

# Let us launch women education centres to usher in a new world



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Nowadays an important issue is raging in Tamil Nadu's education sector. There is a big chunk of population in the state, which has practically no literacy skill. Though these people have acquired some basic literacy skill, they have forgotten it over the years. They are living in villages and constitute the working class in urban areas. Most of them are women. They had attended a few classes in schools and later, enrolled under some adult education schemes.

We have to first target such women who account for lakhs. They

have to acquire not only learning skills but also thinking ability to question the male chauvinistic and casteist forces. An education system for that purpose must be designed for them. This is an important but mostly neglected dimension of education.

### **Learners' zeal**

There are several signs which hint at a field waiting for such a women's movement. The school protection movement with which I am working gives me lots of experiences having those signs.

As part of the movement, we have established in some areas the 'oor koodum maiyam' (center for the townfolk to assemble). The center is run by a few teachers of our movement and the volunteers of the Tamil Nadu government's 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' scheme. It is women, young and old, who mostly take part in the meetings held in some villages every week.

They read with zeal small, simple books distributed at the meetings. Those unable to read just browse through the pages and watch the pictures with delight. They happily talk to one another and return home reluctantly. A similar reading movement is conducted by the Tamil Nadu government for school students. We run an identical exercise in our movement outside schools, which has been attracting scores of women. All these initiatives are beacons of hope. In the light of these experiences, I put forward my proposal.

### **Scheme format**

The Tamil Nadu government must set up women's reading center in every village and in every ward in towns. The job of running the center must be entrusted to the women members of the local bodies. The centers must be helmed by women alone.

The 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' scheme has consolidated two lakh women and gifted a massive women force to the state.

The unique feature of women's reading center scheme will be that the women are living in the respective areas where the scheme is implemented. Only volunteers will run the centers, assisted by local women and the partially educated. The volunteers must be paid an honorary remuneration to be met from the local bodies' budgets.

A place for running women's reading centers must be earmarked; it may be a part of community halls in urban areas. The civic bodies must allot the space in villages. If there are libraries in the villages, they can be converted into centers as most of them remain always locked, having no librarians. The e-seva centers in villages can also be used for the purpose. Or the local bodies can construct small buildings for running the centers.

### **To usher in a new world**

In the women's reading centers, a couple of almirahs can be created to accommodate simple books to be accessed by the new learners. The books gathering dust on the racks in libraries can be shifted to these centers. Similarly, the books remaining unused in school libraries should also be re-located to the centers. A couple of newspapers must be purchased for the centers.

Besides, 53 good books have been written for the classes 1-12 under the reading movement and sent to all schools in the state. The government can also send the books to all rural and urban centers so that the move makes a wonderful impact.

Yet all these are not sufficient. They can be used only to make a

good beginning. Lots of books must be written for newly learning women who have not had primary schooling.

Just as the reading revolution, a creative revolution must also be scripted. There may be potential creative writers among the women who have started reading. They may not be able to write; but they may have wonderful story-telling skills. This was one of the experiences of the literacy movement. The educated women may take upon themselves the work of writing down the stories told by the women at the reading centers.

Thus a new world will be born wherein grand-daughters jot down as their grandmothers keep on telling stories – a world where the wall of generation gap is demolished.

The center will be not merely for reading. That will be the public space for women of the village/town to assemble. The pleasure of talking over a cup of tea at tea-shops has long been a privilege for men. So, the reading center will bring the pleasure and freedom to women too.

### **Space for men**

The women's reading center is not an all-women domain where men's entry is prohibited. Men who are not male chauvinistic can visit here and contribute their mite to running of the center.

Most men above 60 years of age, who have retired from their career, are just whiling away their time while women in the same age group have domestic chores and grandchildren to take care of, devoting their time to the everyday tasks. So, the 60-plus men can make their remaining life meaningful and fresh by teaching at the centers.

Nowadays the Tamil Nadu government is implementing schemes for upgrading women's skills and rights. It can also launch the

women's education centers as an extension of the scheme for women's entitlement.

Chief Minister M. K. Stalin must announce that on the day when the women's entitlement scheme is launched at some places, the women's education center will also be launched.

**Translated by V. Mariappan**