

## **Educating future citizens: the introduction of compulsory education in the Madras Presidency in the 1920s and 1930s.**

The 1920 Madras Elementary Education Act attempted to reorganise educational provision within the Madras Presidency and provide opportunities for local authorities to introduce compulsory education if they could raise the funds and enthusiasm from the voters in their areas. This paper considers the political and administrative debates surrounding the Madras Elementary Education Act 1920. In particular it considers the motivating ideas behind this, particularly the ways in which children were constructed as future citizens and as learners. Using a caste study of the Madras Municipal Corporation, it will consider how the idea of compulsory education as free and equal functioned in practice, with an emphasis on funding, on enforcement and on how these new provisions reinforced educational differences between communities. The aim in writing is to balance the focus on political debates, educational policy, policy implementation and a desire to situate the schoolchild at the centre of the educational process.

The focus is the introduction of compulsory education in the Madras Presidency in the interwar years. This is not a claim to Tamil or indeed Madras exceptionalism, but rather to take Madras as a case study and consider what's happening at the Presidency or provincial level, moving away from a Delhi-centric, all-India perspective to be rooted in the politics of one locality. This is part of a wider decision to move away from a focus on Bengal or Delhi as representative of the entire subcontinent – in Chris Bayly's words 'the provincialise Bengal.'<sup>1</sup> The other crucial overarching context is that of dyarchy. My desire is not to downplay the obvious democratic limitations of the 1919 constitutional reforms, but to prioritise how the Indians who chose to participate in government used the limited opportunities available to carry out a variety of innovative social justice and educational reforms, and in doing so reformulated the relationship between the state, family and the child as future citizen. In other words, when it came to education in Madras the state was in practice Indian in character and in personnel. So the legislation or decision to implement compulsory education was discussed by Indians in the provincial legislature and municipal council, it was enforced in departments led and staffed by Indians (Department of Public Instruction, Education Dept) and the authority figures in the classroom and enforcing compulsion were Indian. Consequently many of the radical ideas which emerged, and conversely, many of the social hierarchies which were maintained, were a result of this constitutional change, rather than either the colonial context and the growing nationalist movement, although both had a part to play. In many ways this paper builds on the work of Stephen Legg and others to centre the constitution as a moment of radical change in education policy.<sup>2</sup>

The Madras Elementary Education Act received assent in November 1920, its primary aim being to introduce a 'central co-ordinating authority' at local level in the form of the District Educational Councils, which would serve as regulatory

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<sup>1</sup> Bayly

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Legg, Arvind etc ?

bodies. These were intended to double educational provision in ten years, with the power to decide local education grants and raise additional local taxation as well as to supervise schools directly. Interestingly, this was a colonial act, modelled on the English Education Act 1902 (Balfour Act) rather than Gokhale's all-India Elementary Act of 1911 but explicitly formulated not to embarrass or curb the future *Indian* Minister of Education who would be responsible when the Act came into force on 1 April 1921 under the new constitutional arrangements, so after dyarchy had been enacted. @QUOTE? One of the most important innovations of the Education Act was the possibility of compulsory education, dealt with in Chapter Five, Clauses 44-52. Under Clause 44, compulsion could be introduced at a meeting of the Local Authority expressly convened for the purpose, and specified according to specific categories of religion and sex. Importantly, this meant the focus was at the level of the municipality, the city council and not at Presidency or all-India level. In order to gain government consent (Clause 45) the local board had to submit to the legislative assembly a declaration of 'its readiness to levy tax' at 'such rates as may be necessary to meet the expenditure involved' and had to guarantee to provide 'sufficient' school places to meet demand. The aim of this was explicitly 'to banish illiteracy from the land' through a basic education.<sup>3</sup> The Act allowed for exemptions to compulsion under Clause 50 for children with no school within one mile from their residence; children suffering from infirmity; children receiving instruction at home which was 'declared to be satisfactory to the prescribed officer'; and finally, and I'd argue most notably, children contributing to the household income exclusions are important. This was to be monitored by Attendance Committees (Clause 51) and ultimately magistrates were expected to enforce school attendance, parents were liable for a Rs 5 fine rising to Rs 50 after more than two offences.<sup>4</sup> Two points are significant here, firstly the state did not intend to force parents to send their children to school and there was a general consensus that 'a good deal of coaxing should proceed' any penal action, with exemptions for working children.<sup>5</sup> However once that relationship had been established, they intended to maintain and pursue it, so the aim was not to bring new children in to the school system but to retain enrolled pupils for longer than 2 years. Secondly, the rhetoric of compulsion indicated a new departure, emphasising that the normative place for childhood learning was within school and the school should be under the control of the state, so that the state decided what constitutes legitimate education.

By 1925 18 mufassal municipalities in the Madras Presidency had introduced some form of compulsion including Chingleput, Conjeeveram and Vellore.<sup>6</sup> The Madras City Corporation forms the basis of our analysis. It ran a scheme of compulsory education in the city between 1925 and 1943 and most of the evidence comes from discussions in the Corporation chamber between local councillors.<sup>7</sup> The providers of education were diverse - in 1924 approximately 35% of the schools in the city were directly managed by the Corporation. A small number were managed by the provincial government, but the vast majority were administered by aided agencies, funded under the Grants-in-Aid provision, these were both mission and non-mission. As a result of the 1920 Act all came under the broad oversight of the

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<sup>3</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, File 2941. Minute of Dissent 28/5/1920

<sup>4</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, file 2941. Select Committee 21/7/1920

<sup>5</sup> TNSAL: MLA Debates 15/11/1921 p.1387

<sup>6</sup> TNSA: GO1951 LE 8/6/1925

<sup>7</sup> Madras Corporation Archives (MCA): Proceedings 4/6/1943 p.4, Tamil Nadu State Archives (TNSA): GO1437 Law & Education (LE) 10/10/1942

Corporation-led District Educational Council.<sup>8</sup> By 1941, 53% of children in the city (46,000) were educated in the Corporation's 140 elementary schools.<sup>9</sup>

The reasons for compulsory education and the conceptual framing of the scheme are particularly important. The Draft Scheme of Free and Compulsory Education for Boys and Girls in the City of Madras was introduced on 28 March 1924 at a Special Meeting of the Corporation by the so-called 'Gokhale of the presidency' T. Varadarajulu Naidu, Justice Party Chairman of the Education Committee.<sup>10</sup> The scheme was initiated in response to the newly recognised 'duty' of the Corporation to impart elementary education to its citizens following the 1920 Education Act mentioned earlier and the 1921 census, which revealed that 'half the males and nearly five-sixths of the females' in the city failed to reach even basic literacy levels.<sup>11</sup> In his opening speech, Varadarajulu Naidu argued that the scheme was founded on 'the now well-accepted principle of the civilised world, that no child should be allowed to grow in ignorance,' combined with the principles of 'our ancient law-givers' such as the Hindu Dharma Shastra, and the example of the other provinces in British India. The aim was to ensure children gained a 'workable knowledge of the three Rs' – reading, writing and arithmetic - in the vernacular and a civic education, allowing them to work more effectively and participate intelligently in civic and political life as adults'.<sup>12</sup> Varadarajulu Naidu 'vigorously pleaded' that 'throughout the civilised world the education of children is a primary duty of the State and the local bodies,' arguing that compulsory schooling was not 'an ideal' but 'a necessity' which would affect 'the whole of our future *as a nation*' [my italics].<sup>13</sup> The measure was seconded by lawyer Dr S. Swaminathan who argued that the 'opportunity to learn the three Rs' was a 'birth-right' or 'elementary right' because 'the boys and girls of today are the citizens of tomorrow'.<sup>14</sup>

A few elements of the debate are worth noting. Most importantly, there was some disquiet expressed at the notion of 'compelling' rather than 'persuading' parents to send their children to school.<sup>15</sup> However the agreement to introduce compulsory education was almost unanimous across all the political parties and group representatives, with only minor disagreements on the practicalities of implementation. This contrasts with the significant debate witnessed as all-India level, as demonstrated by Parimala Rao.<sup>17</sup> There was such widespread public support that even when faced with severe financial difficulties in 1930, in their speeches the Councillors had to constantly reaffirm their commitment to the principle of universal education, accessible to all free of charge.<sup>18</sup> The support was based firstly on a comparative argument, that compulsory education was necessary to ensure Madras' position 'in the civilizational stream'.<sup>19</sup> The councillors emphasised the intellectual heritage and global context of the scheme, arguing that the education provided to children there should be equal to the education provided

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<sup>8</sup> TNSA: GO2268 LE 9/12/1926

<sup>9</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/11/1941 p.9

<sup>10</sup> MCA: Proceedings 31/5/1932 p.10. Gokhale (1866-1915) was a moderate leader of the INC, famous for his attempt to introduce compulsory elementary education at an all-India level in 1911.

<sup>11</sup> TNSA:GO951 LE 8/6/1925

<sup>12</sup> TNSA: GO951 LE 8/6/1925 p.3

<sup>13</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.477, 482, Short Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.143

<sup>14</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.477

<sup>15</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 pp.492-4

<sup>17</sup> Rao 'Compulsory Education' in Rao, Parimala V (ed.) *New Perspectives in the History of Indian Education* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014) p.175

<sup>18</sup> MCA: Proceedings 20/5/1930

<sup>19</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 pp. 488, 491, 495

in (specifically) Britain, Japan and the Philippines to enable 'our motherland to take her rightful place among the nations.'<sup>20</sup> It would also maintain Madras as a 'pioneer' 'ahead of many other cities in India'.<sup>22</sup> Local pride was an important factor, and compulsory education was designed to bolster Madras' position in the 'eye of the civilised world and in the eye of the brother Corporations'<sup>23</sup>.

Second was the belief that 'primary education is essential for carrying on our civic life'<sup>25</sup> and was important for 'the advancement of the city.'<sup>26</sup> The investment in education was explicitly intended to reduce the budget requirements in other areas, and increase the efficiency of both public health and sanitation measures by disciplining the future citizens into the normative practices of civil society and a better understanding of municipal regulations.<sup>28</sup>

Third was a notion of children's rights. Concepts such as the 'birth right of every civilised child' or 'fighting for rights' for children was mentioned frequently in the debates, across the political spectrum.<sup>29</sup> This shows how these middle class, well-educated councillors were really engaged in transnational networks of intellectual exchange and were very aware of emerging child rights discourses in Geneva and the League of Nations with the 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child. A number of councillors were engaged in global pedagogical networks, such as the New Education movement, which encouraged progressive approaches to pedagogy within the classroom. Others were also engaged in the discussions around child-saving, particularly the campaign to end the *devadasi* system of temple prostitution and the suppression of the immoral traffic of girls and women for prostitution. Many of the voices in favour of compulsory education in Madras City, such as councillor Muthulakshmi Reddi, also participated in these other campaigns. The willingness and ability to deploy the concept of the inalienable and universal rights of the child became an important aspect of pushing through reform

Finally, support was given for compulsory education on the basis that 'the boys and girls of today are the citizens of tomorrow' who are 'entrusted to our care'.<sup>30</sup> Now this rhetoric was introduced in the debates in 1924 although it became particularly prominent after 1935, probably reflecting the expansion of the franchise with the Government of India Act of that year. It was constantly repeated that the Corporation was responsible for 'educating the mind of the child of today and making him the citizen of tomorrow'<sup>31</sup> and producing 'self-respecting citizens' who would 'build the future nation'<sup>32</sup>. This was directly linked to democratic participation: 'they are the future voters of the city. We must literate them in order that they may exercise the franchise properly when they grow up.'<sup>33</sup>

This focus on citizenship was intended to have a practical impact on the content of schooling. It was to be reinforced in the space of the classroom, for example a

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<sup>20</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 pp. 476, 488

<sup>22</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p. 482,485; 17/2/1931 p.25; 3/3/1931 p.27.

<sup>23</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p490, 485. See also B. Cohen & S. Ganguly 'Introduction: Regions and Regionalism in India' *India Review* 13, 4 (2014)

<sup>25</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.499

<sup>26</sup> MCA: Proceedings 18/3/1935 pp. 19, 20

<sup>28</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.484

<sup>29</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p490, 485

<sup>30</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1924 p.477

<sup>31</sup> MCA: Proceedings 27/9/1938 p.23

<sup>32</sup> MCA: Proceedings 19/11/1935 p.60

<sup>33</sup> MCA: Proceedings 30/3/1938 p.6

resolution was passed in 1936 to hang a portrait of Gandhi 'in a conspicuous place' in all educational institutions to encourage the 'moral elevation and mental enlargement' of 'our future citizens'.<sup>34</sup> This received support across the chamber specifically because it would 'develop in growing children patriotism and other moral virtues. They will thereby become valuable citizens and enhance the country's position and prestige', enabling the functioning of democratic institutions and facilitating civic governance.<sup>35</sup> It is not entirely clear *how* they thought a portrait of Gandhi was intended to do all this, but it shows the educational aims and the conflicted nature of citizenship, which encompassed both ideas of belonging to the future nation state and ideas of individual rights and responsibilities. Good citizenship was to be primarily achieved through ensuring basic literacy and numeracy for the population, thereby facilitating good governance on the basis that literate citizens were more likely to understand and follow government guidelines. But the Corporation textbooks were intended to go further than that, and 'imbibe' in children the ideals that would 'enable' them to become 'proper, honest and good citizens', disciplining them into the correct social positioning of 'nationalism, patriotism, manhood and womanhood'.<sup>36</sup> This emphasised the intellectual plasticity of the child and their deference to the authority of teachers, which made them more easily moulded into correct patterns of behaviour. It also reflected wider debates on the nature and constraints of masculinity and femininity within the nationalist movement.<sup>37</sup> A later discussion in 1937 around the introduction of a standardised citizenship curriculum highlighted both the centrality of citizenship education in the minds of the city councillors and the practical complexities around teaching children values and loyalties. The suggestion was opposed by Mrs Ammu Swaminathan, then the leader of the Education Committee, who argued textbooks should not be standardised across the city, but should be refreshed every three years to retain the interest of both teachers and pupils.<sup>38</sup> In her words, the textbooks should be written 'from the point of view of the children being poor, the point of view that the children are going to be our future citizens and the point of view of making education interesting for children.'<sup>39</sup> This quotation is particularly interesting because Mrs Ammu Swaminathan is recognising that children are future citizens, as adult-in-the-making but she is also considering that the children's socio-economic circumstances affected educational opportunity and that education needed to be overtly relevant to them. Additionally, she has an idea of the child actively engaging with the content of education, a recognition of the child as learner as well as an object to be acted upon. This is a quite noteworthy development in pedagogical terms.

In summary then, underpinning the introduction of compulsory education was a discourse of rights and the duty of the modern state to provide opportunities for the child, in the context of national development where the child is a future adult. Education was to be universal, compulsory, free and equal and this contributed to a new normative characterisation of the child as at school. At the same it was used to demonstrate the progressive modernity of the Indian state actors and local civil society who supported it, it provided another space to contest colonial notions of

<sup>34</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1/12/1936 p.36

<sup>35</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1/12/1936 p.37

<sup>36</sup> MCA: Proceedings 7/7/1937 pp.24, 32

<sup>37</sup> M. Sinha, 'Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and nationalism in late-colonial India.' *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 623-644.

<sup>38</sup> MCA: Proceedings 7/7/1937 p.27-28

<sup>39</sup> MCA: Proceedings 7/7/1937 p.26

## Indian inferiority.

This idea of the child is worthy of further investigation. Compulsory education is based on the idea of the universal child, that all school-age children should have equal access to educational institutions, that children were different from adults, and that the normative place for the modern childhoods and modern children was the school, explicitly devaluing any other skills the child might obtain at other sites of learning. But what is a child? It was in the discussions over details that the broad concepts were tested. There were extensive debates in the Legislative Council surrounding the Education Act over the numerical boundaries of 'school-age', the debates becoming so contested that ultimate authority was given to the British as arbitrator, in other words the schoolchild was defined by 'such age as the Governor-in-Council [the British Governor] may prescribe in respect of children of either sex in any local area of any particular community.'<sup>40</sup> In Madras City, for example, compulsion was enforced for boys aged between six and eleven years, Muslim boys aged between eight and thirteen years and girls aged between five and ten years.<sup>41</sup> This was based on the supposition that children, or their parents, could define their own ages with accuracy, a difficult assumption given the lack of birth registration.<sup>42</sup> This made it hard to enforce but also contributed to the formation of what were in essence 'educational communities' set against a normative figure of the 'universal' or 'normal' child, who in Madras city was Tamil-speaking, male, Hindu, able-bodied, affluent and middle or upper caste.

In practice, children were not only 'children' delimited by an unstable boundary of age but were and are differentiated by a whole range of intersectional social identities which influenced their access to education and influenced educational provision. Sex influenced access to schooling and in most council areas such as Conjeeveram or Saidapet where compulsory education was introduced, there was no provision for girls. Indeed Erode municipal council requested additional government funding, matched at 125% of the Education Tax when they introduced compulsory education in 1922 because they were the first area in the Presidency to advocate compulsion for both sexes, although the proposals still contained a specific exemption for Muslim girls.<sup>43</sup> The Chairman of the Erode Municipal Council claimed this demonstrated that Erode was 'educationally already much advanced than the great majority of municipalities' and that the proposed financial burden which was 'light compared with the great step forward that the municipality will be taking.'<sup>44</sup> It was important too this girls education was always discussed in terms of girls schools and a female specific curriculum - despite there were consistently more girls in mixed schools than in single-sex schools.<sup>45</sup> There were linguistic barriers, and here are many more opportunities for Tamil speakers than for Telegu speakers (despite being about 30% school-age population in Madras City), so education might be compulsory but there was no schools to attend, and very few Telegu language teachers.<sup>46</sup> The emphasis on teaching in vernacular was strengthened in the 1930s when the Congress party attempted to introduce Hindi

<sup>40</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, file 2941. Madras Elementary Education Act 1920 Chapter 1, section xiii.

<sup>41</sup> TNSA: GO1951 LE 8/6/1925

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Alborn, 'Age and Empire in the Indian Census, 1871-1931' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxx:1 (Summer 1999) pp.61-89

<sup>43</sup> TNSA:GO1193 LE 7/10/1922 Memo 8/7/1922

<sup>44</sup> TNSA: GO1193 LE 7/10/1922

<sup>45</sup> NLS: IP/25/PJ.3 DPI 1919-20

<sup>46</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1/4/1931; MCA: Proceedings 7/9/1931 p38, 18/11/1939 pp.15-18, MCA: Proceedings 7/9/1931 p.39

into secondary schools. Opposition to this - Tamil language campaigner T.S. Nataraja Pillai, for example, argued that it was ‘positively sinful’ to introduce a language with no emotional or practical connections for the children, became a key moment in the formation of the Dravidian nationalist movement, and the protection of the Tamil language became central to cultural nationalism in the Presidency.<sup>47</sup>

Muslims were assumed to be a distinct educational community within the Presidency, particularly because their focus on religious education and training in the Qur’an before in madrassas or at home meant that they were often older before they began their secular education. This intersected with the widespread colonial belief that Muslims needed distinct educational provision on account of the ‘educational backwardness’ of the community.<sup>48</sup> This focus on exclusive Muslim education ignored the interventions by Muslims representatives that in the Madras context where there was no such thing as a watertight community, because Muslims could be Tamil, Telegu and Urdu speakers and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, so religion was only *one* of many shared identities.<sup>49</sup> Muslim girls were regarded as a specific subcategory, often formally exempt from compulsion. At the same time, in Madras city more time was spent by the councillors discussing Muslim girls than any other group, not in terms of their education but in their transport to school and whether uptake justified the expense of bullock carts and guardians to maintain purdah restrictions.<sup>50</sup> Children were assumed to be able-bodied, with an exemption for children with disability, and of course, no provision for those suffering from infirmity to receive any form of education.

And finally caste provision was monitored intensively at a Presidency level, with many initiatives aimed at encouraging lower caste and Dalit education. Most of these initiatives encouraged segregated institutions often run by the Labour Dept, which had specific responsibility for the uplift of the Dalit community in the Madras Presidency.<sup>51</sup> But at the level of the municipality, ie Madras City, while there is full recognition for segregated education on the basis of sex, religion and language there was an absolute refusal from councillors from all parties - Congress, Justice, and later Self-Respect Movement to discuss the educational implications of untouchability and separate provision for Dalits, on the basis that ‘Adi-Dravida boys are allowed admission into any schools’ and would not benefit from separate caste institutions.<sup>52</sup> This inclusion of lower castes into mainstream Hindu schools was a notable feature of the Madrasi approach, and included the threat the Grant-in-Aid money would be withdrawn if the schools pursued segregation on the basis of caste.

contrast, there was a particular category which emerged in Madras City in relation to compulsory education, and that was ‘the poor child’. The councillors agreed that Corporation-run schools should be only ‘for the sake of the poor’, positioning the Corporation as having unique responsibility for the poor child.<sup>53</sup> In Sarada

<sup>47</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1/12/1931 pp. 33-35, 4/12/1934 p.47, 8/10/1935 pp.47, 54, 31/8/1937 pp.55-6 For a wider discussion of Dravidian nationalism and language politics see S. Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Development in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (Berkeley: CUP, 1997); AR Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006) p.153

<sup>48</sup> Sanjay Seth

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth McPherson, *‘How best do we survive?’ A Modern Political History of the Tamil Muslims*, (London: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>50</sup> MCA: Proceedings 16/4/1929, 1/4/1931 pp.46-49, 12/2/1932 pp.26-29

<sup>51</sup> NLS: IP/25/PJ.3 DPI Reports, TNSA: GO329 Home (Education) 17/03/1919, GO886 Home (Education) 07/08/1920, GO28 LE 06/01/1922

<sup>52</sup> MCA: Proceedings 16/4/1928

<sup>53</sup> MCA: Proceedings 13/10/1924 p.235, 8/12/1924 p.61, 13/11/1931, 14/5/1925 p.184, 30/3/1938 p.18,

Balagopalan's terms the poor child became the particular target of the state's educational benevolence.<sup>54</sup> This can be seen in the context of wider paternalistic improvement schemes for slum areas; including housing improvements and bathing fountains, but the emphasis on poor children seems linked to their emerging value as future contributors and citizens to the modern nation state.<sup>55</sup> The Madras Corporation was committed to *free* education for all children in the compulsory area, so that they are 'placed on a footing of equality as regards facilities and opportunities for education'<sup>56</sup>. That seems straightforward and very modern in claim at least, however it appears that in practice, the responsibility to provide free education for 'poor children' was strictly defined to the provision of a building and a teacher, both of varying quality. Additional resolutions to provide free books or clothes for those designated 'poor' were not successful, even when some teachers refused to accept pupils without equipment.<sup>57</sup> In 1937 Labour leader C. Basudev argued that 90% of the 35,000 Corporation school pupils were 'children of the poorest of the poor in the city' and that an estimated 95% of parents could not 'afford to give them good clothing and the necessary books and slates' thereby preventing their attendance.<sup>59</sup> Across a number of debates it was recognised that these 'little urchins' had 'poverty... written on their faces' and struggled to find even 'the barest minimum of clothing', causing disquiet to their wealthier peers.<sup>60</sup> The lack of adequate resources, particularly textbooks, increased inequality within the classroom and had a disastrous impact on homework which was recognised as 'the most fruitful cause of irregular attendance'.<sup>61</sup> These difficulties were raised on an almost annual basis, but were consistently ignored. On the other hand, there was a recognition that the state should provide the basic nutrition necessary for learning and consistent, and Madras City was a frontrunner in the provision of free school meals to poor children in the city.<sup>62</sup>

The curriculum followed in the Corporation schools prioritised basic literacy and numeracy which was judged necessary 'for all children' but particularly so that the 'labouring classes and the menial workers may do this work whatever be their own sphere of life with more intelligence [and] with more enthusiasm'.<sup>63</sup> This was repeated in 1925 in a resolution that 'besides the three Rs the further curriculum of studies ought not to be maintained in all schools in the City *but the same vary according to the class of children attending the school* [my italics]'.<sup>64</sup> When other subjects were taught, they were largely vocational, intended to provide an alternative source of income. Fifteen years after the institution of compulsory education, in 1939, the councillors continued to proclaim that were the 'representatives of the poor,' and were still committed to the ideal that free education should be available to all children and that it was the responsibility of the

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18/11/1939 p.39

<sup>54</sup> Sarada Balagopalan, *Inhabiting Childhood: children, labour and schooling in postcolonial India*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014)

<sup>55</sup> MCA: Proceedings 13/11/1931

<sup>56</sup> MCA: Proceedings 14/5/1925 p.184, 30/3/1938 p.18

<sup>57</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/10/1938 p.40

<sup>59</sup> MCA: Proceedings 31/3/1937 p.113

<sup>60</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1939 p.35

<sup>61</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/10/1938 p.38

<sup>62</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/2/1931. For a wider discussion see C. Ellis "If You Cannot Feed the Body of a Child You Cannot Feed the Brain": Education and Nutrition in Late Colonial Madras." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 135-151.

<sup>63</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1924 p.488

<sup>64</sup> MCA: Proceedings 14/5/1925 p.187, 8/12/1942 pp.16-19

Corporation to provide for the poor.<sup>66</sup> However, for most councillors free education for the poor meant a basic education which was intended to effectively train future workers into more disciplined and pliant workforce, and there was no corresponding commitment to providing a sufficient standard of education to provide the skills or opportunities for social progression. Education seemed designed to strengthen rather than contest class hierarchies.<sup>67</sup>

There were some opportunities for poor children to receive an academic or modern education but these were very limited. Particularly bright children could earn additional scholarships on the basis of exam grades, but to gain the scholarship the child had to be 'certified poor by the Divisional Councillor or Honorary Magistrate', a humiliating but also logistically difficult task.<sup>68</sup> And when it was suggested in resolutions in 1936, 1937 and 1938 that the Corporation could provide financial incentives for 'the children of the labourers' to extended their schooling to V and VI Standards the plans were defeated on the basis that this would be a wasted resource, given that 15,000 poor children continued to receive no schooling at all.<sup>71</sup> In 1939 the Education Committee proposed to extend the length of education at the cost of minimal fees; introducing Standards VI (12 annas per month), VII (14 annas) and Standard VIII (Rs 1). This tacitly supported the assumption that five years schooling was sufficient to teach children basic numeracy and literacy, therefore any further years of education could not be counted as either 'compulsory' or 'free', but at the same time provide a low cost option for clever children from poor families who would continue to receive a subsidised education. In support of this, the Labour representative C. Basudev highlighted:

[The] hunger for education among the working classes. They refuse to stay where they are. They refuse to allow their children to stagnate in the same wretched condition of life into which their birth has confined them. They want their children at least to become clerks, not remain manual workers. It is our duty, if we really are here to work for the uplift of the working-class, to see that birth is not an obstruction to the achievement of human ambitions.<sup>72</sup>

However this plea fell on death ears for the majority. The proposal to subsidise education at the higher standards was passionately opposed as 'an act of criminal folly' because funding constraints meant that some poor children would progress, and that would 'deprive others from having even elementary education'.<sup>73</sup> In other words, because some poor children did well, others would suffer as a consequence. Education might be compulsory, but *access* to education therefore reinforced, rather than contested, existing social hierarchies and social identities and extended government control over the lives of future citizens, while poverty but also sex, religion and caste, remained key deciding factors in the quality and length of educational provision.

It was strongly felt within that Madras Legislative Council (Presidency level) that compulsory education was necessary to expand literacy levels but that 'in all

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<sup>66</sup> MCA: Proceedings 23/8/1938 p.37, 14/11/1939 p.46, 18/11/1939 p.19

<sup>67</sup> Parimala V Rao 'Promiscuous Crowd of English Smatterers': The 'Poor' in the Colonial and Nationalist Discourse on Education in India, 1835-1912' *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 10, 2 (2013), p. 223-248.

<sup>68</sup> MCA: Proceedings 18/2/1932 p.2. Personal experience of this is recounted by KA Gunasekaran, *The Scar*, (Hyderabad, 2009)

<sup>71</sup> MCA: Proceedings MCA: Proceedings 9/12/1936, 19/1/1937, 31/3/1937 pp.100-1, 4/10/1938 p.44

<sup>72</sup> MCA: Proceedings 29/11/1939 p.7

<sup>73</sup> MCA: Proceedings 29/11/1939 p.4, 18/11/1939 p.31, p8 29/11/1939 pp.10-11

countries wherever you compel a man to send his boy to school then you cannot ask him to pay school fees', in other words if education was compulsory it should also be free.<sup>76</sup> Clause 47 established that within a municipal or local authority area which enforced compulsory education, all fees had to be abolished in all institutions to provide equality of access on paper at least.<sup>77</sup> The problem was that elementary education in the Presidency was dominated by private aided institutions, this meant nearly 60% of institutions in 1932 (mission (15%) and non-mission (44%)),<sup>78</sup> and these institutions almost always demanded fees from students in addition to their government grant.<sup>79</sup> If fees were abolished so that there was equality of access these institutions faced a considerable shortfall and so the Madras Educational Rules established a basic rate of compensation for the lack of fees, to be applied at the discretion of local authorities.<sup>80</sup>

While free education appeared to be a reasonable suggestion on paper, there was limited discussion about the practical implications. This became very clear when Madras City began to implement compulsory education in 1925.<sup>81</sup> Initially compulsory education was to be introduced gradually over seven years, starting with three divisions in 1925-26, and gradually extending by about three divisions per year until 1932 because of these financial constraints.<sup>82</sup> The plan included provision for a further 20,810 children including 8,560 boys, and 12,250 specifically non-Muslim girls.<sup>83</sup> It was financed through a separate Elementary Education Fund (EEF) financed by an Education Tax of 0.25% on the annual value of property, introduced from April 1925 and applied across the municipality.<sup>84</sup> The Corporation would then contribute a sum of Rs 2.4 million from the General Revenues, with the Government of Madras (MLC) funding an equivalent amount under the Education Act 1920, Section 48. In exchange, Property Tax was to be reduced by 1.5% meaning that funding for slum improvement and other social investments was to be sacrificed for the sake of education.<sup>85</sup> While there were a few dissenting voices, the vast majority of Councillors agreed that 'the Corporation should be prepared to spend any amount on education'.<sup>86</sup>

The problem was that the municipal Corporation of Madras depended on the aided schools to provide accommodation for the staged introduction of compulsory education and so it became liable to compensate these schools for the income they had previously received from fees. It was agreed that assuming direct management over these aided schools was 'prohibitively high,' although the schools were widely perceived to be 'less costly but equally efficient' to those under public management, so run by the Corporation or by the Presidency-level Education Department.<sup>87</sup> It was therefore decided by local councillors and the Education Department that these aided schools should receive full compensation in line with the existing rates of school fees, around four or five times the so-called 'ridiculously low' rate set out

<sup>76</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, File 2941. Debates 28/9/1920 p.74

<sup>77</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, File 2941. Select Committee 21/7/1920

<sup>78</sup> NLS: IP/25/PJ.3 DPI 1931-32, Quinquennium 1927-28 to 1931-32

<sup>79</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, File 2941. Select Committee 21/7/1920

<sup>80</sup> IOR: L/PJ/6/1592, File 2941. Debates MLA 28/9/1920 p.24

<sup>81</sup> NLS: IP/25/PJ.3 DPI 1930-31 p.23

<sup>82</sup> TNSA: GO951 LE 8/6/1925. Divisions are local authority wards/areas.

<sup>83</sup> TNSA: GO951 LE 8/6/1925. Letter 15/4/1925

<sup>84</sup> MCA: Proceedings 3/2/1925

<sup>85</sup> MCA: Proceedings 20/1/1925 p.13; TNSA: GO951 LE 8/6/1925

<sup>86</sup> MCA: Proceedings 20/1/1925 p.14

<sup>87</sup> MCA: Proceedings 14/5/1925 p.183-187

under the Educational Rules.<sup>89</sup> This very quickly caused a funding crisis, with almost all the money raised in taxes and set aside for compulsory education being used to compensate the aided schools for their lack of fees.<sup>90</sup> This had a devastating impact. The 1931 census recorded up to 15,000 children without access to schooling in the compulsory area, and there were insufficient buildings to house all eligible children if they had wanted to attend.<sup>92</sup> The new building programmes were woefully underfunded while existing buildings were in terrible condition - indeed the Corporation cattleyards were alleged to 'be in a better sanitary condition' and the Chairman of the Education Committee suggested that some schools were 'fit objects to be investigated by the Society for the Protection of Children'.<sup>95</sup> Limited investment in buildings or teachers could be made while the funding situation remain so precarious.

What followed was extensive debate between departments and levels of governance over how this should be resolved. There was no political appetite for the direct management or the municipalisation of aided schools and this was widely recognised to be financially impossible anyway.<sup>97</sup> Instead the funding crisis was used by another group who lobbied for the rights of parental choice, that the rich should be allowed spend their money providing better quality education for their own children. Councillors supporting this argued that 'Our business is only to see that the children of the city are educated' and if 'parents are prepared to pay for their children's education' then 'what do we care if they do that so long as their children do not go without education?'<sup>98</sup> This debate rumbled for a few years, until the Corporation decided to break the terms of the Education Act, to refuse to pay compensation to private aided schools but allow private school managers to charge fees within the compulsory area ultimately forcing the Legislative Assembly to back down and amend the law.<sup>100</sup> The Education Amendment re-centred the role of parental choice in education, allowing parents to decide between aided schools that could levy fees and the free Corporation schools, despite the recognition that this would cause variations in educational standards and exacerbate existing educational divisions, again highlighting the centrality of wealth and family in educational opportunity.<sup>102</sup> This suggests that support for compulsory education was more important as a claim to modernity, a symbolic gesture for the elite which highlighted their benevolence rather than as implemented reality, meaning that children - albeit the future assets of the state - were not important when hard decisions had to taken about the division of limited financial resources. This respect for parental choice can be observed if we look at how compulsion was enforced, revealing a reluctance to challenge the authority of even the poorest of parents. The District Educational Council highlighted the need to 'educate public opinion' about the value of formal schooling and to persuade children to attend school with 'the minimum of inconvenience to their parents'.<sup>104</sup> Enforcement was generally carried out by Corporation schoolteachers who were required to compose registers of children, which were moderated by the local Medical Registrars and

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<sup>89</sup> MCA: Proceedings 16/4/1926 p.20

<sup>90</sup> MCA: Proceedings 23/9/1930

<sup>92</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1933 p.27

<sup>95</sup> MCA: Proceedings 24/8/1926 p.48; 13/10/1924 p.336; 7/9/1926 p.50

<sup>97</sup> MCA: Proceedings 24/7/1931 pp. 121, 124, 130,

<sup>98</sup> MCA: Proceedings 8/5/1926 p.49

<sup>100</sup> MCA: Proceedings 8/5/1926 pp.50- 53, 11/4/1927, 26/8/1927

<sup>102</sup> TNSA: MLA Debates 30/3/1931 pp.119, 126

<sup>104</sup> MCA: Proceedings 14/5/1925 pp.183-44

Superintendent of schools.<sup>105</sup> Teachers were encouraged to use every Saturday morning visiting the local area to provide progress reports to parents and ‘to persuade other parents to send their children to school.’<sup>106</sup> The schoolteacher was thus used as the local embodiment of the interventionist state and as a symbol of a new Indian modernity able to penetrate within the family setting but not threaten familial authority.

When persuasion by teachers failed, an Attendance Committee was to enforce the attendance of those already enrolled in schools. It had a secondary aim of expanding educational provision to those who had no previous contact with the school system.<sup>107</sup> Each municipal division had an Attendance Committee of fifteen ‘local men and women of light and leading...public-spirited persons to shoulder the responsibility’ who had the power to prosecute ‘defaulting parents’ whose children were enrolled but consistently failed to attend, rather than those who refused to send their children.<sup>108</sup> Effectively this delegated power to local civil society bodies to intervene in the family, and they were encouraged to ‘gently’ talk through the issues with parents. Three Attendance Officers were also employed by the Corporation in 1929, on the explicit understanding that they didn’t intimidate the local population.<sup>109</sup> The conditions under which prosecutions could happen were so limited that this was rare, the exceptions were the *pial* or verandah schools, and parents were to be prosecuted if their children attended a school not in receipt of government funding, and therefore not subject to the Madras Educational Rules.<sup>110</sup>

Additionally, a number of interventionist schemes were initiated to encourage parents to send their children to school. This included the Midday Meals Scheme, a scheme to provide free school lunches for children in the poorest areas, a move designed to compensate parents for the lack of income and to provide sufficient nutrition to help children concentrate better in class. This was really significant scheme in because it was so innovative in concept, but also in scale – by 1939 96 schools comprising 6,000 children received free school meals, with buttermilk added as a supplement, all paid for by the Corporation.<sup>111</sup> There was also a suggestion that parents should be compensated directly for the loss of income, so that compulsion would not come ‘at the expense’ of the poor, an idea which received support in the Corporation but was defeated on the basis of cost.<sup>112</sup> The legislation also provided exemptions, allowing attendance at a part-time school if ‘the child’s earnings’ were ‘absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the family’.<sup>113</sup> Two clear strands characterised the debates. The first was a condemnation of child labour, despite the lack of legislation explicitly banning it in the Madras Presidency, and work by children as young as eleven years in *beedi* factories, coffee hotels and theatres was regarded as ‘against all canons of humanity’.<sup>114</sup> The participation of children in paid work was seen by the councillors to reveal the short-termism of poor parents because children were ‘not viewed as a long-term investment as future adults, but

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<sup>105</sup> MCA: Proceedings 22/7/1925 p.352

<sup>106</sup> TNSA GO2268 LE 9/12/1926 Scheme for the Extension of Free and Compulsory Education p.4

<sup>107</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/11/1925 p.352

<sup>108</sup> TNSA:GO1951 LE 8/6/1925; GO2268 LE 9/12/1926, MCA: Proceedings 22/7/1925

<sup>109</sup> MCA: Proceedings date missing 1929

<sup>110</sup> TNSA: GO1951 LE 8/6/1925

<sup>111</sup> MCA: Proceedings 1939 p.35

<sup>112</sup> MCA: Proceedings 25/2/1931 p.3

<sup>113</sup> TNSA: GO 2268 LE 9/12/1926

<sup>114</sup> MCA: Proceedings 13/11/1931 p4, BL: JM Sen *History of Elementary Education in India*, (Calcutta: Book Company, 1933)

rather as an immediate contributor to a group income'.<sup>115</sup> At the same time there was the widespread support for the authority of that family, sympathy for the reliance of poor families on children's wages for survival and extreme reluctance to intervene despite the rhetoric that education was compulsory.<sup>116</sup>

### **Conclusions:**

This leads to a number of conclusions surrounding the introduction of compulsory education in Madras. Within the constitutional constraints of the 1919 reforms, Indians at the level of officials, state Legislative Assembly and municipal councils were prepared to use the new powers available to them to begin a process of social and educational change, meaning that this idea of children as focus of state investment, in rhetoric if not in practice, was directly related to the participation of Indians in municipal and provincial government, rather than the independence struggle or even as a result of independence and the new constitution itself. Accordingly, it was during the 1920s and 1930s when the idea of the child as learner and at school became normalized in state and civil society discourses, and children were seen as future citizens. Compulsion institutionalised children into a new relationships with the state, and through this rhetoric, the school became both the normal site of childhood, and the legitimate and primary space for the interaction between children and the modern state. However, imagining the normative or universal child in school contributed to a dominant construction of 'the child' as male, Hindu, wealthy, Tamil-speaking, able-bodied and upper caste. This was not merely reflective of the 'unevenness' of educational provision. Rather, children outside this implicit normative definition were categorized and implicitly othered into distinct educational communities, which reflected other social identities such as gender, caste, mother tongue and religion. Furthermore, the implementation of free and compulsory education was not egalitarian, and often involved the reconstitution of existing wealth and class hierarchies, to some extent this became an education for social control over the poor, rather than an education for opportunity. There were many limitations to these schemes to introduce elementary education, but it is important to recognise the radicalism of these proposals in the context of the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>115</sup> MCA: Proceedings 28/3/1933 p.29

<sup>116</sup> MCA: Proceedings 13/11/1931, 1/12/1931 p.25