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A “kalagam” in education

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All children in Tamil Nadu schools today happily pronounce a tough Tamil expression – *samacheer kalvi*, literally meaning equal and good education.

This feat has been achieved thanks to the kazhagamaisation of school education. Kazhagam, an archaic Tamil word, means forum or association and most Tamil political parties are kazhagams. That’s the K in DMK, AIADMK, PMK, et al. Mispronunciation of the word kazhagam by non-Tamils can lead to piquant situations. Kalagam means revolt. Kalangam means blemish. And mispronunciation of Tamil names by north Indian TV anchors are commonplace. For the last 72 hours, I have been hearing Maaran’s name sounding as a hybrid between maarun and moron.

Samacheer kalvi could be another tongue twister for the TV anchors but the very issue is not sensational enough for 24X7 whipping and hence spared.

Unfit for haranguing on TV, but *samacheer kalvi* is a burning and serious issue in Tamil Nadu today. It has landed millions of Tamil children in a strange state of ecstasy, their parents in despair, and teachers in confusion, as the schools that reopened a month ago officially have no textbooks or syllabus yet. All thanks to *samacheer kalvi* and the kazhagamaisation of education.

Until the 1960s, education in Tamil Nadu was largely uniform and equal, with private and government schools teaching the same syllabus mostly through the Tamil medium. After the DMK came to power, more English medium schools were started by the private sector. In the 1980s, MGR's AIADMK encouraged the mushrooming of 'nursery' schools and matriculation schools. And now, Tamil Nadu has four streams of school education – matriculation, state board, Anglo-Indian and oriental! Not to mention the Centre-sponsored CBSE too!

With a majority of the private schools choosing the matriculation system and the government schools favouring the state board, a sharp class and caste division of the society through schools has emerged. While poor and mainly Dalit children were allowed to rot in government schools where teachers, and not students, are the largest absentees, the economically better-off children are turned into mark-producing machines in private schools.

Instances of government school teachers coming drunk to school and suicides of students in private mark-making factories are commonplace. A survey revealed that only 20% of school toppers could pass a math test while in college!

A small group of educationists lobbied with the previous DMK government to bring about uniformity in school education. Karunanidhi obliged with a committee headed by former vice-chancellor Muthukumar, known for his scholarship and integrity, rare among TN's vice-chancellors.

Of the dozen recommendations by the committee, Karunanidhi, in his wisdom, implemented only one: to write a common syllabus. As the new books were getting printed, the elections took place. Ayya lost, Amma won, and found to her shock that the Tamil language textbooks carried articles on and by Karunanidhi, and even poems by Kanimozhi!

Amma threw the baby out with the bathwater. All subject books, costing nearly Rs200 crores, were dumped and a reprinting of the old textbooks ordered.

The Samacheer Kalvi Act was amended and the whole issue went to the highest court,

which ordered a scrutiny of the textbooks. Amma formed a 'yes-ma' committee of dubious credentials. A non-Tamil automobile spare parts trader running a school and another a school owner charged with cheating a teacher of her salary were members. The committee said yes to Amma's reforms.

But with courts yet to pronounce the final verdict, the students are making merry. Teachers are experimenting running their classes without textbooks, asking students to sing, dance, debate current affairs, and learn through experience.

How I wish this becomes the new and permanent syllabus!

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