

**WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN TAMIL NADU AFTER INDEPENDENCE:
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Abstract. This study explores the historical trajectory of women's education and empowerment in Tamil Nadu from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Drawing on government reports, policy documents, and scholarly analyses, the research highlights the role of the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW), the Dravidian movement, and literacy initiatives such as Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam in promoting women's social and economic participation. The findings reveal that government-led reforms, including free education schemes, scholarships, and gender-specific quotas, significantly improved literacy rates, especially among rural women. Furthermore, access to technical and higher education expanded, leading to women's increased representation in fields such as medicine, engineering, and information technology. The study concludes that Tamil Nadu became one of India's most progressive states in terms of women's education, setting an important precedent for gender equity and social development in the broader Indian context.

Keywords: *Tamil Nadu, women's education, empowerment, literacy, gender equity, Dravidian movement, education and social development.*

Introduction.

After India's independence in 1947, the government prioritized reforming the education system, raising literacy rates, and promoting women's participation in social and economic life. In this process, the southern state of Tamil Nadu played a distinctive role. Influenced by the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement and later the policies of DMK and AIADMK, the state advanced gender equality and expanded women's access to education.

Tamil Nadu introduced several welfare measures free education, textbooks, uniforms and scholarships for girls and saw steady growth in female participation in vocational and higher education. Supported by a reformist socio-cultural environment, the state achieved higher female literacy rates than many northern Indian states. Nonetheless, challenges such as economic disparities, rural–urban divides, and traditional attitudes limited full progress. Even so, Tamil Nadu consistently outperformed many regions, underscoring its unique trajectory.

This article analyzes the regional features of women's education in Tamil Nadu after independence, focusing on educational policies, statistical data, socio-political influences, and the role of education in social development.

Methodology. The study employs a historical-analytical and comparative approach. The main sources include policy documents of the Governments of Tamil Nadu and India, Census of India (1951–2001) statistics, as well as UNESCO and World Bank reports and relevant scholarly literature. Historical analysis was applied to trace the evolution of women's education in Tamil Nadu between 1947 and 2000, while comparative analysis highlighted differences with other Indian states. Statistical interpretation was used to examine literacy and enrollment trends. The scope of the study primarily covers the period 1947–2000 and focuses on the specific regional features of Tamil Nadu.

Result and Discussion. The findings of the study indicate that, in the post-independence period, Tamil Nadu achieved significant progress in women's education compared to many other Indian states.

Firstly, the introduction of free education for girls, free textbooks and uniforms, and scholarship schemes contributed to a rapid rise in female literacy.

Secondly, women's participation in vocational training and higher education institutions steadily increased, enabling them to play a more active role in social and economic life.

Thirdly, the reformist socio-political movements and supportive cultural environment in Tamil Nadu fostered educational advancement, resulting in female literacy rates higher than those of most northern states.

However, certain obstacles persisted, including economic inequality, rural–urban disparities, and traditional social attitudes, which partly restricted further progress. Despite these challenges, Tamil Nadu consistently outperformed many other regions, reflecting the emergence of a distinct regional model of women's educational development.

Tamil Nadu, located in the southernmost part of India, is one of the country's largest states, ranking tenth in terms of area and sixth in terms of population. Geographically, it borders Kerala in the west, Karnataka in the northwest, Andhra Pradesh and the Union Territory of Puducherry in the north, while its southern coast connects via Pamban Island to Sri Lanka's northern provinces through an international maritime boundary. The majority of the population speaks Tamil, the official language of the state. Chennai, the capital, serves as an important economic, cultural, and administrative center [1].

Tamil Nadu has historically been a socially, culturally, and economically advanced region. Sources dating back to the 4th century BCE record its foundations by Dravidian peoples. In antiquity, Tamils maintained trade links with Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Prior to the spread of Christianity, the region was ruled by powerful kingdoms such as the Cholas (907–1215), Cheras (800–1102), and Pandyas (4th century BCE–1759 CE) [2]. Later dynasties, including the Pallavas and Chalukyas, also exercised authority over Tamil territories. To this day, Tamil Nadu holds a distinctive place in the history of literature, architecture, art, and crafts. Many dynasties, including the Anuradhapura rulers, patronized various art forms, contributing to the flourishing of Dravidian culture [3].

Within the early Tamil polity, there is no clear evidence of formal education for women. However, certain historical records and archaeological findings suggest that women actively participated in art, handicrafts, and religious rituals [4]. Nevertheless, due to the prevailing patriarchal system, women lacked official rights to institutionalized education.

European colonial influence in Tamil Nadu began in the 17th century, initially through the establishment of trading ports. Britain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and France all sought to strengthen their foothold in the region. By the 19th century, however, the British had consolidated control. Madras (modern Chennai) became the administrative center of colonial authority.

After India's independence in 1947, the region was incorporated into Madras State. On January 14, 1969, it was officially renamed Tamil Nadu, meaning "Land of the Tamils." Today, Tamil Nadu is considered one of India's most progressive states, with notable achievements in women's education. Female literacy rates in the state are above the national average, reflecting significant enrollment of girls at both school and higher education levels.

From the earliest years of independence, one of the key priorities of the state government was to expand women's participation in education. In 1948, the Government of India established the University Education Commission under the chairmanship of Professor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1948–1949) [5]. The Commission recommended the expansion of primary education to increase literacy, development of technical and vocational training, and encouragement of women's entry into higher education. It also addressed issues such as course duration, the balance between teaching and research, examinations, student discipline, and the working conditions of teachers. As a result, in 1949 the number of state-funded girls' schools in Tamil Nadu increased, and the University of Madras introduced special scholarships for women. By 1950, female literacy had reached 13 percent, compared to only 8 percent in 1941.

The Constitution of India (1950) guaranteed equal educational rights to all citizens. Alongside this, efforts were made to promote Hindi as a national language, while Tamil Nadu introduced Tamil as the medium of instruction in primary schools. Schools for non-Brahmin castes, including Dalits and Shudras, were expanded, and special emphasis was placed on establishing schools for girls in rural areas.

From the earliest post-independence period, the Madras (later Tamil Nadu) government emphasized science and technology, making extensive use of newspapers, radio, and television to raise public awareness. Campaigns stressed that women, like men, should receive education. Tamil poets such as Avvaiyar (12th century), Subramania Bharati (1882–1921), and Bharathidasan (1891–1964) inspired the social movement by promoting gender equality, women's education, widow remarriage, and criticizing caste hierarchy, child marriage, and dowry practices [6].

In 1952, the Indian government established the Secondary Education Commission (Mudaliar Commission) to reform middle and secondary education. Its recommendations included a three-year system following primary schooling, expansion of technical and vocational education, and the allocation of scholarships for girls. Within this framework, vocational schools were founded in Tamil Nadu in 1953, and women's colleges were opened in Chennai. Between 1951 and 1957, female enrollment in secondary schools rose by 20 percent. Educated women during this period were primarily employed in teaching, cottage industries, nursing, and small-scale trade.

During the first decade of independence, the Government of India continued to implement reforms to expand the education system, and the Tamil Nadu state administration actively aligned with these changes. School curricula placed increasing emphasis on Tamil culture and history, women gained easier access to higher education, and teacher training institutions expanded. By 1950, women comprised about 10 percent of university students in Tamil Nadu; by 1957, this figure had grown to 18 percent. Similarly, the number of primary schools in the state increased from 3,000 in 1947 to more than 5,000 in 1957, while the number of secondary schools grew by 50 percent [7].

In 1958, the Government of India established the National Committee on Women's Education (महिला शिक्षा के लिए राष्ट्रीय समिति) with the objective of addressing obstacles hindering women's education and ensuring parity with boys in literacy levels [8]. The Committee recommended a series of nationwide measures, including:

- combating traditional misconceptions regarding women's education;
- recruiting female teachers;
- introducing special quotas for girls in higher education;

- providing state benefits to 80% of girls aged 6–11;
- promoting gender equality between boys and girls;
- establishing a National Council for Women's Education.

The Committee's recommendations also had a profound impact in Tamil Nadu, where policies were introduced to expand free and compulsory primary education, provide mid-day meal schemes, establish scholarships and grants for girls, and open new schools.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Dravidian Movement (द्रविड़ आंदोलन)[10] played a transformative role in Tamil Nadu, particularly in promoting women's rights and education. Leaders such as E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) fought against caste-based discrimination and championed opportunities for both lower-caste communities and women. After Dravidian parties came to power in 1967, special initiatives such as free courses for girls and rural education programs for women were introduced. Scholarship schemes and other reforms boosted female enrollment in secondary and higher education, and by 1970, women accounted for 25% of students in higher education, compared to only 10% in 1951 [11].

Language policy also played a crucial role. Previously, education had been conducted primarily in Hindi and English, which created barriers for rural girls. The Dravidian Movement advocated the use of Tamil as the medium of instruction, which enabled broader access and raised literacy rates among local girls. Furthermore, the movement spearheaded the establishment of women's colleges and universities. By the late 1960s, the number of vocational colleges in Tamil Nadu had increased by 50%. In 1969, the Tamil Nadu Rural Women's University, the first of its kind in India, was founded. This marked a turning point in redefining women not only as homemakers and mothers, but also as independent contributors to society. The movement also campaigned against early marriage and promoted women's participation in the workforce [12].

As a result of these efforts, caste hierarchies weakened, and women particularly those from lower castes gained access to education. Free schooling, scholarships, and targeted quotas enabled greater entry into universities. Thus, the Dravidian Movement was instrumental in establishing Tamil Nadu as one of India's most literate states today.

The state's chief ministers also contributed to shaping progressive educational policies. Leaders such as Tanguturi Prakasam (1946–1947), O.P. Ramasami (1947), P.S. Krishnaswami Raja (1949–1950, the last Chief Minister of Madras), K. Kamaraj (1954–1963), M. Bhaktavatsalam (1963–1967), C.N. Ramachandran (1977–1987), and J. Jayalalithaa (1991–1996) all undertook significant initiatives. Among them, K. Kamaraj is remembered as one of the most influential educational reformers in Tamil Nadu. His policies made the state one of the first in

India to implement free education schemes. Female enrollment increased significantly, and Tamil Nadu emerged as one of the states with the highest female literacy rates.

In 1962, Kamaraj launched the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, initially a state-level program that later became a nationwide policy. During his tenure, more than 13,000 new schools were built, including dedicated institutions for girls. Special stipends, grants, and college quotas for female students further strengthened women's educational participation.

Kamaraj's contributions earned him the title "Father of the Educational Revolution" in India, and his reforms laid the foundation for Tamil Nadu's emergence as an advanced educational hub. Throughout the 1960s, the government emphasized girls' completion of primary education, although their participation in secondary and higher education remained relatively limited. To address this, scholarship and free-learning material programs were introduced for female students. In 1967, Tamil Nadu expanded the mid-day meal scheme to rural schools, which encouraged millions of underprivileged children, especially girls to attend school. Consequently, female enrollment increased by 30%. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, additional focus was placed on vocational and higher education, leading to the expansion of technical colleges and the construction of hostels for female students at the University of Madras.

Between 1947 and 1970, Tamil Nadu witnessed remarkable progress in women's education under the leadership of Rajaji, Kamaraj, and Bhaktavatsalam. Policies emphasized primary, secondary, technical, and higher education for girls [13]. The state government, in cooperation with the central administration, sought to expand women's academic opportunities, promote scientific education, and reduce rural inequalities [14].

In the early 1970s, the Tamil Nadu government launched fully free education programs for girls in schools and colleges, alongside scholarships for those from low-income and rural families. By 1980, girls' school attendance had risen to 70% (up from 50% in 1971). Female literacy improved from 26.9% in 1971 to 40.4% in 1980 [15].

In 1974, vocational colleges for women were expanded, offering training in tailoring, nursing, teaching, and emerging fields such as computer technology. This period marked the shift from perceiving women solely as homemakers to recognizing them as part of the skilled workforce. By the 1980s, women were increasingly entering social services and professional domains.

The 1980s and 1990s were particularly significant for women's education in Tamil Nadu. The government promoted women's entry into STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). In 1981, fully free primary and secondary education was introduced for girls,

followed in 1985 by special grants and scholarships for rural women. Low-income families received targeted financial assistance to help their daughters enter higher education. As a result, between 1981 and 1990, girls' participation in primary and secondary education rose from 70% to 85%, and female literacy increased from 50% to 65%, with growing numbers of women from rural and poor backgrounds enrolling in universities [16].

In 1983, the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW) was established with the primary aim of promoting women's active participation in society and enhancing their socio-economic status [17]. The corporation introduced various initiatives, including the formation of self-help groups, vocational training programs, and micro-credit schemes designed to empower women both socially and economically. These measures enabled thousands of women to achieve economic independence and greater social recognition.

The Tamil Nadu government also strengthened women's economic autonomy by expanding opportunities in small-scale industries and entrepreneurship. In 1984, technical institutions were established for women, followed by the introduction of information technology courses in 1986, which significantly increased female participation in the workforce.

To further encourage women's access to higher and technical education, the government introduced special quotas for girls in 1985 and, in 1988, Bharathiar University launched exclusive programs for women, particularly in STEM fields, supported by government-funded grants. By the late 1980s, women accounted for nearly 40% of university students, with growing enrollment from rural areas. During this period, women increasingly pursued studies not only in traditional fields such as arts and education, but also in technology, medicine, and engineering.

The National Education Policy of 1986 (NEP-1986) further reinforced the inclusion of women in education. It emphasized free textbooks, school uniforms, and stipends for girls, while also improving educational infrastructure. Special provisions, such as free hostels and transportation facilities, were made for rural women, making access to distant schools and universities more feasible. As a result, female literacy in rural Tamil Nadu rose from 40% in 1981 to 60% in 1990, with increased enrollment in vocational and higher education [18].

This period also marked a cultural shift. By the mid-1980s, parents began prioritizing their daughters' education over early marriage. Popular culture including cinema and literature helped to shape public opinion, highlighting women's rights and the importance of education. Women themselves increasingly aspired to professional independence and active roles in public life.

In the 1990s, the Tamil Nadu government expanded welfare measures to further support female education. In 1991, free educational materials, school uniforms, transport facilities, and

scholarships were provided to rural girls. In 1995, the Midday Meal Scheme was expanded to cover girls in both primary and secondary schools, encouraging greater enrollment and retention rates. As a result, female literacy and school completion rates improved substantially, with increasing numbers of girls pursuing higher education in law, business, engineering, and information technology.

During this decade, the government also prioritized women's representation in higher education by expanding quotas in universities (1992), launching STEM-related grant programs (1995), and designing special schemes for rural and economically disadvantaged girls (1998). Consequently, by the late 1990s, women constituted 50% of university students, with significant participation in postgraduate and doctoral programs. Popular fields included medicine, engineering, IT, and entrepreneurship.

Between 1970 and 2000, women's education in Tamil Nadu expanded remarkably. Free education programs, vocational colleges, scholarships, and government grants significantly improved female participation in higher education, transforming Tamil Nadu into one of India's leading states in terms of women's literacy.

In the early 2000s, the state launched the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam (Women's Literacy Movement), which provided literacy courses to thousands of women and strengthened self-help groups that enabled small-scale business ventures [19]. Beyond literacy, the movement promoted knowledge in science, technology, modern agriculture, health, and hygiene, thereby increasing women's socio-political engagement and community leadership [20]. This initiative marked a new phase in women's empowerment, consolidating Tamil Nadu's position as a pioneer in women's education and development in India.

Conclusion. In the post-independence period, women's education in Tamil Nadu advanced significantly compared to many other Indian states. Between the 1980s and 2000s, government initiatives such as free education programs, scholarships, quotas in higher education, provision of free textbooks and uniforms, transportation facilities, and hostels greatly increased girls' access to schooling and higher education. As a result, women's participation expanded not only in primary and secondary education but also in vocational training, technical institutes, and universities.

The establishment of the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW) and the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam (Women's Literacy Movement) played a crucial role in enhancing female literacy, promoting economic independence, and encouraging women's active engagement in social life. By the 1990s, women accounted for nearly half of university students, with a growing presence in fields such as medicine, engineering, IT, and business, beyond the

traditionally female-dominated disciplines. Nevertheless, challenges persisted, including economic inequality, rural–urban disparities, and lingering traditional attitudes. Yet, overall progress placed Tamil Nadu among the leading Indian states in women’s education.

In conclusion, the experience of Tamil Nadu demonstrates how the integration of state policies, socio-political movements, and a supportive cultural environment can create a sustainable model for advancing women’s education. This trajectory not only reshaped gender roles within Tamil Nadu but also offers valuable lessons for other regions seeking to strengthen women’s participation in education and socio-economic development.

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