

OMJASVIN M D @ Chennai

TAMIL Nadu has been witnessing an increase in the number of tribal children getting enrolled in the Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) since 2017, according to data shared by the Union government in the Lok Sabha in August. In fact, the enrolments were higher during the pandemic – academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22 – compared to the previous years.

During the same period, however, states like Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal saw a drop in such enrolments, the data showed.

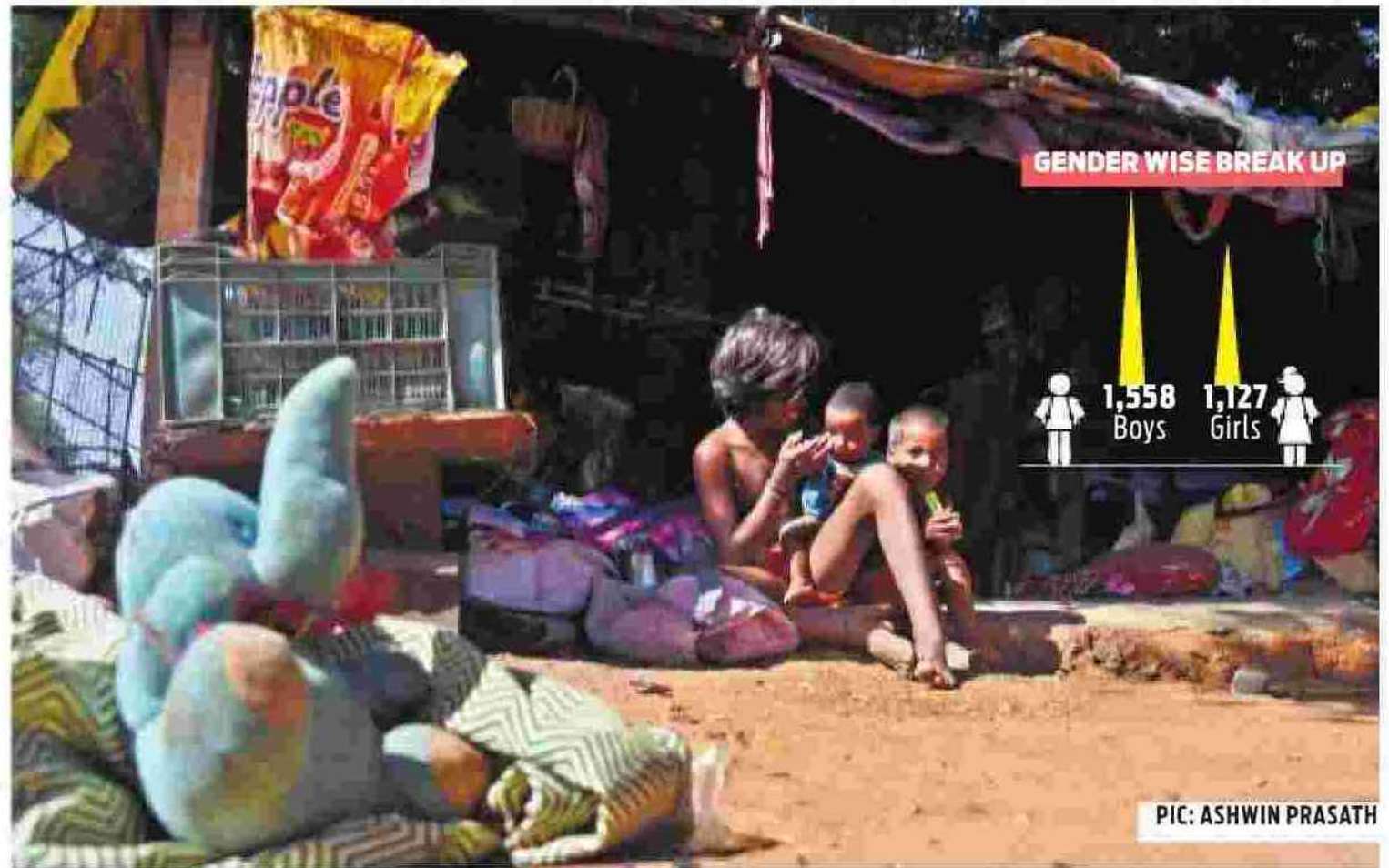
According to sources, regular contact with government officials tasked with taking care of the tribal communities during the pandemic is said to be one of the reasons for this development. Tribal parents got to know about the existence of such schools and started enrolling their children there, the sources added.

EMRS is a residential school system run by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs exclusively for tribal children for classes 6-12. Tamil Nadu has eight such schools. But experts say the State should have more. According to the data on the website of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, out of the 632 such schools in the country, Tamil Nadu has only eight, while at least 18 other states have more such schools than Tamil Nadu.

A senior official with the Directorate of Tribal Welfare said they would keep requesting for more such schools for the State. "Enrolment is generally high in Salem and Namakkal districts," he added.

Accessibility is key

Though there's an increase in admissions, tribal-rights activists said the schools must cover more districts and opened in localities accessible to tribals. KC Murugesan, a tribal rights activist, said the number of schools in the State must be increased in proportion to the population of the students. "While it is appreciable that there is a marginal increase,



PIC: ASHWIN PRASATH

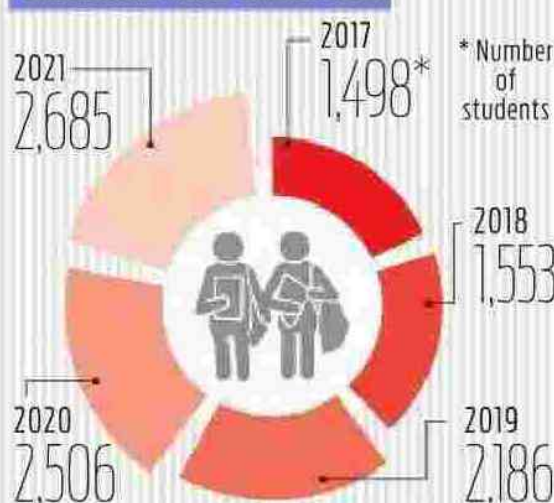
EKALAVYA ENROLMENT INCREASES IN TN

A result of higher awareness about such schools among tribals

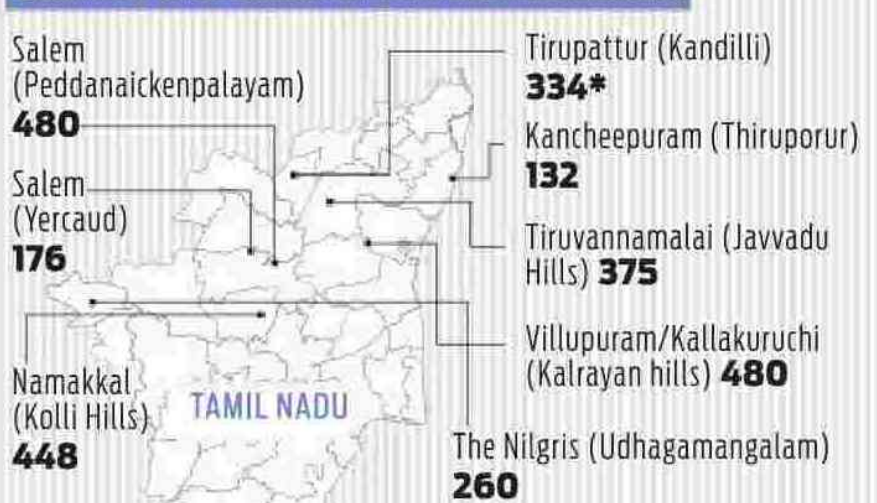
TN has only eight of the 632 Ekalavya schools

18 other states have more such schools than TN; officials say they will keep the pressure on Centre to grant more

GRADUAL RISE SINCE 2017



DISTRICT WISE BREAK UP FOR 2021 ENROLMENT



these schools must be expanded to localities closer to where tribals actually live," he said.

He said that in most parts of the State, the tribals do not understand the concept of residential schools and they wouldn't enrol their children in such schools where they don't get to see them for a longer time. "As a result, they end

up sending their children to nearby government schools, from which they often drop out. This could be prevented in such residential schools," Murugesan said.

Activists said the government must organise awareness campaigns in tribal hamlets on the facilities at the Ekalavya schools like free medical

treatment, food, and hostel.

"The government should convince tribal parents that their children would be taken care of," said Murugesan.

Meanwhile, the Centre has announced that it released ₹2.4 crore for pre-matric scholarships and ₹5.5 crores for post-matric scholarships for ST students in Tamil Nadu.