

## **The Evolution of the Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu - a Historical Study**

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**Abstract:** This paper explains the history and development of the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board, which was started in 2008 by Dr. M. Karunanidhi. It was the first board in India created for the welfare and rights of transgender people. The paper shows how the board helped the community gain legal identity, education, jobs, housing, and healthcare. It also highlights many government orders and schemes such as pension, self-employment support, and free travel that improved their lives. Success stories like K. Prithika Yashini, the first transgender Sub-Inspector, and others show the progress made through these efforts. The paper concludes that the Tamil Nadu government's continuous support, beginning with Dr. Karunanidhi's vision, has changed public attitudes and given transgender persons dignity, respect, and equal opportunities in society.

**Keywords:** Transgender Welfare Board, Tamil Nadu, Dr. M. Karunanidhi, Social Empowerment, Legal Recognition, Inclusive Governance

### **Introduction**

A transgender person is a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex they are born with at birth. They may identify themselves as male, female, or belong to another gender category beyond the traditional identity during the time of birth. Across societies, transgender individuals have experienced discrimination, exclusion, and lack of access to basic rights and opportunities. Social stigma has often limited their education, employment, and healthcare, leaving them among the most marginalised groups in the world.<sup>1</sup> According to Cambridge dictionary, the word 'transgender' is used to describe someone whose gender does

not match the body they were born with.<sup>ii</sup> In India, a major development took place with the 2011 Census, which officially recognised the “third gender” category for the first time. According to census data, about 4.9 lakh (490,000) persons identified under this category, although the actual number is estimated to be higher due to underreporting.<sup>iii</sup> This recognition marked a progressive step toward inclusion and acknowledgement of gender diversity in the country.

At the global level, several initiatives have been launched to promote the rights and dignity of transgender people. The United Nations and its agencies, including UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund), have advocated for equality and protection of gender-diverse communities through policy programmes and awareness campaigns. The UNAIDS “Unbox Me” campaign (2022), for instance, aimed to create understanding about the struggles of transgender children and promote acceptance and inclusivity.<sup>iv</sup> Many countries have also enacted legal reforms that recognise self-identified gender and safeguard the civil rights of transgender persons.

In India, Tamil Nadu emerged as a pioneer in advancing its scheme for the welfare of transgenders. In 2008, the Government of Tamil Nadu established the Transgender Welfare Board, the first of its kind in the country.<sup>v</sup> The board was created to address the social, economic, and legal challenges faced by transgender individuals and to ensure their access to education, housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities. This initiative was a symbol for a significant commitment to social justice and human rights for the transgender community.

The present study aims to trace the historical evolution of the Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu and to analyse its significance on the empowerment and inclusion of transgender persons in society. It highlights Tamil Nadu’s progressive approach to promoting equality and dignity for all citizens.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are to

- study the history of the Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu.
- understand the aims and functions of the Board.

- find out how the Board has helped the transgender community.
- identify the importance of the Board in the empowerment of the community.

### **Meaning and Identity of Transgender People**

The term transgender refers to individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from the sex they are born at birth. Transgender persons may identify as male, female, both, neither, or outside their traditional gender identity.<sup>vi</sup> Their understanding of self may not align with societal expectations, leading to a unique sense of identity that is distinct from cisgender norms. Gender identity is a deeply personal and psychological experience. Many transgender individuals undergo social, medical, or legal steps to express their gender authentically. Globally, the recognition of transgender identity has evolved over time, with increasing legal and social acknowledgement in many countries, including India.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Early References about Transgender community**

The history of the transgender community in Tamil Nadu can be understood by looking at different time periods, beginning from the early Sangam Age. During the Sangam Age, which was around 300 BCE to 300 CE, Tamil society already knew that some people did not fit fully into the idea of “man” or “woman.” Important Sangam books such as *Purananuru* and *Agananuru* use words like “Pedi” and “Ali” to describe such persons. These simple words in the poems show that people with different gender identities lived openly in Tamil society more than two thousand years ago. These early literary references prove that the community was not new, but had long been part of Tamil life.<sup>viii</sup>

In the period after the Sangam Age, from 300 CE to 800 CE, Tamil scholars continued to write about gender in a clear and organised way. The commentaries of the classical grammar text *Tolkappiyam* explain three kinds of gender: Aan (male), Pen (female), and Ali (third gender). This shows that Tamil thinkers understood that gender was not only two types. These writings show that the idea of a third gender was well known and accepted in Tamil thought.<sup>ix</sup>

In the early medieval period, from about 800 CE to 1300 CE, many records from the Chola and Pandya kingdoms show that transgender persons continued to live and work in society. Temple

records and old Tamil writings mention performers and helpers who did not follow common gender roles. In the Chola period, the Rajarajesvara Temple inscription (No. 66, north enclosure) lists several women by names connected to famous shrine sites, including one called Ali (Tiruvali), indicating the use of such community names in temple records.<sup>x</sup>

In the later medieval and pre-colonial period, from 1300 CE to 1800 CE, Tamil society saw changes in rule and culture, but the transgender community still remained visible. Old notes from the Nayak and Maratha periods mention people who took part in folk arts and local events. Even though the writings from this time are fewer, they still show that people with different gender identities lived in villages and towns and were part of daily life. During the British period, from 1800 CE to 1947 CE, the situation became more difficult for the community. The British Government brought strict laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which wrongly listed many groups, including transgender persons, as “criminals.” British reports also used the word “eunuchs” in a negative way.<sup>xi</sup> These laws pushed the community away from their earlier social roles and caused great hardship.

After India became independent in 1947, change started slowly. In Tamil Nadu, transgender persons began to receive more attention from social groups and the government. From the 1990s onward, activists and officials worked to support the Thirunangai community. Understanding transgender identity is essential for formulating inclusive policies and welfare programmes. Recognition of gender plurality at both societal and governmental levels is the first step toward reducing discrimination and ensuring equality for transgender persons.

In Tamil Nadu, transgender people are known as Thirunangai (திருநங்கை) referring to transgender women and Thirunambi (திருநம்பி) referring to transgender men.<sup>xii</sup> In 2008, a 25-year-old transgender woman named Pooja from Salem, Tamil Nadu, faced many difficulties because

she did not have any proof of her identity in government documents. She was not willing to identify herself as either male or female since all official forms only had two options: ‘M’ for male and ‘F’ for female. This made it hard for her to get basic facilities and recognition. Understanding this

problem, the Tamil Nadu Government took an important step by officially recognising transgender

persons as individuals. Pooja was given a civic ration card that had the letter 'T' in the gender column instead of 'M' or 'F', marking her as transgender. The Tamil Nadu Consumer Goods Corporation also recognised the 'T' category in their records. This was the first time in India that the government officially recognised a third gender in its documents. This step became a model for the whole country and helped transgender persons get admission in schools, colleges, hospitals, and other institutions by using 'T' in the gender column. It was a major move towards giving identity and respect to the transgender community in Tamil Nadu.<sup>xiii</sup>

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### **Social Status and Problems of the Transgender Community**

Transgender persons have historically faced marginalisation and social exclusion in many societies. In India, they were often denied access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing, which limited their social and economic development. Many transgender individuals experience stigma, harassment, and discrimination in both public and private spaces, which affects their mental and physical well-being.<sup>xiv</sup> The lack of official recognition and legal protection further increased their chances for their discrimination. According to the 2011 Census, while 4.9 lakh people identified as transgender in India, many more remain uncounted due to fear of social stigma. Social beliefs also influenced family acceptance, community participation, and access to public services, making it difficult for transgender persons to live with dignity.<sup>xv</sup>

Addressing these social challenges requires awareness, legal protection, and targeted welfare measures. Understanding the social status and problems of transgender persons is important for planning effective policies.

### **Formation of the Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu (15 April 2008)**

The Tamil Nadu Aravanigal Welfare Board was established on 15 April 2008 which functions under the Department of Social Welfare, becoming the first government initiative of its kind in India. The main objective for the creation of this board was to ensure safety and welfare to

the transgender people in the state. The Board was created to address the social, economic, and legal challenges faced by transgender persons and to provide them with access to education, healthcare, employment, and housing. The Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu was started by the then chief minister, Dr. M. Karunanidhi. The Board worked to support the needs of the transgender community.<sup>xvi</sup> The government also arranged for gender reconstruction surgeries to be done safely in government hospitals. This helped prevent infections that could happen when the surgeries were done as rituals. The Board also made it possible for transgender people to get family ration cards, identity cards, and voter ID cards, helping them become part of society more fully.<sup>xvii</sup>

In a case filed for the welfare of the Aravanis, the Supreme Court gave a judgment on 15 April 2014. In this judgment, the Court declared the Aravanis community as the “third gender.” The order stated that, apart from men and women, transgender people should be officially recognised as the third gender. The Court also explained that the term “transgender” usually refers to people who have changed from male to female. However, the third gender includes people with many different gender identities. Since the word “transgender” does not cover all of them, the Supreme Court decided that the term “third gender” is more suitable. Following this judgment, in 2017, the Government of Tamil Nadu ordered that the name of the “Aravani Welfare Board” be changed to the “Tamil Nadu Third Gender Welfare Board.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Functions of the Board**

- To implement the schemes decided by the Tamil Nadu Aravanis Welfare Board in all the districts of the state through the District Social Welfare officers.<sup>xix</sup>
- To issue transgender identity cards, ration cards, and other documents.
- To provide training for self-employment and create self-help groups.
- To support transgender hostels and housing needs.
- To raise awareness about transgender rights and social equality.
- To promote social inclusion and participation in public life.<sup>xx</sup>

By institutionalizing transgender welfare, Tamil Nadu became a precedent for other states in India. The Board represents a significant step towards recognising the rights of transgender persons and ensuring their empowerment through structured state support.

### **Organization of the Board**

The Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board functions under the Chairmanship of the Minister for Social Welfare. It has both official and non-official members, including representatives from the transgender community. The State level committee includes Commissioner of Social Welfare as the Chair person and Director of Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology or a representative nominated by him/her, Director of Institute of Mental Health or a representative nominated by him/her and Transgender representative nominated by Chairperson as members of the committee.<sup>xxi</sup> At the district level, District Collectors act as heads of the committees to identify and support beneficiaries. The Board ensures that every district has local transgender representatives so that help can reach everyone.<sup>xxii</sup> The Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board is headed by the Hon'ble Minister for Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme as Chairperson. The Board includes 11 official members and 12 transgender persons as non-official members, ensuring equal participation of government representatives and community members in decision-making.

### **Welfare Schemes (2008–2011)**

In its early years, the Board introduced many useful schemes to improve the lives of transgender people. Training was given in Fine Arts free of cost to make transgender persons financially independent.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Board also helped with money to start small businesses. Many people received sewing machines and training to make fashion jewellery with a subsidy of Rs. 1,68,360 to improve the livelihood of the Aravanis and to enhance their dignity. The amount was to be provided to the 'Sister Foundation' for setting up production centers for making modern beauty ornaments using Aravanis.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## **Transgender Self Help Groups**

In the fifth conference of the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board held on 15.10.2009, it was decided to form transgender self-help groups. Each group would have 7 to 8 members. The main aim was to improve their livelihood by helping them earn a better income.<sup>xxv</sup> The government introduced a 25% subsidy for Transgender Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that are ready to start income-generating activities. Business project proposals from these SHGs were received through the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board. Support was also given for training, formation costs, and funds to create new groups under the Mahalir Thittam scheme of the Rural Development Department. In each district, a District Level Committee was formed with the District Collector as Chairperson to evaluate these project proposals. The scheme was implemented to provide training, marketing tie-ups, and field-level monitoring for transgender SHGs through registered Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).<sup>xxvi</sup> For example, Rs. 20,000 was given to Ms. V. Kausalya (Aravani) to start an idly shop in 2010<sup>xxvii</sup>.

By 2009–2010, the Board had issued 2,411 identity cards, 1,211 ration cards, 335 free land pattas, distributed 111 free sewing machines, provided self-employment grant of Rs. 20,000 to 320 persons, done free sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) to 49 transgenders, provided education grants to 2 persons<sup>xxviii</sup> and issued medical insurance card under Kalaignar Kaapittu thittam to 585 transgender people.<sup>xxix</sup>

## **Transgender Day (April 15)**

In 2011, the Government of Tamil Nadu declared 15th April to be celebrated every year as Transgender Day in recognition of the struggles and achievements of the transgender community. This day serves to promote awareness, equality, and respect for transgender persons across the state.<sup>xxx</sup> The Government of Tamil Nadu instituted an award to honour third-gender individuals who have risen in life through their own determination and hard work, without any external support, and who serve as an inspiration to others in the community. This award is presented every year on 15th April, observed as Third Gender Day, by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.<sup>xxxi</sup> In 2024, the award was presented to Ms. Sandiya from Kanyakumari District in recognition of her remarkable achievements and service to society.<sup>xxxii</sup>

## **Welfare Schemes Since 2012**

### **Community Certificate**

Third gender candidates who do not have a community certificate are to be considered under the Most Backward Class (MBC) category. However, those belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities will continue to be treated as per their respective community classifications.

### **Reservation in Employment**

Third gender candidates who hold identity cards and identify themselves as ‘female’ can be considered under both the 30% reservation for women and the 70% general category (for men and women). Those who identify themselves as ‘male’ will be considered under the 70% general category (for men and women).<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### **Pension Scheme**

In 2011 the Government of Tamil Nadu decided to provide a monthly pension of Rs. 1,000 to all destitute transgender persons who are economically weak and above 40 years of age. This welfare measure aims to ensure financial security and social support for elderly transgender individuals who have limited sources of income and livelihood opportunities.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **Introduction of Mobile App**

In 2024, the Government of Tamil Nadu launched a mobile application named “**Thirunangaikal**” to help transgender persons improve their livelihood and easily access various government welfare schemes. This app marked an important step toward digital empowerment, making it easier for the transgender community to stay informed about welfare measures and avail themselves of benefits without difficulty.<sup>xxxv</sup>

From 2025 onwards, all transgender persons in Tamil Nadu can travel free of cost in public transportation by showing their identity cards. This scheme is significant because it helps

transgender people move freely, reduces their financial burden, and promotes social inclusion and equality in everyday life.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

These steps show the continuous efforts made by the government to ensure equality, respect, and livelihood opportunities for the transgender community.

### **Success Stories and Empowerment**

The seeds planted by Dr. Karunanidhi have grown into many success stories. In 2020, transgender persons in Chengalpattu opened a grocery shop called “Thiru Stores” with the help of volunteers. This became a model for group efforts and financial independence.

K. Prithika Yashini made history in 2017 by becoming India’s first transgender Sub-Inspector of Police through the Tamil Nadu Police Department. Her achievement showed that with opportunity, transgender persons can succeed in any profession.

Many transgender persons today have become successful in media, arts, and business. Padmini, a transgender woman, now works as a news reader, inspiring many others. The Angel Transgender Self-Help Group started a garden project, promoting teamwork and green livelihoods.

In 2025, the Best Transgender Award was given by the Hon’ble Chief Minister to A. Revathi (Namakkal) and K. Ponni (Thoothukudi) for their great work in helping their community. These stories show how the Board’s schemes and support have led to real empowerment and respect in society.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The establishment of the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board by Dr. M. Karunanidhi stands as a landmark achievement in his steps towards equality and social justice. His visionary step in 2008 laid the foundation for recognizing the transgender community as an integral part of society, deserving of dignity, opportunities, and state support. The Board became a hope for

thousands of transgender persons, giving them access to education, healthcare, employment, and housing rights that had long been denied to them.

Through consistent efforts, the Board helped transgender individuals gain a legal identity by issuing identity cards, ration cards, and voter IDs, ensuring that they were not invisible in the state. Over the years, Tamil Nadu became a pioneer in inclusive governance, recruiting transgender persons as police officers, healthcare workers, and staff in various departments as a milestone that redefined the boundaries of opportunity. The institution of the Best Transgender Award and the celebration of Third Gender Day each year have further strengthened their social standing and self-worth.

Dr. Karunanidhi's initiative was not merely an act of welfare but a transformative vision that acknowledged the transgender community's right to equality and empowerment. His leadership became the basis for social reform that continues to advance even today. The Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board remains a best example of how empathy, inclusion, and political will can change lives, inspire other states, and build a society where every individual regardless of gender identity is respected, valued, and given the chance to live.

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