School fire in southern India kills 90 children

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The deaths of 90 young children in a school fire in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has highlighted the appalling state of schools—private and public—throughout the country. The tragedy is one of the consequences of a decade-and-a-half of market reforms, which have led to a steady deterioration of an already inadequate public education system and a proliferation of private schools that are often overcrowded, in shoddy buildings, and largely unregulated.

It was in one of these—the Sri Krishna private school in Kumbakonam—that the fire broke out at around 11 a.m., on July 16. At least 800 children between the ages of 6 and 14 were packed into the three-storey building—most of them in long, narrow classrooms with only one exit. A portion of the building, including the kitchen on the ground floor, was covered by a thatched roof.

According to police and eyewitnesses, the blaze started in the kitchen while the midday meal was being prepared. The thatched roof caught alight and the fire rapidly spread to the rest of the building. All of the teachers and the older children managed to escape, but up to 190 young children were trapped in a single second-floor classroom after the only exit was blocked by flames.

Before the firefighters arrived, local people rushed to try to rescue the children who were crying for help. Using sledgehammers they punched holes, sprayed water into the room and finally created gaps large enough to enter the class room. They saved some of the children but found the bodies of more than 70 piled up near the sole exit to the room. In all, 46 boys and 44 girls died. Another 23 children were seriously injured.

Firefighting and rescue operations were hampered by lack of access to the school, which is located between two residential blocks. It had only one entrance and a single flight of stairs. Firefighters had to demolish walls with the help of cranes to gain proper access. According to eyewitnesses, the fire brigade did not have enough water and had to collect more at a pond several kilometres away.

The fact that the school was able to operate for decades in such conditions is the direct responsibility of successive state governments. Although it is illegal to have thatched roofs on schools, the practice is widespread and largely ignored. Parents and local residents were angry that the school's licence had been renewed as recently as January, when it was clearly a firetrap. "They killed my son who wanted to stand first in the state," one mother, Manjula, told the media.

In a bid to deflect public outrage over the fire, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram immediately blamed the education department and the school management for the tragedy. Four district-level education department officials were suspended and the school's licence cancelled. Five school staff, including the owner, Pulavar Palanichany, his wife and daughter and two cooks, were arrested and charged with negligent homicide and other criminal actions.

State Education Minister C.V. Shanmugam declared that classes would be suspended in schools with thatched roofs for a week, and ordered schools to replace such structures or face closure. It is highly unlikely that the order will be enforced. As one former education official explained in the *Hindu* newspaper, such a move would lead to the closure of 75 percent of the state's elementary schools.

Moreover, the thatched roof at the Sri Krishna school was simply the most glaring safety deficiency. The building lacked even the most basic safety precautions, including fire escapes and exits and fire extinguishers. While a safety code exists, it is rarely enforced.

In the rush to find convenient scapegoats, state authorities and the press are trying to blame the teachers for failing to ensure the safety of the children. District Collector J. Radhakrishnan has instituted an inquiry into charges of "dereliction of duty" against all 24 teachers. Hounded by the media and fearing reprisals, teachers have fled their homes.

It is not clear, however, what the teachers should have done or indeed could have done in the confused circumstances created by a rapidly spreading fire. None of

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them had any training to deal with a fire. There was no established fire drill and no firefighting equipment. To focus blame on the teachers is simply to let the school owner, education authorities and the government off the hook.

The Congress-led national government has stepped in to try to quell anger and concern over the tragedy. Kalanidhi Maran of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) visited the scene. He told the media that he did not think the state government needed assistance from New Delhi, adding: "What we need is enforcement of the laws." While it is currently in opposition at the state level, the DMK is just as responsible as the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) for the conditions of schools in Tamil Nadu, including the lack of adequate inspection.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi visited the area on Sunday, announcing a special package worth 10 million rupees ($US220,000) for the families of the victims and another 2.5 million to replace thatched roofs in school meal centres with proper ones. However, this meagre offer in no way addresses the underlying causes.

There has been a systematic rundown of the public school system as part of the economic restructuring initiated by Congress in the early 1990s and then extended under the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). Government spending on education has fallen to 3 percent of Gross Domestic Product, approximately half of what it was about two decades ago. As a result, public schools, particularly in rural areas, lack many basic facilities or do not exist at all.

Parents have been compelled to turn to the burgeoning private schools system to provide an education for their children. In some cases, these schools offer teaching in English—an added incentive for parents keen for their children to obtain a well-paid job. Many of these schools are grossly inadequate, are not officially registered and flout basic safety, health and education standards. In Tamil Nadu alone, there are an estimated 13,000 private schools.

A BBC report noted: "Most of India's private schools in district towns are dull, claustrophobic, cramped and often derelict structures with no fire safety systems, playgrounds or libraries. Most of these private schools in Tamil Nadu's district towns are located in a warren of congested lanes and by-lanes and school authorities often lock the gates when classes are on to keep the children from slipping out into the traffic...

"In many districts of Tamil Nadu, such English medium schools which are affiliated to state syllabus guidelines are fly-by-night operations. They open up small schools in rented buildings and the authorities and teachers vanish after collecting the annual fees. Though such English medium schools have been around since 1972, regulation has been lax—there were only four inspectors for such schools in Tamil Nadu till recently, when laws were tightened."

An editorial in the *Hindu* lamented the state of the education system: "While universalisation of primary education certainly requires more schools and greater initiative independent of the state, the present tendency of governments is to throw up their hands and fail to allocate the resources needed, especially for recruiting more teachers, providing decent infrastructure, and for raising the quality of learning.

"Instead, an open general licence is given to teaching shops to set up, cut corners, and to flout rules and norms with impunity. Corruption makes it possible for dubious operators of various kinds to flourish in the educational system at various levels. Compromising on safety procedures is definitely not the way to low-cost quality education: where school children are concerned, such compromise is worse than doing nothing at all."

The newspaper expressed the hope that the Congress-led government's new 2 percent tax impost would be used to address the problems. But like Sonia Gandhi's offer to replace thatched roofs, the new tax—which is expected to raise 40-50 billion rupees (approximately $US1 billion) annually—is little more than a drop in the ocean. It is earmarked for basic public education, including the provision of "a nutritious cooked midday meal" for all school children.

For all the current expressions of concern about the Kumbakonam fire, as soon as the immediate anger has died away, politicians, state and national, will quickly drop the issue. After a fire in January in which 50 people died at a wedding hall, the Tamil Nadu state government ordered all public buildings to be fitted with fire alarms and sprinkler systems. Needless to say, the Sri Krishna school in Kumbakonam, along with countless other public buildings across the state, had neither.

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