

The Child at School

Compulsory Education in the Madras Presidency

The Madras Elementary Education Act, passed in 1920, was intended to facilitate the reorganisation of educational provision and encourage the introduction of compulsory education in local authority areas throughout the Madras Presidency. This was innovative on its own terms and stands in stark contrast to the complex and multifaceted opposition to compulsory education at an all-Indian level.¹ Although still an optional, rather than required, function for local councils, it was part of a raft of measures that contributed to a wider re-conceptualisation of both Indian childhood and the relationship between the state, the family and the child in the interwar years. Compulsory education was a significant symbol of the progressive modernity of the Indian legislators and social activists, seen to be an essential component of the modern industrialising state and modern forms of governmentality to which these elites aspired. Underpinning this was a new normative characterisation of the child as a learner and in school, a sharp contrast to the manual and household labour that had previously been the experience of most children.² The institutionalisation of children within the spatial, temporal and authoritative boundaries of government-approved learning demonstrated a commitment to a universal idea of children as malleable and vulnerable and as the responsibility of the modern state. Central to this conception of a normative childhood was the increasingly widespread belief that education should be free and

accessible to all. The inherent contradiction that this would only be applied in areas with sufficient political will and sufficient funding and infrastructure was largely disregarded.³

The first part of this chapter considers the figure of the normative modern child in school and the ways in which Indian politicians and officials increasingly conceived childhood as defined by chronological age boundaries. Yet, in practice, when the Education Act was implemented, children were more often imagined within the identity politics of the presidency, and compulsory education actually strengthened the production of educational communities based on social categories of caste, class, religion or gender. Historians such as Barnita Bagchi, Joseph Bara and Latika Chaudhary have already demonstrated how social hierarchies informed children's access to education and were used to maintain an elite's access to power, revealing how the diversity of communities in south India impeded the expansion of education.⁴ The focus here is to explore the tensions between the emerging discursive category of universal childhood and the ways in which other social identities informed children's discursive and practical interactions with the state. In practice, the structures that promoted equality of access based on an idea of normal childhood learning perpetuated and reinforced existing social hierarchies, contributing to the formation of distinctive educational communities.

If modern education was to be universal and compulsory, then there was consensus across parties within the Madras Legislative Council that the only way to enforce this fairly was to make education free. Free education for the undifferentiated child became an ideological commitment intended to display the modernity of Indian legislators and signal a redefined relationship between the child, the family and the state. The second half of the chapter considers the act's governance structures and financing to unpack these new claims to responsibility for children as part of a wider understanding of the institutionalisation of children as a key function of the modern state, bringing the child into direct contact with new authority structures, not just in the schools itself but also civic activists within the District Educational Council. This was a significant challenge to the authority of the patriarchal family. By considering the enforcement of compulsion, the controversy over religious education and the fraught compromise over the payment of school fees, it becomes clear that this was much more complicated than a mere rejection of traditional

authority. Either for practical, or I would suggest, ideological reasons, Indian legislators, teachers and social activists were limited in their claims to intervention and reluctant to challenge or undermine the authority of the family, even as they saw it as backwards and unmodern. Instead, a close reading of the sources would suggest that they claimed an authority based on a wider notion of kinship, a claim that relied on the presence of the colonial state as an alternative, foreign source of power and on fundamentally anti-modern concepts of authority, legitimacy and familial responsibility rather than modern expertise.

Madras Elementary Education Act, 1920

A bill for the expansion of elementary education was introduced in 1918 'as an essential accompaniment of all large measures of social, political or economic reform,' a critical aspect of the functioning of a modern state.⁵ The bill was recognised as a 'working compromise,' reflecting the input of a number of educational interests. It was modelled on the English Education Act, 1902—quite different from the education bills of other presidencies, which were more explicitly based on Gokhale's defeated all-India Elementary Act of 1911.⁶ An earlier bill, much closer in tone to Gokhale's, had been defeated in 1915 but began the process of establishing that it 'shall be the duty of the parent of every child' between five and ten years to send their child to school as 'adequate fulfilment of parental responsibility,' with penalties for non-compliance.⁷ In 1918 the Education Department claimed that the colonial government in Madras had made 'sustained efforts' to 'stimulate and assist' elementary education but, for progress to continue, education had to be placed on a statutory level as the direct responsibility of the state, not just reliant on parental enthusiasm. Of the approximately 2.7 million boys in the presidency on 31 March 1918, around 1.2 million studied in recognised elementary schools for non-Europeans.⁸ This included 11,358 (1 per cent) in government institutions, 47,822 (4 per cent) in schools run by municipal boards, 363,490 (29 per cent) in local board institutions, 735,608 (58 per cent) in private aided schools, 100,763 (8 per cent) in unaided schools, with a further 167,143 girls studying in designated boys' schools. The vast majority of schools were run by private agencies but received financial support from the government as a result of a Grant-in-Aid Scheme introduced in 1906. This scheme provided financial assistance to institutions based on the standard

and number of teachers, average attendance and the general efficiency of the school.⁹ After 1911 the provincial government also subsidised the opening of elementary schools in villages with more than 500 inhabitants. While a further resolution in 1913 by the Government of India encouraged district boards to spend ‘not less than 15% of their income from taxation’ on schools, this rarely happened in practice.¹⁰

The primary aim of the new legislation in Madras was to introduce a ‘central co-ordinating authority’ in the form of the District Educational Council (DEC). This would serve as a regulatory body, facilitating the expansion of elementary education in each local area. The DECs were charged with doubling provision in ten years, having the power to decide local education grants and raise additional local taxation, a similar model to the English Education Act, 1902. Taluk boards and municipalities were to manage both the schools and new tax, supervised by the DEC but funded by an additional 2 lakhs a year from the provincial government budget.¹¹ After detailed negotiations, the act received assent from the viceroy in November 1920, being explicitly formulated not to embarrass or curb the future Indian minister of education after constitutional reforms were enacted.¹² By the time the act came into force on 1 April 1921, the Montague–Chelmsford Reforms had significantly altered the Madras Legislative Council (MLC), which became predominantly Indian, elected on a small franchise with responsibility for transferred areas such as education and health.

One of the most important innovations of the Education Act was the possibility of compulsory education, dealt with in Chapter 5, Clauses 44–52. Under Clause 44, compulsion could be introduced at a meeting of the local authority expressly convened for the purpose, for the whole or just part of the local area, and specified according to specific categories of religion and sex. In order to gain government consent (Clause 45), the local board had to submit, to the DEC and governor in council, a declaration of ‘its readiness to levy tax’ at ‘such rates as may be necessary to meet the expenditure involved’. They also had to provide ‘sufficient’ school places. The aim was explicitly ‘to banish illiteracy from the land’ through a basic education and, when this was achieved, to further expand the curriculum.¹³ The resolution received widespread support across the Advisory Council—from the Dalit representative M. C. Rajah to the Brahmin lawyer T. R. Ramachandra Iyer—amid fears of

the social consequences of illiteracy for stable government.¹⁴ Compulsion was perceived to be necessary for the expansion of mass education both to attract children to school and to ensure their attendance for longer than the current average duration of just over two years.¹⁵ The decision to leave the initiative with local bodies but the ultimate financial control to the provincial government was undisputed. This broad consensus on the desirability of compulsory education is significant, particularly given the significant opposition within the Congress party at the all-India level.¹⁶

The act allowed for exemptions to compulsion under Clause 50 for children with no school within 1 mile of their residence, children suffering from infirmity, children receiving instruction at home 'declared to be satisfactory to the prescribed officer' and children contributing to the household income. This was to be monitored by Attendance Committees (Clause 51) and ultimately magistrates were expected to enforce school attendance. Parents were liable for a 5-rupee fine rising to 50 rupees after more than two offences, although revised from the original figure of 100 rupees.¹⁷ There was a consensus that 'a good deal of coaxing should proceed' any penal action and a manifest reluctance to intervene in opposition to parental authority.¹⁸ Consistently, legislators recognised that they were introducing only a 'modified form of compulsion calculated not so much to ensure that every child entered a school as to prevent the child who had entered a school from being removed from it within the period of school-age'.¹⁹ Two points are significant. First, this emphasised that the state did not intend to force parents to send their children to school (and the final exemption clearly excused working children), but once that relationship had been established, they intended to maintain and pursue it. Second, the rhetoric of compulsion indicated a new departure, emphasising that the normative place for childhood learning was within the school, and the school was under the control of the state, either directly or financially. As the school became institutionalised as the site of modern childhood, this de-legitimised other sites of learning and the acquisition of other knowledges and skills within the family or workplace as traditional or backward, particularly those associated with artisanal work, the lower classes and girls.²⁰ By 1925 eighteen *mufassal* municipalities had introduced some form of compulsion, including Chingleput, Conjeeveram and Vellore.²¹ In 1926 the Education Department even initiated a compulsory

education scheme in Saidapet as an 'experimental measure', which ran from 1928 to 1931 to examine the functioning of compulsory schooling in rural areas.²² As Hendrick argues in the British context, the regulatory impact of this was that children could now be 'monitored, surveyed, calculated'; regulated into the correct forms of belief and behaviour and brought into a direct, and potentially long-term, relationship with the state outside the mediation of the family.²³

The normative image of the child learner was predicated on an understanding of the term 'school-age' children. However, there were extensive debates in the Legislative Council over the numerical boundaries of 'school-age', the debates becoming so fractious that ultimate authority was given to the British as the arbitrator. Under these rules, the schoolchild was defined by 'such age as the Governor in Council may prescribe in respect of children of either sex in any local area of any particular community' although within the broad parameters of 'not less than five and not more than twelve years'.²⁴ This reflected the wide variety of practices across the subcontinent, although there was no consideration of the widely recognised inability of many children to self-define their ages due to a lack of birth registration.²⁵

The lack of clear numerical boundaries meant it was very difficult to enforce compulsion. In Erode, for example, the 1921 census suggested that there were 1,366 boys between the ages of five and ten years, of which 152 were Muslim. When Muslim boys were counted in 1922 in preparation for compulsion, the enumerators found only 61 between the ages of eight and thirteen years.²⁶ In Negapatam, the estimated pupil numbers and then later surveys differed radically.²⁷ In Madras City 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.²⁸ This variation was even more significant in rural areas, and the intensive survey of Saidapet in 1924 included a variety of contradictory estimates on school population and attendance but no clear specification of the age boundaries.²⁹ This made it almost impossible to accurately assess numbers, which had a significant impact on the provision of adequate accommodation and teachers. The definition of the child by age remained fluid and contested, hampering the expansion of educational provision. It also contributed to the formation of 'educational communities' defined by a variety of other social identities.

The Development of Educational Communities: Female Education

The widespread support for compulsory education suggested that most politicians accepted the normative idea of the child identified primarily as a learner and as in school. However, when the Education Act was implemented in the different municipal areas, it became clear that children were categorised in different ways, not merely by a numerical boundary of age. The clearest distinction was sex and the act explicitly allowed differentiation in the schooling of girls and boys. In the extensive discussions about the introduction of compulsion in Conjeeveram or Saidapet, there was only passing recognition that frequently mentioned that ‘child’ was, in fact, a male child, and that female children were outwith the scope of the compulsory education scheme altogether.³⁰ This encouraged the perception that girls were a separate educational community, othered from this normative male ideal. Few councils followed the example of Erode, where the municipal council introduced compulsory education in 1922 and requested additional government funding, matched at 125 per cent of the education tax 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.³¹ 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 was ‘light compared with the great step forward that the municipality will be taking’.³² This reflected the wider politics in the presidency: the Erode Municipal Council was dominated by the Swaraj wing of the Congress party, increasingly keen to highlight their own progressive credentials and to oppose the Justice Party in the MLC, but also to contest the dominance of Madras City within the Congress party itself.³³ The Education Department cautiously supported the move as ‘highly praiseworthy’ and ‘heartily approved’ compulsion for girls in principle, but in practice, all the educational officials—the Education Department, director of public instruction (DPI) and inspector of municipal councils—urged caution and suggested the financial burden of including girls was unsustainable and the plan was too ambitious to be workable.³⁴

Single-sex schools had long been a part of the educational landscape of the presidency and in 1921–22, for example, there were 2,631 registered

elementary girls' schools.³⁵ Of these 64 per cent were in public management, 21 per cent were run by missions and only 15 per cent were aided non-mission, in contrast to co-educational schools, which were much more likely to be privately run with grants-in-aid. This was particularly stark in the rural areas, and the *Elementary Educational Survey Report* (1924) revealed broad correspondence between the presence of mission schools and girls' education. Ramnad, for example, was 'backwards' in respect of both boys' (30 per cent) and girls' (7 per cent) education, while Tinnevely and South Kanara were known both for 'well conducted Mission schools' and the particularly high rate of education for girls (still only 13 per cent).³⁶ Popular support for girls' education increased during the 1920s, as evidenced by the Madras witnesses to the Hartog Commission on Education in 1929.³⁷ This changing attitude can be linked to the social activism of women in organisations such as the Madras-based Women's Indian Association (WIA), who both used their voices in the public sphere to make the argument for women's education and worked for the establishment of more girls' schools.³⁸

However, the Public Instruction figures show that within the Madras Presidency, there were consistently more girls in mainstream co-educational schools than in single-sex schools, a statistic often obscured by the campaigning priorities of middle-class social reformers and the focus in the historiographical literature on the specifics of girls' schooling and curriculum.³⁹ By 1926–27, for example, there was a 28 per cent increase in the number of schools, with a 38 per cent increase in the number of girls attending, but a 54 per cent increase in the number of girls in co-educational schools.⁴⁰ The emphasis on extending compulsory education to all children, when this term effectively meant boys, contributed significantly to the de-legitimising of the educational experiences of lower class and caste girls, particularly in rural areas, and to the increased rigidity of the female-only educational communities preferred by the urban elite for their own daughters. This Othered the female students in school while also de-legitimising the childhoods of those whose learning happened in the community and not formal educational institutions. The assumption that the normative site of childhood learning was within a formal institution included a gendered preconception concerning what constituted both legitimate knowledge and a legitimate childhood experience.⁴¹ Despite slowly changing attitudes, poor girls were discursively and practically

Othered from the normative experience of schooling and childhood, and this was accentuated when girls faced the 'double discrimination' of caste or religion, as well as sex.⁴²

Religion and the Development of Educational Communities

By the 1920s religion and communal identity had become key signifiers of the child. The DPI reports consistently categorised children by sex and by community as non-Brahmin, depressed classes (Dalit), Christian, Muhammadan and Brahmin in order to trace the educational progress of each community, the categories of governance further rigidifying the boundaries between communities. Alongside this, the reports referred to particular 'exceptional' groups such as Europeans, Indian princes and criminal tribes, reflecting the categorisation and reification of social groups within the census.⁴³ Education became a way of 'perceiving difference' and facilitating comparison. Sanjay Seth argues that the 'educational backwardness' of the Muslim community was 'discovered' as figures for educational achievement provided a way to compare populations and compete over resources.⁴⁴

By the twentieth century, Muslims were established as a distinct educational community within the presidency, although their position as a minority varied considerably between the Mapillas in Malabar, where they formed 35 per cent of the population, to Ramnad (7 per cent) or Trichinopoly (3 per cent).⁴⁵ The focus on religious education in the early years and training in the Qur'an before entering secular education in madrassas or at home meant that the numerical definition of school age was often different for Muslim boys, which again set them apart as having distinctive educational needs as a result of religious difference. This was recognised in the debates over a 'conscience clause' (Clause 53) added in the later stages of the Education Act in an attempt to counter the perceived threat of proselytisation by Christian missionaries. The clause included a provision to cut grant-aided funding for all schools that refused to offer exemptions to religious instruction. This was resisted by the Christian missionary E. M. Macphail who highlighted the number of aided schools, most famously Pachaiyappa's College Madras, which refused access to 'non-Caste Hindus, Muslims and Christians'.⁴⁶ Rather than debating the pedagogical impact of religious education or the susceptibility of children to conversion, the discussions surrounding the conscience clause were

used to strengthen the claims of the Muslim community and British officials for the 'peculiar position' and educational requirements of the Muslim child.⁴⁷ This mirrors the Bengali situation, where Parna Sengupta argues that the expansion of modern education by Christian missionary organisations provided new educational spaces and conditions of access that encouraged the reformulation of a modern and distinctive Muslim identity.⁴⁸

These new claims, which framed educational communities in exclusively religious terms, did not go uncontested. Lone voices, such as B. V. Narasimha Iyer, a Salem-based pro-Home Rule lawyer, rejected this, stating that the government should enforce 'equal access to all buildings and institutions' because a 'water-tight community' did not exist.⁴⁹ Likewise, twenty years later, a suggestion by the Congress mayor of Madras City that elementary schools should be linguistically rather than communally divided was strongly rejected as politically motivated.⁵⁰ However, recent research has queried the homogeneity of Muslims in the presidency, highlighting the linguistic divisions within the Muslim community and the high levels of integration of Muslim Tamil and Telegu speakers within wider rural communities.⁵¹ While the Muslim Educational Association was the spokesperson of the Muslim community, it appears more representative of a particularly vocal Urdu-speaking urban-educated Muslim elite than the rest of the Muslim population. This group's claims to represent the Muslim community seem to have contributed to the oversimplification of religious and linguistic identities within the presidency and sidelined more nuanced voices.⁵² This doubtless contributed to communal differences within the presidency, but possibly also prevented non-Urdu-speaking Muslims from accessing local elementary education. Similarly, access to formal schooling for Muslim girls was particularly limited and of peripheral concern to most in the MLC or the Muslim Educational Association, although it was a key area of concern for the Madras Municipal Corporation (see Chapter 2). While the commitment to education remained, the practical implementation was left in the hands of philanthropic lady experts, such as advisory boards of local Muslim ladies or the Madras Muslim Ladies Association.⁵³ In practice this meant that while Muslim girls emerged as a clearly defined educational grouping in the 1920s whose 'honour' was perceived to be the responsibility of Muslim pressure groups, the girls themselves were the responsibility of no one and

received little attention, and certainly no funding, at the provincial level. Increased access to elementary education appears to have significantly contributed to a situation where children from minority groups were increasingly seen as members of a distinct educational community.

Caste as an Educational Identity

The claim of the Christian community to a separate educational identity on the basis of religion was complicated by their small numbers and by the lower-caste position of many Christians in the social hierarchies of the presidency. It was 'the declared policy of Government that no boy should be refused admission to a Government education institution merely on the ground of caste.'⁵⁴ Nonetheless, a debate in 1921 on government funding for mission schools highlighted the concern, particularly proffered by the Dalit representative M. C. Rajah, that publicly funded institutions 'still shut their doors against particular classes and communities of the land.'⁵⁵ The division of education by caste was opposed in principle by the educated middle-class politicians of the MLC, most of whom saw Dalits within the context of the wider Hindu community. Congress party members cautiously supported integration and viewed caste and communalism as 'obstacles to a healthy nationalism', which 'could only be annihilated only through the recognition of common ideals and interests, through common faith, through the development of a cooperative spirit among our younger generation.'⁵⁶ The suggestion that children were uniquely able to transcend social boundaries stood in stark contrast to the practical realities of schooling, detailed most painfully in the experiences recounted in Chapter 8. The Justice Party, on the other hand, used the democratisation of educational provision as an important tactic in their opposition to Brahmin domination. The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills strikes, however, had emphasised the difference between Dalits and the caste working classes within the non-Brahmin movement and the relationship was characterised by what Rupa Viswanath calls 'serious political animosity.'⁵⁷ Despite some interest from the Self-Respect fringes, neither the Justice Party in the 1920s nor later the Congress party were interested in Untouchability as an educational problem and evidenced very little interest in the systematic discrimination against Dalits.⁵⁸

In direct contrast to the political discourse, the administration of the Education Department was premised on identification by caste.

Caste statistics featured heavily in administration reports, perpetuating a colonial rule of difference through strategies that facilitated the division of the population alongside the claim of benevolence towards disadvantaged groups such as Dalits.⁵⁹ Grant-in-Aid funding was predicated on the implementation of the Madras Educational Rules, guidelines initiated in 1892 and frequently revised thereafter, which specified castes eligible for preferential treatment, including Christian converts, but this was rarely enforced.⁶⁰ The 1920s saw a rapid increase in the number of Dalits enrolling in school: in 1922, 12 per cent of the 1.4 million pupils in schools were designated 'Adi-Dravida' or Dalit, rising to 13 per cent of the 2.5 million school population in 1935–36.⁶¹ Retaining Dalit pupils proved particularly difficult, and a quantitative analysis provides little reflection of the qualitative consequences of systematic marginalisation reflected in teacher attitudes, access to learning materials and the Brahminical teaching content.⁶² Access continued to be contested at a popular level, and while by 1937 there were over 400,000 Dalit pupils attending school, 81 per cent were schooled in government-run institutions.⁶³ Given the strength of the private aided schools as a proportion of educational provision, the preponderance of Dalits in government institutions reflects the reluctance of many aided institutions to accept Dalit pupils and the continued opposition to Dalit education. Compulsory education was abandoned in 1931 in Saidapet, largely as a result of the 'complete and successful economic boycott of the Adi-Dravida population' by their caste neighbours, and in 1933–34 twenty *panchayat* schools were closed because they refused to admit Dalit pupils.⁶⁴ There are two further points to note. First, by the 1930s schools run by mission societies or philanthropists, such as the Poor Schools Society or the Social Service League, continued to educate Dalits, but their numerical contribution was much smaller than usually reflected in the historiographical literature.⁶⁵ Second, most of the 'government institutions' that provided education for Dalits were under minimal control from the Education Department.⁶⁶ Instead, the Educational Survey of 1924 revealed the regional disparities in education provision, and by 1926–27 the Labour, Jail, Fisheries, Police, Salt and Forest Departments and the registrar-general of *panchayats* were also running schools for Dalits designated as 'government'.⁶⁷

The Labour Department was a particularly significant provider of education for Dalits. In response to the Gray Commission on Panchamas,

a commissioner of labour was appointed in 1919 as 'protector' of the depressed classes. His duties included the provision of education in Tanjore, Godavari, Chingleput and Chindambaram taluk of South Arcot, which extended to cover the whole presidency by 1923.⁶⁸ The commissioner had the authority to provide additional resources to facilitate school attendance, such as books, scholarships, clothing and even midday meals.⁶⁹ Yet as early as 1922, the Labour Department was opposed by both the Justice and Congress parties, and its funding was severely curtailed.⁷⁰ The department was commended by the 1928 Hartog Commission on Education for its work to 'establish and maintain free elementary education' despite the lack of support from 'the usual agencies' for public education, yet even the Commissioner of Labour S. H. Slater accepted that his position was 'an anomaly'.⁷¹ Slater regarded himself as 'largely responsible' for Dalit education, providing around 1,200 schools at the elementary level, with occasional supervision from the Education Department. The focus within these schools was on vocational training, either agricultural or industrial, according to the area, in addition to teaching basic literacy and personal hygiene. Slater also suggested schemes to 'subsidize school attendance' through financial incentives to the parents.⁷² This contributed significantly to the formation of a distinct educational community for Dalits, in which caste status determined educational access, curriculum and success. Despite the emergence of a discourse in which the normative site of childhood was the school, for children from marginalised groups, other identities based on religion, gender and caste remained a more significant determinant of their educational opportunities. Within educational circles, it was becoming increasingly clear that to be a true child was to be male, of caste background and part of the Hindu majority community.

State Responsibility for Education

The rest of the chapter moves away from the child as an object of education to consider the governance and funding structures set up to facilitate educational expansion and what this reveals about the relationship between the modern state and the family and the child. The Madras Elementary Education Act of 1920 posited that the state had 'ultimate responsibility' for education and it was 'the primary duty' of government to 'devote all their energies towards the expansion of elementary education'.⁷³

The act facilitated the creation of DECAs as independent bodies that were to have 'the principal responsibility for ascertaining the educational needs of an area' and for 'stimulating such expansion as may be necessary'.⁷⁴ Decentralised from direct government control and situated in each local area, the councils were to be a body of 'broad-minded men who have really the interests of the young people at heart', avuncular figures from the local community rather than ambitious politicians who would work with the family for the sake of the children.⁷⁵ The DECAs could recognise new elementary schools and supervise the distribution of Grant-in-Aid funding. Headed by the district collector, they comprised local experts, including heads of private institutions, members of the municipal authority and local social reformers.⁷⁶ Similar to the structures of the 1902 English Balfour Act, the DECAs were to include 'self-respecting' or 'high-souled men' who had shunned overt political office but as 'persons of local knowledge and experience' would contribute to 'a healthy civic life' in the local areas.⁷⁷ In addition, the council provided an opportunity for groups usually marginalised in the political process to participate in government, including both representatives of the Dalit community and educated women.⁷⁸ The DECA became one aspect of the avuncular state characterised by civic activism in which local activists and local Indian officials could be responsible for the education and social uplift of the children in their area and hold significant influence over local educational organisations.⁷⁹ But the authority of these individuals was not uncontested: the positions were unelected, were vulnerable to political patronage and the lines of financial responsibility were blurred so that ultimately the DECAs were abolished with little opposition in 1939.⁸⁰ This reveals an example of the tensions inherent in this emergent avuncular state, between local and traditional authority structures that had resonance in the local community, but which meant that more modern forms of political accountability were lost.

The new DECAs were only one level of the variety of educational institutions facilitating the expansion of elementary education. Conjeeveram claimed the 'privilege' of being the first municipality to introduce compulsion from 1 September 1922, and the development of the scheme demonstrates the variety of organisations involved.⁸¹ According to the 1921 Census, 1,800 (39 per cent) of Conjeeveram's 4,600 boys received no elementary education. In April 1922, the municipal council voted to introduce an education tax raised from 2 per cent property tax and 12.5

per cent professional tax in the budget of 1922–23, along with an equivalent contribution from the government under section 37 of the Education Act, with the hope of making education compulsory for ‘all boys of school-going age’.⁸² The details were worked out after extensive correspondence between the chairman of the Conjeeveram Municipal Council, the president of the Saidapet DEC, the DPI and the Education Department regarding pupil numbers, school facilities and tax changes.⁸³ Interventions were received from the Chingleput DEC, local sub-assistant inspectors of schools, officials from the Education Department, the inspector of municipal councils and even a visit from the Minister for Education A. P. Patro himself.⁸⁴ A similar resolution in the Madras Municipal Corporation in March 1924 included a comparable set of negotiations involving municipal and provincial political representatives, the DEC and officials from the Education Department, inspectors and the corporation commissioner.⁸⁵ The details of both schemes are themselves unimportant but demonstrate the webs of communication between political and administrative organisations at the municipal, district and provincial levels. These meant that lines of financial or political accountability were almost impossible to trace. Within these networks of correspondence, there was a shared assumption that the state was responsible for the educational progress of children, but what precisely constituted ‘the state’ and the division of responsibility between local agencies and provincial government departments was changing, contested and difficult to ascertain. In the morass of bureaucracy and competing agendas of adult activists, the small illiterate child was easily forgotten.

Financial Implications of Compulsory Education: Free Education for All

A central goal of the Education Act was to alleviate the widely acknowledged funding crisis in elementary education and provide additional educational facilities.⁸⁶ Under Chapter 3 of the act, local areas could levy a tax that would contribute to an Elementary Education Fund (EEF) solely for the purpose of primary level education. This tax was to be no more than 25 per cent of local tax revenues (Section 34), match-funded by the government. The provincial government argued that until 1920 funds had been ‘spasmodic and precarious’ but that the new system was to be uniquely progressive in India.⁸⁷ The act was intended to

demonstrate the government's commitment to decentralisation 'giving to the local residents the principal voice in determining to what extent and in what direction they wish their elementary education to be extended' although with the corresponding pledge that the provincial government 'had no desire to divest themselves of their financial and general responsibility'. In practice, municipalities such as Negapatam were pressurised to introduce an education tax and the commitment to match local funding meant that while educational spending increased, the provincial government retained control over local budgets.⁸⁸ The local DEC became liable for a failure to expand educational provision, but subsequent protests that it was 'the essential duty of the State to provide adequate funds' were ignored.⁸⁹ The decentralisation of education control and finance not only blurred accountability for educational provision, but enabled provincial and district bodies to espouse compulsion as a demonstration of their own modernity and concern for the child but to avoid the duty of paying for it.⁹⁰

These tensions were exacerbated when compulsory education was introduced. It was strongly felt within the Madras Legislative Council that compulsion was necessary but that 'generally in all countries wherever you compel a man to send his boy to school then you cannot ask him to pay school fees'—compulsory education was to be free and equally accessible to all.⁹¹ As a result, Clause 47 established the 'abolition of all fees in elementary schools' within the compulsory area, partly because other schemes such as fee reductions for poor students were deemed to be too difficult to administer.⁹² This made the state directly responsible for financing education, without parental contribution, even if what constituted 'the state' was disputed. Elementary education in the presidency was dominated by private aided institutions, mission (15 per cent) and non-mission (44 per cent) schools comprising 59 per cent of educational provision in 1932.⁹³ These institutions demanded fees from students in addition to their government grant, and accordingly a commitment was given that if compulsion was introduced and fees were abolished, 'the loss sustained by institutions under private management must be made good by the DEC.'⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

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 1925.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ It was financed through a separate EEF financed by an Education Tax of 0.25 per cent on the annual value of the property, introduced from April 1925 and applied across the municipality.⁹⁸ The corporation would then contribute a sum of 2.4 million rupees from the general revenues, with the MLC funding an equivalent amount under the Education Act, 1920, Section 48. In exchange, property tax was to be reduced by 1.5 per cent, meaning that funding for slum improvement and other social investments was to be sacrificed for the sake of education.⁹⁹ 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.’¹⁰⁰

However, 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.¹⁰¹ 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 under the Educational Rules.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴ The new building programmes were woefully underfunded while existing buildings were in terrible condition—indeed, the corporation cattle yards 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'.¹⁰⁵ Limited investment in buildings or teachers could be made while the funding situation remained 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.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the funding crisis was used by another group of councillors who lobbied for the rights of parental choice, that the rich should be allowed to spend their money providing better quality education for their own children. Councillors, such as the Labour leader and Justice V. Chakkarai Chettiar, argued, '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?'¹⁰⁷ As the extent of the financial burden became clear, both the Justice Party and Congress Swaraj Party in the corporation agreed to defy the MLC, break the terms of the Education Act and refuse to pay compensation to private aided schools but allow private school managers to charge fees within the compulsory area ultimately forcing the MLC to amend the law.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹ The opposition of those who represented the poor, either Dalit leaders or the Provincial Labour Party, was drowned out by the practicalities of finance and the increasingly expressed commitment to parental choice and responsibility.¹¹⁰ Reducing the financial dependence of the aided schools also reduced the influence of the local authority over the education provided by them.

The debates in the MLC and in municipal bodies reveal the widespread commitment by members of the political and administrative classes to the education of all children within the presidency, with little consideration of party political boundaries. However, the continuing reluctance to provide

sufficient funding, either through new tax revenues or a bigger proportion of provincial resources, demonstrates the extent to which children were forgotten when the state decided how to use its resources.¹¹¹ As the trade union leader E. L. Iyer pointed out, getting the child into the school building was more important than the quality of education they received.¹¹² Idealistic support for compulsory education was more important as a claim to modernity for the elite, a symbolic gesture of benevolence, than as implemented reality, meaning that children—albeit the future assets of the state—were not important when hard decisions had to be taken about the division of limited financial resources.

Parental Authority

The recognition that richer parents desired to contribute financially to ensure their child received a better quality of education was symptomatic of a wider trend in which the state deferred to familial authority and choice. Parents were recognised in the Educational Rules as a key site of authority in the child's life, and from the earliest debates, it was agreed that compulsion should be introduced very gradually for 'if there is any social custom that will create resentment it will be the punishing of parents for not sending their boys to school'.¹¹³ The approach was to be non-punitive, with a strategy based around 'persuasion in the first instance and compulsion by slow degrees' using local agencies such as the DEC and village *panchayat*.¹¹⁴ The aim was to provide 'inducements' to parents while educating them to 'understand the value of education' so that they came to 'look upon the education of their children as a paramount duty cast upon them'.¹¹⁵ The terminology was consensual and persuasive, reflective of a widely held belief that non-attendance reflected a failure among the lower classes to understand the value of formal education in the context of their lives, particularly in rural communities.¹¹⁶

The rhetoric of persuasion and the deference to familial authority was reflected in the reluctance to legislate against the employment of children.¹¹⁷ While the penalty for neglecting to send a child to school was harsher than in other presidencies, there was no corresponding penalty for 'unlawful employment of child during prescribed school hours'.¹¹⁸ Likewise, the commitment to free education recognised the impact on family finances of losing the child's income. On the rare occasions that child

labour was discussed, it was in terms of ignorance and want, not the morality of employing children. Parental decisions were framed in terms of poverty and ignorance, and the parent was still regarded as the ultimate authority in the child's life, despite potentially damaging their life chances.¹¹⁹ This reflects Sarada Balagopalan's argument that earlier colonial schemes for education used a discourse of 'liberal benevolence' in respecting parental choice for their child's continued participation in child labour. She posits that this is not evidence of actual parental preference; instead, it reflects paternalistic perceptions of lower-class parenting among legislators.¹²⁰ Given the commitment of the Dalit and labour representatives to compulsory education and the lack of other non-elite voices within these debates, it seems likely that this was also the case in interwar Madras.

Parental views were also paramount in the issue of religious education when the legislators attempted to change the 'conscience clause' because of concerns that anxieties about religious freedom and the possibility of conversion would prevent parents from sending their children to school. While most presidencies were content to leave untouched the religious neutrality of Wood's Educational Dispatch, 1854, the legislators in Madras felt that this was sufficiently significant to address explicitly.¹²¹ Two measures were brought in to appease these concerns. Clause 49 ensured that if and when compulsion was introduced, the government would have 'some means of safeguarding the religious sentiments of parents' and parents were protected from prosecution for not sending their child to a school of a different faith when there was no alternative in the area.¹²² For those who chose to attend a government grant-aided school because of the lack of alternative educational provisions in the local area, Clause 53 provided exemptions from religious instruction lessons, provided no less than ten parents complained.¹²³ This was largely based on the assumption that an increase in school provision would negate 'the necessity for such exemptions' and that as school provision increased, it would mirror educational communities of religion and caste.¹²⁴ The Indian members, led by N. Subba Rao, a Brahmin Congress lawyer, preferred a more radical approach, arguing that the guardian should be required to formally opt-in to religious instruction and schools that contravened this should have their government grants halved, but this was defeated by the British majority in the pre-dyarchical Advisory Council.¹²⁵

A further two days were spent discussing the conscience clause when the Education Act reached the MLC in September 1920. These debates provided a space to articulate new concerns that children could become 'Europeanised' through secular education, which would encourage critical thinking about all religious traditions.¹²⁶ The primary focus, however, was to establish that 'religious and moral education must be in the hands of parents themselves' and that teachers could model moral behaviour but not push a religious agenda.¹²⁷ With the mission schools often known for their high-quality education and the clear social opportunities gained through learning English, this protected higher-caste families in the urban areas who wanted to send their kids there but feared religious conversion. Concluding the debate, the president reiterated that religious instruction was the responsibility and duty of the parents, and that 'the basis of religious instruction which is given to any child must be given by the parent in his own home'.¹²⁸ The home was therefore an authoritative site of knowledge transmission, regardless of community. This reflected a well-established colonial division between public and private spheres, and the reluctance of the colonial government to interfere in matters of religion and personal law, but also the limits to the authority of the school and the state as education provider. As suggested earlier, the conscience clause facilitated the growth of emerging educational communities so that children became increasingly defined and divided by their religious identity, which was deemed to be more important than anything else.¹²⁹ While the state, often acting through civic agencies such as the DEC, had begun to claim a relationship directly with the child through the educational system, its influence was circumscribed by the continuing dominance of the family as the key site of authority in the child's life.

Conclusion

The Madras Elementary Education Act, 1920, had widespread support from differing layers of political institutions across the presidency. While change was often discursive rather than actual, the promotion of compulsory education by the political classes and state agencies meant that the school was increasingly regarded as the normative space of childhood. In the context of India in the 1920s, this was in itself a radical demand, designed to produce social change and to demonstrate the

progressive modernity of the legislators. The numbers not in school remained significant, but children were imagined as learners institutionalised within the school and this provided a more formal boundary between childhood and adulthood. This further de-legitimised other experiences of education within the home or workplace, meaning that non-schooled children were seen as transgressing increasingly popular universal or self-evident norms of childhood needs and rights, guaranteed by the state. Imagining the child in school thus contributed to a dominant construction of 'the child' as male, Hindu and of caste background. This was not merely reflective of the 'unevenness' of educational provision.¹³⁰ Rather, children outside this implicit normative definition were categorised into distinct educational communities, which reflected other social identities such as gender, caste and religion and, while sometimes increasing their access to schools, further emphasised their difference from a universal norm. Belonging to one of these marginalised educational communities often became a more significant indicator of childhood experience, opportunities and boundaries, rather than age or immaturity.

The assertion of state responsibility for the child contained within the Elementary Education Act was a claim to modernity; a claim by Indian legislators to participation in global forms of modern governmentality, often explicitly based on the English and Welsh model. Whilst the perceived 'duty' of the state to provide education was acknowledged, discharging this responsibility involved a variety of actors. This included a wide variety of government agencies, including the newly formed DECs, local and municipal councils, private aided schools, the DPI, the Education Department and the Labour Department. Each of these bodies claimed to uphold the best interests of the child by providing education but lacked the political will to take financial responsibility and risk the consequent unpopularity of increasing taxation. This meant that despite the grand promises, elementary education remained in the same 'miserable chaotic condition' and the decentralisation of provision gave more control to local elites but also increased regional disparities and blurred the lines of political accountability.¹³¹ While local philanthropists and civic activists involved in increasing educational provision could claim legitimacy as modern, they also conceived of their role in avuncular terms, as a result of being Indian and local, almost framed within the scope of the extended

family. Although the dyarchal state claimed a new relationship with the child through these local actors, its interventionist potential was limited by the continuing recognition of the authority of the family and its right to make decisions on behalf of the child, particularly in matters of religious conscience, school attendance and school fees.