

Why children are unable to read Tamil



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Only 20 per cent of class 3 students are able to read Tamil and among southern states it is Tamil Nadu which is lagging behind in terms of linguistic skill of reading. This is the finding that the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) survey on 'Basic Learning' (2022) has thrown up. Rather than being shocked at this finding, we have to speak about truths bluntly on the basis of this finding.

Corona alone to blame?

The NCERT survey held in March, 2022 has assessed the educational standard of class 3 students. Questionnaires were distributed to 86,000 students. Corona curbs were clamped all

over the world at a time when these children had to study in class 1.

Tamil lessons skipped

At that time lessons were held online through Zoom and G Classroom. This kind of virtual classroom was something totally new to both teachers and students. Yet the most difficult times we were passing through had forced this arrangement of teaching and learning. The physical classroom's complete sense of teaching and learning could, though, not be attained through online classes. However, this online system was at best able to provide a ray of hope to the students, considering that all educational activities had come to a standstill. But that ray of hope was deliberately prevented from falling on the teaching of the Tamil language in most of the private schools.

Discriminatory perspective

Today's learning environment focuses mainly on mathematics, science etc. in schools so the students will excel in those subjects in colleges later on. These subjects get longer hours of teaching, relegating language classes to the backseat. This is what's happening in almost all schools. As a result of this step-motherly treatment meted to learning of languages, both teachers and students are quite lethargic towards teaching and learning of languages respectively.

Parents' lack of understanding

Most of today's parents do not want their children to pursue learning of languages. Instead they have set their children the

targets in medicine and engineering courses. The parents have a misconception that it is sufficient that their children are pursuing seriously the basic lessons in medicine and engineering. So, right from the primary education the children are burdened with study of such lessons only.

Even when the students are interested in language learning and even when the teachers are taking trouble to teach them the languages, particularly Tamil, the parents just pooh-pooh Tamil, saying to their children, "After all, it is Tamil. You can learn it later. For now it is maths and science that are more important."

Even if their children do well in studies of language, the parents do not say it openly as a matter of pride as they do in case the wards excel in maths or science.

Social perspective

The impact of the western languages on education is immense. Of course, there can be two opinions about the need to learn such languages. But mother tongue is as important as eyes. It is only through those 'eyes' that the children can understand the structure and dynamics of other languages through a comparative method.

Unfortunately the society just passes over this truth. The tendency is quite prevalent in the society by and large – the tendency of looking down upon those speaking in Tamil as if they were aliens from some other planet.

This general tendency rubs off on the children who consequently begin to believe that study of Tamil is not so important as medicine, engineering etc. and resultantly don't respect Tamil at all.

Games children have lost

Children naturally learn lots of words through games. The games do not involve body alone but also the mind of the children who learn words related to games through games. Thus the children internalize a treasure trove of vocabulary in their minds – a treasure trove that is stamped with their originality of thinking.

But unfortunately today's social, political and economic configurations of the world have knocked out of existence several children's games played on the native soil for ages. Children's learning and reading process is not confined to classrooms. They keep learning several things in classroom, society and at home. Provided these learning environments are structured excellently, the children will excel in learning and the art of expressing themselves ably.

If a child has to excel in language lessons, it must be exposed to learning through its mother tongue. Till that is made possible, our children will be lagging behind in language skill.

It is time for those concerned with Tamil to plunge into action.

Translated by V. Mariappan.