



EDUCATION FOR ALL - A PROGRESSIVE PATHWAY IN THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE OF INDEPENDENT TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Education and jobs focused on education have been significant issues in Tamil Nadu since the early Twentieth Century, which underscored the importance of the Justice Party and its quota scheme. The Madras Elementary Education Act was passed in 1920 making elementary education compulsory. Ever since the Justice Party came to power, it made elementary education free and compulsory. A demand for it had been made in the Non-Brahmin Manifesto of 1916. In fact, after Independence, Congress Chief Ministers fully embraced this initiative. During his tenure, K.Kamaraj implemented free education and the free noon meal programme. At a time when the annual Budget of the Madras State, prior to Linguistic Reorganization in 1956, had not exceeded Rs 100 crores, it was simply unfeasible to allocate funds for new school constructions, particularly in rural areas. The Mid-Day Meal started by K.Kamaraj, expanded by M.G. Ramachandran and promoted by M.Karunanidhi and J.Jayalalithaa boosted the free education in Tamil Nadu and thereby the scope of education for all has been ensured.



KEYWORDS: Education, Primary and Elementary Education, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme, K.Kamaraj, Bhaktavatsalam, M.G. Ramachandran, M.Karunanidhi, J. Jayalalithaa.

INTRODUCTION :

When the Constitution was first established, 'Education' was classified as a 'State' subject. The Congress Governments in the State after Independence took this responsibility seriously and adequately addressed the educational needs of the people. However, during the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977, the Indira Gandhi administration at the Centre amended the Constitution to place 'Education' under the Concurrent List.¹ While this move was perceived as benevolent by the ruling Congress Party, it posed a challenge to the principle of 'federalism', which is fundamental to Indian democracy.² This shift has, in fact, compromised the quality of education due to regional pressures on the Centre in the context of 'Coalition Era' politics, particularly since the 1990s.

In recent years, the Supreme Court has granted a quasi-Union List status to 'Education' by mandating nationwide entrance examinations, initially for engineering admissions (JEE-Main) and more recently for medical college entry through NEET.³ The Narendra Modi-led B.J.P.-N.D.A. Government has further advanced this narrative with the unilateral announcement of the 'New Education Policy' (N.E.P.) in 2020, claiming that 'Education' has always been part of the 'Union' List of the Constitution⁴, which is not the case even today. Meanwhile, the Centre has introduced a new initiative for establishing 'Institutes of Excellence' (IoE) aimed at enhancing existing institutions with an additional funding infusion of Rs 3,000 crore each, on a 50-50 cost-sharing basis.

While these initiatives are considered holistic in their approach, they have also attracted criticism, particularly in 'Dravidian' Tamil Nadu. This criticism stems from concerns that the Union of India, along with its agencies and the higher judiciary, is undermining the advantages of the reservation scheme for all groups except the S.C./S.T. Critics argued that under the IoE scheme, the substantial investments, similar to those in private professional colleges, would lead to increased tuition fees. This concern has yet to be addressed satisfactorily. The State Government, which initially appeared supportive, then seemed to be reconsidering its stance.

Consequently, the impoverished and rural students would inevitably be compelled to remain excluded, which was a concern shared by the A.I.A.D.M.K. Government, the D.M.K. Opposition, and nearly all regional parties in Tamil Nadu. The newly passed order of 7.5 percent quota for rural government school students admissions in the State, was accepted one.⁵ Vice-Chancellor Dr. M K Surappa's personal initiative and dedication to transform the esteemed Anna University, Chennai, into an institution of learning was faced significant scrutiny, partly due to the State's historical commitment to social justice.⁶

'Kula Kalvi Thittam' (Clan-Based Education System)

Congress Chief Minister Rajaji, was the first political leader to attempt to meet the educational aspirations of the post-Independence generation of parents for their children, ensuring that they did not remain illiterate. Rajaji was keen to implement his idea of a new elementary education policy based on Gandhi's ideas of a basic education.⁷ To maintain the initiative and simultaneously tackle the issue of insufficient classroom space for additional students, his Government launched the 'Modified Scheme of Elementary Education' (M. S.E.E.) in 1953.⁸

This scheme involved staggered class hours for students from the first to the fifth standard. The objective was to create more classrooms concurrently and eventually phase out the staggered system over time.⁹ Consequently, classes for the first and third standards were scheduled for the morning session, while the second and fourth standards were to be held in the post-lunch session within the same classroom. Only the fifth standard students would attend classes in both sessions. This was an innovative yet experimental scheme that could have been adjusted or discontinued later. However, it suffered from a lack of proper presentation and Rajaji's reluctance to confront what was fundamentally political criticism. It was more about political rivalry between E.V. Ramasami of D.K. and his former followers, now part of the D.M.K., who exploited Rajaji's Brahmin heritage as a tactic.¹⁰

Even in hindsight, Rajaji's initiative was the first among the schemes designed to provide education for all. In its eagerness to enroll a greater number of students and to prevent parents from withdrawing their children to assist in their work, the Government announced that students would attend classes in only one session and could continue to support their parents in their traditional occupation during the other session, thereby acquiring a specialized traditional skill as well. Periyar and other critics denounced it as '*Kula Kalvi Thittam*' or *Varnashrama Education Scheme*, or a clan-based education system.¹¹

They argued that while a carpenter's son would be relegated to an apprenticeship in his father's occupation during the non-class session, his Brahmin classmate would be gaining additional knowledge in the arts and sciences, thus gaining an advantage over others when it came to higher education and employment opportunities a decade or more later. Even more concerning was the likelihood that a carpenter's son would remain a carpenter with only basic literacy, rather than being equipped, both physically and mentally, to compete for admission to higher education and for white-collar positions. There was indeed some validity to this argument.

The Government's objectives would have been better served if Rajaji had approached the defense of the scheme with more finesse and patience, acknowledging the State's limitations in constructing additional classrooms, and suggesting that parents could allow their children to engage in alternative activities during non-class hours. Furthermore, he did not effectively communicate that his initiative was merely a temporary solution, expected to last a few years until more schools and classrooms could be established. Frustrated by what he perceived as unwarranted criticism, Rajaji,

during a public meeting in the Chennai suburb of Thiruvanmiyur sarcastically referred to it as '*Kula Kalvi Thittam*'. However, the sarcasm did not resonate, although his 'admission' was noted.

Subsequently, the D.M.K. Government introduced classroom-based 'vocational education' as an 'optional stream' at the higher secondary level, which represented an enhancement of the Rajaji scheme that had enjoyed popularity until the allure of engineering education captivated both parents and students, coinciding with the onset of the Economic Reforms era. The parental generation had reaped the benefits of Kamaraj's free education and meal schemes, and they aspired for their children to ascend the next rung on the aspirational ladder - and justifiably so - but they desired this advancement to occur swiftly.

As Chief Minister, Kamaraj made significant strides in increasing funding for school education. However, this progress did not occur instantaneously, contrary to what Rajaji's critics might have believed. With a bit of diplomacy, Rajaji could have extended his tenure to secure the necessary resources, but at that time, Kamaraj held the advantage. The key distinction was that Kamaraj instilled a sense of progress among the people, as they perceived that more classrooms were constructed between academic years, often with contributions from the community, both financially and materially. Even in some urban areas, the newly built classrooms sometimes had thatched roofs; nevertheless, for the average citizen, the education of their children was paramount, even if it meant learning beneath a tree. Kamaraj fulfilled those expectations.

During this period, classes were also held under trees while local masons were concurrently constructing new classrooms within the same campus. This practice continued until the early sixties, during which Rajaji's tiered classes persisted. Nonetheless, the Kamaraj initiative also encouraged land donations for new school buildings, similar to Vinoba Bhave's 'Bhoodan Movement' that was taking place nationally around the same time. With his approach that resonated with the common man and his straightforward communication, Kamaraj transformed his free education initiative into a 'people's movement.' Rajaji had the potential to achieve this as well, but he did not. In retrospect, Rajaji's initiative remained one of the earliest schemes that Tamil Nadu had developed, embodying the 'Welfare State' model.

Drawing from his own childhood experiences, as well as the experiences of rural children from impoverished families he met during his extensive travels throughout the State, Kamaraj implemented free elementary education.¹² To prevent poor families from keeping their children out of school-since having more hands to work was crucial for earning-he also established a free meal scheme, utilizing resources provided through an American CARE aid initiative.¹³ This ensured that families did not need to provide for that one meal for their child, which was a fortunate opportunity for an average child in such circumstances. The successful operation of this scheme resulted in a significant number of students passing their Eleventh Standard 'Secondary School Leaving Certificate' (S.S.L.C.) examinations (which replaced the current Plus-Two) in the following decade. The total number of colleges in 1953 - 1954 were only 53 but by the end of 1962-1963 these colleges rose to 63.¹⁴

PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION

As Chief Minister, M.G.Ramachandran reinstated the free meal initiative that Kamaraj had originally launched, which had ultimately ceased to function over time. The scheme's downfall was attributed to its funding structure, which relied on community involvement and donations that failed to materialize during the peak of food shortages in the early to mid-sixties. This period also coincided with the Congress Government's declining popularity in the State, as highlighted by a resurgent D.M.K., both within the State Legislature and beyond. The emotional connection of the people with the post-Independence Government had significantly diminished, if not completely disappeared. Consequently, their financial contributions and support for school infrastructure and the noon meal scheme dwindled sooner rather than later.

Reflecting on past experiences, M.G.R. launched his Midday Nutritious Meal Scheme as a government-funded initiative, ensuring it was not hindered by a lack of financial resources.¹⁵ He initiated the scheme with an annual budget allocation of Rs. 133 crores. This strategy had guaranteed the scheme's uninterrupted operation since its inception on 1st July 1982, benefiting 60 lakh individuals

in rural areas.¹⁶ On the eve of the start of the scheme, M.G.Ramachandran had opined that this scheme was an outcome of his experience of extreme starvation at an age when he knew only to cry when he was hungry.¹⁷ The successful introduction of Tamil Nadu's Nutritious Meal Scheme prompted the creation of National Programme of Nutritious Support to primary education popularly known as Mid-Day Meal Scheme on 15th August 1995. Under this programme the Union Human Resource Development Ministry supplied free food grains to primary school children at the rate of 100 gram per child for ten months in a year.¹⁸ Moreover, every subsequent government, including that of the opposing M. Karunanidhi, had expanded the scheme on 1st June 1998 by incorporating additional nutritious items such as boiled eggs and fruits.¹⁹ Further, J. Jayalithaa brought soya food, potatoes and other cereals which would ensure protein strength to the children enrolled in Noon Meal Scheme.²⁰ Nevertheless, upon its initial rollout, the M.G.Ramachandran scheme faced considerable criticism from economists who argued that it was a populist misallocation of limited funds, diverting them from essential development projects. However, when the World Bank praised the initiative and recommended it to other developing nations, it received widespread acclaim.²¹

In addition to providing free education and midday meals, the Kamaraj Government also implemented the distribution of free school books and uniforms, the latter of which necessitated strict adherence to ensure that the socio-economic divide did not manifest even at such a young age.²² However, these initiatives presented a new challenge for the Government, which inherited the situation from the Kamaraj era. An increasing number of students enrolled and graduated from the State's schools, yet their graduation rates were not complemented by an adequate number of colleges and available seats, even for undergraduate studies in the fields of arts, sciences, and commerce.

Kamaraj's successor, Chief Minister M Bhaktavatsalam, also affiliated with the Congress Party, began to experience the repercussions when the first batch of beneficiaries from the Kamaraj Era started passing out from school.²³ In a manner reminiscent of Kamaraj's innovative approach, Bhaktavatsalam encouraged temple administrations throughout the State to establish schools and, more importantly, colleges.²⁴ The fact that the distant Justice Party administration had placed Hindu temples under government oversight proved advantageous.²⁵ The succeeding D.M.K. Government commenced the establishment of an increasing number of arts and sciences colleges, particularly offering undergraduate programmes, in semi-urban areas.²⁶

All of this was merely a component of the problem-solving process. In the following decade, the enthusiasm for collegiate education was supplanted by a greater demand for professional education. This created a challenge for the Chief Minister, M.G.Ramachandran. He instinctively recognized the necessary actions and sought to provide some guidance for this need. Consequently, his Government authorized private initiatives in professional education, particularly in high-cost fields such as medicine and engineering. The Government initially focused on private trusts and charities, but eventually extended this opportunity to emerging 'Education Entrepreneurs'.

The privatization of higher education initiated by M.G.Ramachandran functioned relatively effectively for a time, until the emergence of the post-M.G.Ramachandran Economic Reforms Era.²⁷ This was the period when an increasing number of jobs became available in the I.T. and related sectors. There was a concurrent demand for a significantly larger number of colleges, particularly in engineering disciplines. Few considered whether there would be sufficient job opportunities for all engineering graduates. Additionally, many parents did not reflect on their children's inherent capabilities to meet the challenges of professional education, nor their own aptitudes and preferences. For them, rote learning and private tutoring seemed sufficient. It was also during this time that private colleges began to exploit parents financially. M.G.Ramachandran could not be held accountable for this situation, as opposed to neighbouring states like Kerala, where the literacy rate was high but stagnant for an extended period, in Tamil Nadu, the ambitious youth yearned for higher education even more fervently.

The issue is that even in the twenty-first century, Tamil Nadu remained entrenched in the post-Independence Twentieth Century regarding the responsibilities of the State. Unrecognized by Twenty-First Century India, Tamil Nadu continues to uphold the now obsolete 'Welfare State' model. Successive Dravidian administrations persist in their belief that it is their inherent duty to empower the people,

especially the impoverished and vulnerable, at every opportunity. Consequently, while they are rapidly advancing the market economy model to elevate industrialization in the State to modern standards—thereby generating jobs and family incomes—the State has not relinquished its obligation to provide food and education for its citizens.

To conclude, since Kamaraj's tenure as Chief Minister, successive Governments have firmly believed that if it was necessary to feed students to keep them in school, they would allocate resources for both education and midday meals. The fundamental aim was to enable these individuals to support themselves and their future generations, guiding them as they ascend the aspirational ladder during the prolonged interim. This approach encompassed a variety of options, and Tamil Nadu has experimented with several of them throughout the post-Reforms period, ultimately adopting what can be termed the 'Consensus Model'—only to revert to the foundational 'Welfare State' model.

END NOTES

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