

Rajaji's Hereditary Education Scheme: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The Hereditary Education Scheme introduced in the Madras State during the chief ministership of C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) in 1952–1953 was one of the most controversial educational experiments in post-independent India. The scheme, popularly known as the **Kula Kalvi Thittam**, sought to reorganise elementary education by combining school instruction with practical training in the traditional occupation of the child's family. Rajaji and his supporters argued that the scheme would make education more practical, reduce school expenditure, prevent unemployment, and preserve useful occupational skills. However, its opponents viewed the scheme as a form of hereditary occupational education that could reinforce caste and social inequalities. The controversy surrounding the scheme brought together questions of education, caste, occupation, social mobility, economic development, and the role of the state in shaping educational policy. This paper examines the historical background, objectives, implementation, public response, political controversy, and eventual withdrawal of the Hereditary Education Scheme. It argues that the significance of the scheme lies not merely in its short duration but in the larger debate it generated concerning equality of educational opportunity and the relationship between traditional occupations and modern education in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: C. Rajagopalachari, Rajaji, Hereditary Education Scheme, Kula Kalvi Thittam, Madras State, Education, Caste, Social Mobility, Tamil Nadu, Educational History.

1. Introduction

Education occupied a central position in the process of social transformation in India after independence. The newly independent nation regarded education as an important instrument for democracy, citizenship, economic development and social equality. In the Madras State, educational questions were particularly significant because the region had already experienced extensive debates concerning caste, social justice, occupational mobility and access to education.

C. Rajagopalachari, popularly known as Rajaji, became the Chief Minister of Madras State in April 1952. His administration introduced several measures intended to address the economic and administrative difficulties facing the state. Among these measures, the **Hereditary Education Scheme**, introduced in 1952 and implemented more extensively in 1953, became the most controversial.

The scheme proposed a combination of formal schooling and occupational training. Children were expected to spend part of their time in school and part of their time learning the traditional occupation of their family. The policy was presented by its proponents as an attempt to connect education with productive life. Critics, however, argued that linking children's education with parental occupation could perpetuate existing social and caste-based divisions.

The controversy was therefore much wider than a disagreement over school administration. It raised fundamental questions: Should education prepare children to continue their family's occupation or enable them to choose a different occupation? Could traditional occupational knowledge be incorporated into modern education without reproducing social inequality? To what extent should the state intervene in the organisation of elementary education?

This paper examines these questions from a historical perspective.

2. Historical Background

The educational system of the Madras Presidency had developed under complex social and political circumstances. Missionary institutions, government schools, indigenous educational institutions and private organisations all contributed to the expansion of education. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, access to education gradually increased, although substantial inequalities remained.

The Justice Party and later the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements placed considerable emphasis on social equality and the expansion of educational opportunities among communities that had historically experienced limited access to formal education. The colonial government's educational policies had also encouraged the gradual development of mass education, but financial constraints remained a major problem.

After independence, the Madras State faced the challenge of expanding elementary education while operating with limited financial resources. Population growth, increasing demand for schooling and the need to reduce illiteracy placed considerable pressure on the government.

It was within this context that Rajaji proposed an alternative approach to elementary education.

3. Rajaji's Educational Ideas

Rajaji's educational thinking was influenced by his broader views concerning social responsibility, self-reliance, discipline and the relationship between education and productive work. He believed that education should not be completely separated from practical life.

The Hereditary Education Scheme was therefore presented as an educational experiment intended to combine academic instruction with vocational experience. Instead of keeping children in school for the entire working day, the scheme proposed that a portion of their time should be devoted to learning productive work associated with their family.

The underlying argument was that elementary education should develop both intellectual and practical abilities. According to its supporters, such an arrangement could reduce the financial burden of schooling while also preventing educated unemployment.

However, the scheme became controversial because the proposed vocational component was closely associated with the occupation of the child's family.

4. Introduction of the Hereditary Education Scheme

The scheme was introduced during Rajaji's tenure as Chief Minister of Madras State. It was initially associated with changes in elementary education and was implemented in selected areas before being extended more widely.

The central idea was that children would receive school education for part of the day and acquire practical occupational knowledge for the remaining period. In rural areas, for example, children from agricultural families could learn agricultural activities, while children belonging to artisan families could acquire knowledge of traditional crafts.

The government considered this approach economical and socially useful. It was argued that the existing system placed excessive financial demands on the state and that practical training could make education more relevant to village life.

The scheme consequently attempted to establish a connection between:

1. Elementary education
2. Vocational training
3. Family occupation
4. Productive work
5. Rural economic life

5. Objectives of the Scheme

The major objectives attributed to the Hereditary Education Scheme included the following:

5.1 Reduction of Educational Expenditure

The government was concerned about the financial resources required for expanding elementary education. The scheme was expected to reduce the amount of time children spent in formal schooling and thereby lower expenditure on infrastructure and teachers.

5.2 Promotion of Vocational Education

The scheme sought to introduce practical occupational training into elementary education. Rajaji's supporters believed that children should acquire useful skills rather than receive education that was entirely theoretical.

5.3 Prevention of Educated Unemployment

Another argument in favour of the scheme was that academic education alone might produce young people who lacked practical employment opportunities. Vocational training was expected to provide children with skills connected with productive activity.

5.4 Preservation of Traditional Skills

Traditional occupations such as agriculture, weaving, carpentry, metalwork and other crafts required specialised knowledge. Supporters argued that the scheme could help preserve such occupational skills.

5.5 Integration of Education with Rural Life

A large proportion of the population lived in rural areas. The scheme attempted to make education relevant to village society by linking school learning with local economic activities.

6. Structure and Working of the Scheme

The most distinctive feature of the scheme was the division of children's time between formal schooling and practical occupational learning.

Instead of following a conventional full-day school system, children were expected to attend school for a shorter period and spend the remaining time learning productive activities. The occupational component was closely connected with the family's traditional occupation.

The scheme therefore represented a departure from the conventional understanding of elementary education. School education was no longer viewed as an activity completely separated from the economic life of the household.

The implementation, however, generated practical difficulties. Questions arose concerning the quality and supervision of occupational training, the role of parents, the suitability of traditional occupations for children, and the relationship between vocational training and formal education.

7. Opposition to the Scheme

The scheme encountered strong opposition from political parties, teachers, social reformers, intellectuals and sections of the public.

The most serious criticism concerned the relationship between education and caste. In traditional Indian society, occupations had often been associated with caste and hereditary social structures. Critics therefore argued that directing children towards their parents' occupations could reproduce the existing social hierarchy.

Opponents feared that children from disadvantaged communities might be prevented from using education as a means of social mobility. Education had increasingly come to be regarded as a pathway through which individuals could move beyond the occupational position of their families.

The criticism can therefore be summarised around several issues:

- Possible reinforcement of caste-based occupations

- Reduction in children's educational opportunities
- Restriction of social mobility
- Unequal access to modern employment
- Inadequate academic instruction
- Greater burden on children from economically weaker families

The phrase “**Kula Kalvi**”, meaning education connected with one's hereditary occupation or community, became politically powerful because it captured the central criticism of the scheme.

8. Role of the Dravidian Movement

The opposition to the scheme was particularly strong among the Dravidian political movement. Leaders associated with the Dravidian movement interpreted the policy within the larger framework of their struggle against caste hierarchy and social inequality.

The Dravidian movement had long criticised hereditary social structures and argued for equality, rationalism and educational opportunity. The Hereditary Education Scheme therefore became an important political issue.

The **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)** and other opponents mobilised public opinion against the scheme. Public meetings, political campaigns and legislative debates contributed to increasing pressure on the Rajaji government.

The controversy consequently transformed an educational policy into a major political and social issue.

9. Teachers and Public Response

Teachers also expressed concerns regarding the implementation of the scheme. The introduction of a new educational structure required changes in school administration, teaching practices and curriculum organisation.

Parents and members of the public reacted differently. Some supporters considered practical occupational education valuable, particularly in rural communities. Others feared that the scheme would reduce children's opportunities for higher education.

The public debate therefore reflected a larger transformation taking place in Tamil society. Families increasingly viewed modern education as a means of entering government employment, professions and new economic sectors. Consequently, a policy that appeared to restrict educational mobility encountered substantial resistance.

10. Caste and Social Mobility

The most important historical dimension of the controversy was the question of **social mobility**.

Traditional occupations were not simply economic activities. In many parts of India, occupation had historically been connected with caste identity and social status. Therefore, a policy that linked a child's education with parental occupation could be interpreted as reinforcing inherited social structures.

Education, by contrast, had become an important mechanism for challenging such structures. Access to schooling enabled individuals from different social backgrounds to acquire new skills and enter occupations outside their traditional communities.

The debate over the Hereditary Education Scheme thus represented a conflict between two different models of education:

Model	1	–	Hereditary/Vocational	Model:
	Family occupation → Practical training → Continuation of occupational skills			
Model	2	–	Modern Mobility	Model:
	Formal education → Qualification → Occupational choice → Social mobility			

The historical significance of the controversy lies in this fundamental conflict.

11. Political Controversy and Rajaji's Resignation

The controversy surrounding the scheme contributed to increasing political pressure on Rajaji's government. Opposition to the policy became part of a wider criticism of his administration.

The issue was debated within the Congress organisation and the Madras State legislature. The growing opposition eventually weakened Rajaji's political position.

Rajaji resigned as Chief Minister in 1954. After his resignation, K. Kamaraj became Chief Minister of Madras State. The new administration reconsidered several policies associated with the previous government, and the Hereditary Education Scheme was subsequently withdrawn.

The withdrawal demonstrated the difficulty of implementing educational reforms when they conflict with widely held expectations concerning equality and social advancement.

12. Kamaraj and the Expansion of Education

The subsequent educational policies of Kamaraj represented a substantially different approach. His administration emphasised the expansion of schools and improvement of access to education.

The period of Kamaraj's chief ministership witnessed considerable attention to the expansion of elementary and secondary education. The political importance of education increased, and schooling came to be associated increasingly with social development and opportunity.

The contrast between Rajaji's Hereditary Education Scheme and Kamaraj's emphasis on expansion illustrates two different approaches to educational policy.

Rajaji emphasised **practicality, economy and vocational orientation**, whereas the later policy direction placed greater emphasis on **wider access and expansion of formal education**.

13. Historical Significance

The Hereditary Education Scheme occupies an important place in the educational history of Tamil Nadu for several reasons.

First, it was one of the earliest major post-independence attempts to integrate vocational training with elementary education in the state.

Second, it demonstrated the difficulties involved in transferring traditional occupational knowledge into a modern educational system.

Third, the controversy revealed the importance of caste and social mobility in educational policy.

Fourth, the opposition to the scheme demonstrated the increasing political influence of the Dravidian movement.

Finally, the episode contributed to a broader understanding that educational policy in Tamil Nadu could not be separated from questions of equality, caste, economic opportunity and political representation.

14. Critical Evaluation

From a historical perspective, the Hereditary Education Scheme contained both progressive and problematic elements.

Its progressive feature was its recognition that education should have practical relevance. The emphasis on vocational skills, productive work and local economic knowledge anticipated later discussions about skill-based education and vocational education.

However, the major weakness was the connection between vocational training and hereditary occupation. In a society where occupation could be closely associated with caste, such a connection created the possibility of reproducing existing social inequalities.

The scheme also faced difficulties because educational aspirations had changed significantly in post-independence India. Families increasingly wanted their children to obtain qualifications that could lead to occupations outside traditional hereditary work.

Thus, the failure of the scheme cannot be explained solely by political opposition. It must also be understood in relation to changing social aspirations and the growing importance of education as an instrument of mobility.

15. Conclusion

Rajaji's Hereditary Education Scheme was a significant but short-lived experiment in the educational history of post-independent Madras State. Introduced in the context of financial constraints and concerns about the relevance of conventional schooling, the scheme attempted to combine formal education with vocational training and traditional occupational knowledge.

Its historical importance, however, lies primarily in the controversy it generated. The scheme raised fundamental questions about whether education should reproduce traditional occupations or provide individuals with the freedom to choose new forms of employment. In Tamil Nadu, where questions of caste, equality and social mobility were central to political life, the hereditary character of the scheme became its greatest weakness.

The opposition to the scheme demonstrated that education had acquired a meaning beyond literacy and occupational training. It had become an important instrument of social transformation. The eventual withdrawal of the scheme marked the triumph of a broader conception of educational opportunity in which children's futures were not necessarily determined by the occupation of their parents.

The history of the Hereditary Education Scheme therefore provides valuable insight into the interaction between **education, caste, politics, economy and social change** in post-independence Tamil Nadu. It remains an important case study for understanding the evolution of educational policy and the continuing debate between vocational education and equal educational opportunity.

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