literacy rate is ahead of many other states, there are problems in terms of age-specific and gender-specific literacy. Comparative age-specific literacy data for 2001 has not yet been published, but such data for 1981 and 1991 already showed that Tamil Nadu's growth rates in literacy between 1981 and 1991 for certain age categories were lower than the national average

[Radhakrishnan and Akila 2002]. Particularly, the lower rates among 7-14 age females, but not males, indicated that progress in primary education among girls was poorer than that among boys. Thus, if girls remained disadvantaged even at the primary level, their relative access to higher levels may be even poorer. *Gender gaps in literacy:* While Tamil Nadu's inter-district data for 2001 may indicate good news about female literacy in general, gender gaps in literacy would show that the female literacy rate (65 per cent) is much lower than male literacy (82 per cent). As Table 1 shows, although the male-female gaps have narrowed between 1991 and 2001, with higher increase in literacy among females than males, the improvement in female literacy has not been considerable in many districts. Examples include both educationally advanced and backward districts. In fact, but for Chennai and Kanyakumari, all districts have a male-female gap of more than 15 per cent points. The gap is wide in Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai and Nilgiris, which have a high concentration of SCs and STs. Cuddalore, Namakkal, Salem and Villupuram also lag behind both in terms of overall and female literacy. Further, the female literacy rate has not gone above 80 per cent in any district except Kanyakumari, while 21 districts have reached this level for males.

Caste-based disparities in literacy: Despite the overall improvement in literacy and a relative decline in regional variations in Tamil Nadu, disparities in male-female, and SC/ST-others tend to be considerable.⁴ Gender gaps in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities still owe basically to the interlinkage between caste and gender and its repercussions on the schooling of girls.⁵

Enrolment, retention and achievement: As literacy rates are only indicative of overall progress or decline, specific indicators of enrolment, retention and achievement are sought to address primary education. While conventionally indicators to gauge enrolment were gross enrolment ratio (GER) and age-specific enrolment ratio, recently more specific indicators such as net enrolment ratio (NER), non-attendance or discontinuation ratio, and dropout rate at each class or level are also widely used.⁶

It is believed that 95 per cent of India's population now has access to primary schools within 1 km of their habitat [Govinda 2002]. Tamil Nadu achieved this even earlier. Tamil Nadu's enrolment trend is unique because its enrolments have actually decreased due to the successful reduction in the size of its younger population. Although its gross enrolment has at times been above 100 per cent due to the enrolment of under-aged and over-aged children, and possibly an offshoot of the push for enrolment during the beginning of the 1990s, Table 2 shows that there is positive adjustment in recent times.

Nevertheless, districtwise data on GERs pose some concern, as Table 3 shows. Tamil Nadu's primary level GER is 97 per cent, with 98 per cent among boys and 96 per cent among girls. It is important to recognise that in many districts there is a direct correlation between low enrolment of girls and low overall enrolment. Examples are Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai and Villupuram, which, on that account, received special attention from the DPEP's gender-specific strategies. On the other hand, Salem, Kancheepuram, Namakkal, Tiruvallur and Toothukudi have higher GERs for girls than boys. If this may be due to better reach of schemes targeting girls' primary enrolment, relevant field-based evidence would be useful as lessons for other districts.

While establishing more schools to ensure greater enrolments is in practice, it should be borne in mind that the number of schools in a locality and its GER are not always directly

correlated. For instance, while Kanyakumari, with the highest GER in the state, has only 1 per cent of the primary schools, Tiruvannamalai, one of the poor achievers, has almost 5 per cent of the primary schools in the state.

However, this is not to argue against establishing the essential number of easily reachable schools in every needy location. In 2001, Tamil Nadu had 31,488 primary schools, and more may be established in suitable locations. But some caution against mushrooming of inefficient schools and against reproduction of the myth about the availability of schools as the sole factor for improving enrolments will nevertheless help. Evidence shows that caste and class equations also continue to play a major role, due to which dalit children remain relatively disadvantaged [Nambissan 1996].

While more schools and higher enrolments may mark a beginning, it is important to ensure that all the enrolled children are retained in the system by due promotions. In this regard, retention data from the 43rd NSS round for 1987-88 and the 52nd round for 1995-96 is quite disturbing, as close to 60 per cent of the out-of-school children in the ages of 6-11 in Tamil Nadu are girls [Ramachandran et al 1997]. The average discontinuation

Table 1: Districtwise Gender Disparities in Tamil Nadu's Literacy, 1991-2001

| District | Literacy Rate | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|--------|---------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| | 1991 | | | 2001 | | |
| | Male | Female | Male-Female Per Cent Point Difference | Male | Female | Male-Female Per Cent Point Difference |
| Ariyalur | 63.19 | 34.47 | 28 | 77.92 | 52.03 | 28 |
| Chennai | 87.86 | 74.87 | 13 | 84.71 | 75.32 | 9 |
| Coimbatore | 76.45 | 55.73 | 21 | 83.82 | 69.80 | 14 |
| Cuddalore | 71.53 | 45.21 | 26 | 82.76 | 60.86 | 22 |
| Dharmapuri | 57.21 | 34.23 | 23 | 68.82 | 49.10 | 20 |
| Dindigul | 69.19 | 43.94 | 25 | 80.29 | 59.30 | 21 |
| Erode | 65.54 | 41.58 | 24 | 75.49 | 55.26 | 20 |
| Kancheepuram | 77.11 | 55.51 | 22 | 84.82 | 70.21 | 15 |
| Kanyakumari | 85.70 | 78.39 | 7 | 90.88 | 85.38 | 5 |
| Karur | 69.62 | 42.59 | 27 | 80.42 | 57.30 | 23 |
| Madurai | 79.93 | 57.90 | 23 | 87.24 | 69.93 | 17 |
| Nagapattinam | 77.03 | 54.43 | 23 | 85.61 | 68.35 | 17 |
| Namakkal | 66.65 | 41.71 | 25 | 78.02 | 57.04 | 21 |
| Perambalur | 64.74 | 38.57 | 26 | 77.68 | 54.26 | 23 |
| Pudukkottai | 71.78 | 43.62 | 28 | 83.22 | 60.94 | 22 |
| Ramanathapuram | 74.73 | 48.84 | 26 | 82.96 | 63.55 | 19 |
| Salem | 63.51 | 41.31 | 22 | 75.25 | 55.61 | 19 |
| Sivaganga | 76.90 | 49.59 | 27 | 83.70 | 62.12 | 22 |
| Thanjavur | 77.26 | 55.01 | 22 | 85.45 | 66.95 | 19 |
| The Nilgiris | 81.79 | 61.47 | 20 | 89.63 | 73.39 | 16 |
| Theni | 72.70 | 47.51 | 25 | 82.50 | 61.41 | 21 |
| Tiruvallur | 77.03 | 54.90 | 22 | 84.62 | 68.23 | 17 |
| Tiruvallur | 77.45 | 54.73 | 23 | 85.59 | 68.36 | 17 |
| Toothukudi | 82.02 | 64.57 | 17 | 88.66 | 75.64 | 13 |
| Tiruchirappalli | 79.50 | 57.69 | 22 | 87.19 | 71.19 | 16 |
| Tirunelveli | 77.46 | 54.23 | 23 | 85.89 | 68.50 | 17 |
| Tiruvannamalai | 66.71 | 39.25 | 28 | 80.14 | 56.31 | 24 |
| Vellore | 72.94 | 48.58 | 24 | 82.67 | 63.53 | 19 |
| Villupuram | 60.92 | 35.38 | 26 | 76.02 | 53.16 | 23 |
| Virudhunagar | 75.67 | 50.17 | 25 | 84.56 | 64.09 | 20 |
| Tamil Nadu | 73.75 | 51.33 | 22 | 82.33 | 64.55 | 18 |

Source: Census of India 2001.

Table 2: Proportion of Enrolment to School-Age Population

| Level | School Age Popn (in lakh) | | | Enrolment (in lakh) | | | Per Cent of Enrolment | | |
|---------|---------------------------|------|------|---------------------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|
| | 1993 | 1998 | 2001 | 1993 | 1998 | 2001 | 1993 | 1998 | 2001 |
| Primary | 79.8 | 68.8 | 57.5 | 80.2 | 66.7 | 56.7 | 100 | 96.9 | 98.6 |
| Middle | 36.8 | 37.5 | 37.6 | 35.4 | 33.8 | 35.2 | 96.2 | 90.1 | 93.6 |

Source: Policy notes of respective years, Government of Tamil Nadu.

rate⁷ in Tamil Nadu has also been considerable and in fact higher than the corresponding national average. While at all-India levels, discontinuation is only 6 per cent among children enrolled in a primary class in a rural area, the same is 11 per cent for Tamil Nadu. Further, Tamil Nadu also displays a high incidence of discontinuation among children in the 12-14 age categories, often girls, probably owing to the demands of domestic and remunerative labour on them. Factors causing poor retention or high discontinuation are either supply related (such as school-based difficulties), demand based (need to work) or customary, such as the need for girl children for sibling care at home. In Tamil Nadu, customary factors are more prevalent [Parikh 1999].

Table 4 compares the rates of discontinuation among the 6-14 age group children for India and Tamil Nadu with data for 1992 and 1994. It shows that discontinuation is increasing rather than decreasing in Tamil Nadu, and is especially high among girls. This suggests the need to focus more attention on the regular attendance of girls, especially in backward districts.

Another key indicator that deals with the nature of retention among primary school children is their repetition rates. It is a sign of wastage, as repeating children do not move from one class to the next higher, but stagnate in the same class.

While the government's current practice of compulsory pass until class five may have its own repercussions, for want of more recent data, the one available for the year 1993 is presented in Table 5. Tamil Nadu's repetition rates, both for boys and girls, are considerably higher than the corresponding national average. Further, its repetition rates are slightly higher for boys than girls, not only in class one but also in classes four and five. This indicates that girls get lesser chance to repeat, and that in cases of failure to study, migration, demands for child labour and the like, girls may greatly lose their access to schooling rather than win chances to repeat. That girls suffer more denial of schooling than boys do probably reflects in their differential dropout status, as Table 6 shows.

Table 6 shows that there has been some drop in Tamil Nadu's dropout rates across time, and this has been quite considerable for girls across all levels. But there are still gender gaps to be addressed even in the primary stage, and this would be more urgent in some districts than others. Dropout data disaggregated at the district level is presented in Table 7.

As has already been indicated, districts such as Dindigul, Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Theni, Villupuram and Virudhunagar need sharper focus in terms of curtailing their dropout rates. Further, in most of these districts, the dropout rate among boys is not very high (not higher than the corresponding state average), but those among girls is quite high (higher than the state average). If primary education and completion for all has to be a reality, effective tackling of dropout among girls should be immediately prioritised.

While it is true that children who drop out of the system fail to gain from it, not all those who continue in the system actually do gain either. This is evident from the very low attainment levels of children. The government does not publish data on these lines. But, data available for the phase I DPEP districts on the achievement levels of class one and class four children showed that although the average levels of learning among children in all the concerned districts had risen from 1994 to 1997, the attainment level reached was quite low. Children's poor achievement, probable elsewhere in the state too, raises concerns related to the burden of non-comprehension in schools, which

was highlighted in the government of India report titled, 'Learning without Burden'.

In sum, primary-level enrolment, retention and attainment need

Table 3: Districtwise Distribution of Primary and Middle Schools, and GERs by Age Category, 1998-99

| District | Per Cent Distribution of Schools | | Enrolment Ratio (6-11) | | Enrolment Ratio (11-14) | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------|------------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Primary | Middle | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Total | |
| | | | | | | | | Total |
| Chennai | 0.9 | 4.0 | 108.2 | 75.4 | 89.7 | 96.0 | 91.9 | 94.0 |
| Coimbatore | 4.8 | 4.0 | 120.7 | 112.1 | 116.4 | 115.8 | 98.7 | 107.1 |
| Cuddalore | 3.9 | 3.9 | 97.2 | 92.3 | 94.8 | 94.8 | 90.0 | 92.5 |
| Dharmapuri | 6.4 | 3.4 | 82.1 | 78.6 | 80.4 | 81.9 | 76.1 | 79.0 |
| Dindigul | 3.9 | 3.5 | 117.4 | 117.7 | 117.5 | 107.0 | 101.6 | 104.4 |
| Erode | 4.9 | 3.4 | 122.2 | 119.1 | 120.7 | 126.1 | 91.0 | 106.8 |
| Kancheepuram | 3.5 | 4.4 | 86.3 | 106.2 | 94.8 | 76.4 | 79.9 | 78.1 |
| Kanyakumari | 1.1 | 2.7 | 103.7 | 106.9 | 105.3 | 94.6 | 86.5 | 90.6 |
| Karur | 2.2 | 1.5 | 116.8 | 115.2 | 116.0 | 113.8 | 106.1 | 110.0 |
| Madurai | 3.3 | 3.7 | 86.9 | 85.7 | 86.3 | 83.1 | 80.2 | 81.7 |
| Nagapattinam | 2.7 | 3.2 | 111.0 | 107.6 | 109.3 | 103.6 | 106.5 | 105.0 |
| Namakkal | 2.6 | 1.2 | 127.4 | 161.4 | 141.8 | 120.9 | 112.3 | 116.7 |
| Perambalur | 2.3 | 2.1 | 108.0 | 107.1 | 108.0 | 102.6 | 98.6 | 100.7 |
| Pudukkottai | 3.7 | 3.2 | 95.1 | 71.0 | 81.5 | 87.4 | 76.7 | 81.9 |
| Ramanathapuram | 3.2 | 2.8 | 87.9 | 89.8 | 88.8 | 88.4 | 83.6 | 86.0 |
| Salem | 4.1 | 2.9 | 96.3 | 124.3 | 107.9 | 90.1 | 86.3 | 88.3 |
| Sivaganga | 3.2 | 2.8 | 95.0 | 98.9 | 96.9 | 87.1 | 88.8 | 87.9 |
| Thanjavur | 3.6 | 4.0 | 92.0 | 89.1 | 90.6 | 86.0 | 88.0 | 86.9 |
| Theni | 1.4 | 2.8 | 87.9 | 87.7 | 87.8 | 86.4 | 81.5 | 84.0 |
| Tirunelveli | 5.0 | 6.8 | 91.4 | 96.0 | 93.6 | 88.4 | 103.5 | 95.2 |
| Tiruvallur | 3.6 | 3.5 | 88.6 | 116.0 | 100.3 | 77.4 | 82.0 | 79.7 |
| Tiruvannamalai | 4.8 | 3.4 | 87.3 | 85.9 | 86.6 | 83.0 | 82.3 | 82.7 |
| Thiruvarur | 2.2 | 2.2 | 118.0 | 115.0 | 116.5 | 110.6 | 113.5 | 111.7 |
| Toothukudi | 3.5 | 5.1 | 96.4 | 103.2 | 99.7 | 89.0 | 91.6 | 90.3 |
| Tiruchirappalli | 3.3 | 4.7 | 90.7 | 90.9 | 90.8 | 87.0 | 83.9 | 85.5 |
| Udhagamandalam | 1.3 | 1.1 | 106.9 | 98.5 | 102.7 | 99.0 | 86.4 | 92.8 |
| Vellore | 5.4 | 5.6 | 95.4 | 85.2 | 90.1 | 84.6 | 74.1 | 79.0 |
| Villupuram | 5.6 | 5.1 | 81.9 | 77.5 | 79.7 | 79.6 | 75.5 | 77.6 |
| Virudhunagar | 3.5 | 2.9 | 89.8 | 92.5 | 91.1 | 107.5 | 75.3 | 89.3 |
| Tamil Nadu | 100.0 | 100.0 | 97.9 | 96.0 | 96.7 | 92.7 | 87.5 | 90.1 |

Source: Quoted from the draft monograph of Radhakrishnan and Akila (2002).

Table 4: Discontinuation Rate among 6-14 Age Children

| | Ever Enrolment Rate for 1992 (Per Cent) | | | Discontinuation Rate (Per Cent) | | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls | Total | 1992 | | | 1994 | | |
| | | | | Boys | Girls | Total | Boys | Girls | Total |
| Tamil Nadu | 90.9 | 84.3 | 87.7 | 6.2 | 7.9 | 7.1 | 7.5 | 14.8 | 10.9 |
| All-India | 77.1 | 64.8 | 71.4 | 6.0 | 7.8 | 8.0 | 4.8 | 7.6 | 6.0 |

Source: Quoted from Parikh 1999.

Table 5: Repetition Rate among Girls and Boys in Primary Classes, 1993

| | Class 1 | | Class 2 | | Class 3 | | Class 4 | | Class 5 | |
|-----------|------------|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|------|
| | G | B | G | B | G | B | G | B | G | B |
| | Tamil Nadu | 15.3 | 15.9 | 13.1 | 13.1 | 14.1 | 14.1 | 16.1 | 16.6 | 11.2 |
| All-India | 9.2 | 9.0 | 7.2 | 7.0 | 10.3 | 9.9 | 7.8 | 7.6 | 7.1 | 7.2 |

Source: Sixth All-India Education Survey.

Table 6: Sexwise Dropout Rate between Different Classes, 1986-2002

| Year | In Classes 1-5 | | In Classes 1-8 | | In Classes 1-10 | | In Classes 1-12 | |
|-----------|----------------|-------|----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 1991-92 | 17.71 | 21.16 | 37.48 | 46.50 | 64.45 | 71.93 | 83.92 | 86.07 |
| 1996-97 | 14.05 | 16.20 | 26.38 | 34.78 | 58.63 | 67.05 | 78.21 | 83.09 |
| 2001-2002 | 12.73 | 15.95 | 35.46 | 34.53 | 57.34 | 57.79 | 79.69 | 79.32 |

Source: Policy notes of respective years, Government of Tamil Nadu.

greater attention in Tamil Nadu. They are currently suffering due to several reasons, some of them home-related, and some school-related. While home-related factors may either be generational and indicative of cumulative backwardness (such as a tradition of illiteracy), or may be contemporary (such as the economic demands on children in poor families), they are nevertheless more complex to solve than school-related factors. But it is increasingly recognised that many of the home-related difficulties could be effectively tackled by appropriate school-related developments. In this context, it may be useful to assess the role of the state in terms of its supply provisions for universal primary education in Tamil Nadu.

III Government Primary Schooling

That primary education is largely a state responsibility is now well established. The political commitment to educating all children through government schools under state responsibility was recognised quite early in Tamil Nadu. It has been a pioneer in not only implementing innovative schemes like the nutritious noon meal scheme, but also passing legislation for compulsory elementary education.

Regarding its compulsory elementary education, however, there has been a long delay in implementation since passing the bill in 1994, the bill becoming an act in 1995, passing the act in 1997, to actually notifying it for implementation in 1998. Meanwhile, a number of concerns have been raised, some focusing on whether the phrase 'free and quality primary education' should be suffixed with 'compulsory', some others arguing that the penalty clause of the act victimises poor parents rather than ensuring more state responsibility. There have also been claims for amendment because the act does not cover children up to 14 years of age (while elementary education conventionally

Table 7: Districtwise Dropout Rate by Class and Sex, 1998-99
(Per cent)

| District | Class I – V | | | Class I – VIII | | |
|-----------------|-------------|-------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls | Total | Boys | Girls | Total |
| Chennai | 12.7 | 14.8 | 13.7 | 35.6 | 41.2 | 39.7 |
| Coimbatore | 12.7 | 14.8 | 14.1 | 39.3 | 33.1 | 36.0 |
| Cuddalore | 13.3 | 17.2 | 15.1 | 36.3 | 42.7 | 40.4 |
| Dharmapuri | 13.5 | 16.0 | 15.1 | 41.6 | 35.0 | 38.1 |
| Dindigul | 12.9 | 16.7 | 14.5 | 38.2 | 32.1 | 35.1 |
| Erode | 13.4 | 14.4 | 14.2 | 41.1 | 34.6 | 37.7 |
| Kancheepuram | 13.0 | 16.7 | 14.8 | 34.6 | 39.9 | 42.7 |
| Kanyakumari | 12.4 | 14.8 | 13.5 | 32.4 | 27.3 | 30.1 |
| Karur | 12.8 | 15.5 | 14.4 | 35.0 | 29.4 | 32.1 |
| Madurai | 12.8 | 16.0 | 14.3 | 38.4 | 32.3 | 35.3 |
| Nagapattinam | 13.2 | 16.3 | 14.4 | 35.0 | 29.5 | 32.2 |
| Namakkal | 13.4 | 14.6 | 14.3 | 25.8 | 21.7 | 23.7 |
| Perambalur | 12.8 | 15.4 | 14.4 | 35.0 | 29.4 | 32.1 |
| Pudukkottai | 13.1 | 15.8 | 14.7 | 40.8 | 34.4 | 37.4 |
| Ramanathapuram | 13.6 | 16.6 | 14.7 | 37.2 | 31.3 | 35.1 |
| Salem | 13.4 | 14.6 | 14.3 | 25.8 | 21.7 | 23.7 |
| Sivaganga | 12.8 | 16.0 | 14.4 | 39.9 | 33.6 | 36.6 |
| Thanjavur | 12.6 | 15.8 | 14.1 | 35.0 | 29.5 | 32.2 |
| Theni | 12.8 | 16.3 | 14.3 | 38.4 | 32.3 | 35.3 |
| Tirunelveli | 12.5 | 15.8 | 14.1 | 36.1 | 30.4 | 33.3 |
| Thiruvallur | 13.0 | 16.5 | 14.8 | 34.6 | 39.9 | 38.0 |
| Tiruvannamalai | 13.4 | 16.8 | 15.0 | 42.0 | 35.3 | 38.7 |
| Thiruvaur | 13.2 | 16.2 | 15.0 | 35.0 | 29.5 | 32.2 |
| Toothukudi | 12.6 | 15.8 | 14.1 | 38.5 | 32.4 | 35.6 |
| Tiruchirappalli | 12.8 | 15.4 | 14.4 | 35.0 | 29.4 | 32.1 |
| Udhagamandalam | 13.6 | 13.9 | 14.1 | 39.6 | 33.3 | 36.5 |
| Vellore | 13.3 | 16.6 | 14.9 | 39.0 | 32.8 | 35.9 |
| Villupuram | 12.7 | 17.3 | 14.8 | 36.3 | 42.7 | 40.4 |
| Virudhunagar | 13.6 | 16.9 | 15.2 | 41.1 | 34.6 | 37.8 |
| Tamil Nadu | 13.0 | 16.2 | 14.5 | 36.9 | 33.4 | 35.2 |

Source: Government of Tamil Nadu, statistics department.

extends up to this age), but stops with inclusion up to 11 years only, when incidence of dropping out (especially for child labour) has been proven to be considerable.

Currently, awareness for primary education is being created across all districts and there is hope that parental motivation for enrolment is likely to improve further in the light of education becoming a fundamental right of all citizens. In this context, the state needs to be equipped better for both sufficient and qualitative supply.

The role of the state is even more conspicuous in Tamil Nadu than in other states because of the spread and popularity of its schemes like the noon meal scheme, introduced in 1982 for children from class one to five, and extended since 1984 to cover all children of classes six to 10 also. Allied benefits like free textbooks are also given to beneficiaries of the noon meal scheme. In fact, each year, the Tamil Nadu Textbook Corporation distributes about 400 lakh textbooks to children through the departments of education, Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare, BCs and MBCs, and the directorate of rehabilitation. The government's welfare schemes also include free supply of slates to class one children, uniforms, bus passes and even bags and slippers to many children. Besides, the state implemented the Tamil Nadu integrated nutrition project from 1991 to 1997, and provides a package of services through the integrated child development services since 1975. However, while the probable impact of these measures on enrolment has been shown by some studies [Radhakrishnan and Akila 2002], field-based evidence on its role in reducing gender gaps in primary education is wanting.

Schooling Availability and Quality

In the current scenario of time targeting the goals of universal primary completion, it should be recognised that the quality of schooling offered with currently available funds should become a central concern. The first step, namely, schooling availability and access, is not problematic as far as lower primary schooling is considered. But in terms of upper primary schooling, data for 1993-94 has shown that only 81 per cent of Tamil Nadu's habitations have an upper primary school within 1 km. The need to bridge lower and upper primary schooling in Tamil Nadu is vital, given the high discontinuation rates in classes four and five, and that especially among girls.

Many schools are also in want of classrooms, despite the fact that the budget allocation for classroom construction has been increasing in every annual state budget. This apart, panchayat union schools construct their own buildings, and recently, the DPEP has also constructed buildings and classrooms using locally available resources. Play-walls and swings, and special care for disabled children, have marked a difference in some such schools. The state also gets maintenance grants from the central government's EFA scheme. Yet, the improvement in meeting the need for classrooms does not seem significant. While the sixth all-India survey had noted that in 1993 50 per cent of the state's schools suffered from inadequate number of classrooms, and this may have improved, there is still no data on overcrowded classrooms, those used for non-teaching purposes, and those in dire need of repairs. However, an indirect development in this regard is the government order of 1994-95 that all primary schools should establish a parent-teacher association (PTA) to ensure not only enrolment and quality but also to facilitate legitimate collection of funds for construction of classrooms and compound walls or expenditure for infrastructure. PTAs, village education councils

(VECs), and community participation in general are expanding in rural Tamil Nadu, and have the scope to ensure local monitoring as an effective strategy, although resources in poor and illiterate areas may need greater attention. In any case, unless the parents of girls are satisfied with the quality of schools that their children may attend, targeting all girls will remain a distant dream.

Schooling infrastructure is an important criterion in this regard. The sixth all-India survey in 1993 found that there was no drinking water in one-third of Tamil Nadu's government schools, no blackboards in one-fifth, and no basic furniture for teachers and students in about 70 per cent of the cases, 91 per cent had no toilets, and the provision of sanitation, especially in girls' schools, was very poor. About 80 per cent had no electricity. Playgrounds were not available in about half of the schools. This has been despite the fact that the state has completed all four phases of the Operation Blackboard scheme.⁸ Random field visits do show that the problem continues in many villages across districts.

Apart from the points discussed so far in the vein of correction for proper expansion of primary education benefiting especially girls who have remained excluded from EFA, two major issues regarding teachers are even more crucial. One is their availability, which can be gauged in terms of the teacher-school ratio,⁹ and teacher-pupil ratio. The other is their efficiency in terms of creating and sustaining interest in learning and thus producing greater attainment levels among children.

The Tamil Nadu government has been facing a crisis regarding the teacher-pupil ratio. In fact, while it held 1:20 as a healthy ratio in the early 1990s, it soon readjusted it to 1:40 by a government order (GO No 525, December 29, 1999). But it is important to reckon that reducing the class size will help teachers use their time with students more effectively.¹⁰

Regarding the efficiency of teachers and teaching, the directorate of teacher education and training gives a number of programmes across the state [DTERT 1993]. 'Joyful learning', supported by Unicef, has been chief among these. The government has also given grants for teaching-learning material. However, despite the generally high educational level of teachers and their training qualifications, it is true that many teachers have greater responsibilities than they can handle. The low motivation levels among teachers translate into indifferent classroom practices, teacher absenteeism, and low turnout of students in terms of both numbers and attainment levels. The state's strategy to have more female teachers and to encourage monitoring by the parent community and panchayats offers some promise for targeting more girls. In a number of cases, sensitised and motivated community participation seems to hold the key to ensuring that all children are in school.

IV Funds for Primary Education

Allocating sufficient resources by prioritising needs is central to improving educational performance across the country. But despite increases in budgets for education, public spending on education is still low, at just about 3 per cent of GDP. Although it is increasingly being said that allocating 6 per cent of GDP on education is essential to achieve UPE at least by 2007, the share of GDP spent on education has paradoxically fallen from 3.65 per cent at the beginning of the 1990s to 3.48 per cent in 1996-97 [Sipahimalani 2000]. Further, as mobilisation of additional resources becomes difficult, restructuring of the available

educational budget is becoming the solution. In this regard, it is important to note the features of intra-sectoral allocation.

As Table 8 shows, by Tamil Nadu's plan outlay, in the Eighth Five-Year Plan for 1992-97, Rs 25.25 lakh was allocated for elementary education (nearly 50 per cent of the total outlay), while secondary and higher education received about half, namely, Rs 12.59 lakh. But as there is greater upgradation of primary schools to middle, with more children completing primary education, increasing resources for them may be needed in these levels as well.

Similarly, the inter-functional allocation of resources is also vital. Many components are in dire need of funds, as 90 per cent of the funds for primary education are being used for teachers' salaries, and building construction takes away a major portion of the rest of the share. It is difficult to curtail funds for Tamil Nadu's noon-meal and related welfare schemes, as already a number of children seem to suffer due to the resource crunch that has led to prioritising the most disadvantaged and needy among them to avail of such benefits. In this context, shifting the priorities for resource allocation would also be difficult.

It is in this regard that the government has been encouraging private contributions to primary education. At the household level, current expenditure on primary education per student in Tamil Nadu is only Rs 470, while the all-India figure is Rs 539, as 80 per cent of its elementary schools are managed directly by the state. In this context, as Chennai, Tirunelveli and Toothukudi have a major share of established private aided schools, there are suggestions that other districts may also be encouraged to establish private schools so as to reduce the state's burden. But this needs careful consideration in terms of not only quality but also certain gender concerns. For instance, the India Development Report [Parikh 1999] has shown that in terms of girls' education, government schools are a safer bet than the private fee-collecting schools, since among the 6-14 age children, the female-to-male ratio was close to 1 in government schools, while it was only 0.73 in private schools. This indicates parental preference for educating boys rather than girls when educational expenditure becomes higher. Hence the state must shoulder more responsibility both for quantity and quality rather than depend on private schooling that may adversely affect female education. Fortunately, private unaided schools, where the financial burden may be even higher on parents, form a very small percentage in Tamil Nadu, suggesting the effective control it wields against mushrooming of market-oriented and inefficient schools.

V Conclusion

Some critical issues and priorities for action have emerged in the course of discussion in this paper. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, a closer look with regard to the following concerns

Table 8: Intra-Sectoral Allocation of Resources in Education, 1992-98

| Sector | 8th Plan Outlay (in Rs lakh) | Per Cent per Sector |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Elementary education | 25,247 | 57.4 |
| Secondary and higher secondary | 12,585 | 28.6 |
| University | 2,150 | 4.9 |
| Adult and non-formal | 4,000 | 9.1 |
| Language development | 18 | 0.1 |
| Total outlay for education | 44,000 | 100 |

Source: 8th Five-Year Plan, Government of Tamil Nadu.

for policy and implementation may help to effectively achieve primary education for all girls.

– Elusive EFA goals are to be urgently met. Regarding literacy attainment, male-female disparities, considering both rural-urban and OC-SC/ST factors, should be reduced. Social and gender equity can be achieved only by creating better awareness of primary education among the disadvantaged and minority groups in every district.

– There is a need to bridge the gap between lower and upper primary schooling availability and access. Bridging the gap between primary and middle levels with special focus on the needs of girls will also be essential as more children complete primary education.

– The trend of increasing wastage needs to be curtailed, and repetition in primary classes needs proper attention. Timely tackling of discontinuation can help to curtail dropouts at all levels. Effectively implementing the Compulsory Elementary Education Act with due recognition of the special disadvantages of girls and their parents is urgent.

– Integrating gender perspectives in all functional areas is a must. The currently-used gender focus for increasing female enrolment should get sharper to ensure their retention and attainment. Some areas can be sensitising all teachers, and encouraging mothers' participation in PTAs and VECs. Tamil Nadu's local escort system for ST girls is commendable, and more of such innovations are welcome.

– Inadequate spending, at the present 3 per cent share of GDP, has to be rectified. In fact, the Kothari commission had recommended this even as early as the 1960s. [PW]

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Notes

- 1 Azariades and Drazen (1990) are considered to be the first to conclusively state this critical threshold for reaping tangible benefits from education. Sen (1999) and Sen and Dreze (1999) noted that education provides people with 'human capabilities', the power to reflect, make choices and seek a voice in society. Hanushek and Kunko (2000) proved that low levels of human capital go with poverty, and inefficient diffusion of knowledge hinders increasing productivity. A number of authors have also presented compelling justification for investing in girls' education [King 1990, Lockheed and Verspoor 1990]. Research in India has corroborated most of these findings [Bhatty 1998, Govinda 2002].
- 2 Some recent developments in this context are the 73rd and 74th amendments in the early 1990s that paved the way for decentralised management in many fields including primary education through panchayat raj institutions. Further, the 83rd in 1997 argued for education as a fundamental right, and the 93rd in 2001, with presidential assent in 2002, has made education a fundamental right of all children between the ages of 6 and 14. A nationwide campaign is calling for the fulfilment of it through formal schools under state responsibility.
- 3 See Radhakrishnan and Akila 1993 for and analysis of Tamil Nadu's literacy in the all-India context during the 1980s, and Radhakrishnan and Akila (2002) for a similar account in the 1990s.
- 4 Athreya and Chunkath (1996) have already shown that Tamil Nadu has a contiguous low literacy belt consisting of Dharmapuri, Periyar, Salem, South Arcot, and Tiruvannamalai. Its other major illiteracy belt is the contiguous area of Dindigul, Madurai, Thanjavur and Tiruchchirappalli.
- 5 Akila (2000) documents the socio-historical role of the interplay of caste and gender in determining the low educational status of women in Madras Presidency and later in Tamil Nadu.
- 6 As the NER is a proportion of the population of a particular age group enrolled at a specific level of schooling to the total population in that age group, it is more reliable than the GER, which does not consider age, and the age-specific enrolment ratio, which does not consider the level or class of enrolment. Secondly, while non-attendance and

discontinuation rates caution about the absence of students in schools, they are indicative of dropout at a later date.

- 7 This indicator refers to the percentage of ever-enrolled children who discontinued their studies at any time during the age of 6 to 14 years. It is therefore an average for an 8-year period, and only a rough estimate, which provides context to non-attendance, later leading often to dropout.
- 8 Operation Blackboard is one of the largest projects for improving school infrastructure. It basically has three main components, namely, the building component, teacher component and equipment component. Although the majority of funds under this scheme have gone into building construction and teacher appointments, it is still popularly known for its equipment component including provision of blackboards.
- 9 Data from the policy notes of the government during the 1990s shows that on average there are four teachers for primary schools, which generally have five classes. The government has been taking account of surplus posts in some schools and is using a transparent method of transferring teachers to needy schools. Even by the policy note of 2001-02, there are 7,987 surplus posts in panchayat union schools, and the number is higher in other types of schools.
- 10 Some interesting studies have focused on the ideal class size for students to benefit from schooling. Haq and Haq (1998) noted that students in a class of five will spend an estimated 90 per cent of their time on learning activity; in a class of 20 they will spend only 60 per cent of their time on learning; and in a class of 100, the learning time will further drop to just 12 per cent.

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