

Mandate 2026



Ten Legal Reforms for
Tamil Nadu



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Published in August 2026
by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy
5th floor, Awfis Rajkamal Pinnacle
Nungambakkam, Chennai 600006

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Designed by Kunal Agnihotri

Typeset in Lato Sans by Łukasz Dziedzic
and GT Supter by Grilli Type

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This book may be cited as:
Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, *Mandate 2026: Ten Legal Reforms for Tamil Nadu* (Manjushree RM and others (eds), Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy 2026).

The Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy is an independent think-tank doing legal research to make better laws and improve governance for the public good.

Vidhi Tamil Nadu was set up in 2024 to work with the Tamil Nadu government to enhance law drafting capacity, support policymaking with sound legal advice, and draft primary legislation, rules, and regulations in relevant areas of reform. The team is grateful to have since then worked with the Department of Industries, Investment Promotion and Commerce, the state's investment promotion agency Guidance Tamil Nadu, the Department of Labour Welfare and Skill Development, the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers' Social Security and Welfare Board, the Department of Health and Family Welfare, and the Directorate of Public Health and Preventive Medicine.

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We acknowledge the use of AI tools for proofreading and editing. Errors in this draft, if any, are the sole responsibility of the editors.

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Acknowledgements

This book draws on Vidhi's institutional knowledge and experience, built over years of independent legal research and sustained engagement with governments. We wish to thank the following individuals in particular:

Aashna Mansata
Arghya Sengupta
Dhvani Mehta
Ishaan Bamba
Manthan Palsande
Mayuri Gupta
Naveed Mehmood Ahmad
Priyamvadha Shivaji
Shruthi Naik
Swapnil Tripathi
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We are grateful to Sunishth Goyal, Assistant Professor of Law, NALSAR University of Law, for his inputs. We thank R Sriram for his invaluable contribution in proofreading the Tamil translation of this book. We also thank Pranav Aggarwal (Ashoka University) and Vysakh MP (Tamil Nadu National Law University) for their research assistance.

Foreword

Justice (Retd.) Kurian Joseph
Former Judge
Supreme Court of India



It gives me great pleasure to commend *Mandate 2026: Ten Legal Reforms for Tamil Nadu* to the legal fraternity and to all citizens who have a stake in our Nation's future. The Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy is one of our nation's most respected independent think-tanks, and this volume is a testament to the rigour and public purpose that have come to define its work.

The need for legal reform is perennial. Law, if it is to serve its purpose, must keep pace with the society it governs. A framework that was adequate for one era may, in another, become a fetter upon progress. It is in this spirit that *Mandate 2026* has been conceived. Across three carefully delineated themes, **Economy and Livelihoods**, **Rights and Dignity**, and **Institutions and Governance**, the Report identifies ten reform agendas that are, each one of them, specific, implementable, and urgent.

On **Economy and Livelihoods**, the Report asks searching and sobering questions. It identifies, with precision, how an anachronistic agricultural land conversion process constrains the State's economic dynamism, and how the criminalisation of trivial business lapses erodes the very investment climate that Tamil Nadu has laboured so hard to build. It further calls for portable legal recognition for gig workers through the proposed GROWTH Act, and for the long-overdue enactment of the *Penn Vivasayi Vettri* law to give legal personhood to the countless women who farm their lands without ever being recognised as farmers. Each of these reforms, if enacted, would honour Tamil Nadu's defining marriage of progressive ideology and economic pragmatism.

On **Rights and Dignity**, the Report speaks to the conscience of the State. A public building that a person with disability cannot enter is not truly a public building. An inter-caste couple who must live in fear for their choice of partner has not truly exercised a constitutional freedom. A transgender community that built its identity and welfare over two decades of pioneering effort must not find those protections eroded by a stroke of central legislation. These are not marginal matters but they go to the core of what it means to be a model State.

On **Institutions and Governance**, the Report addresses the structural sinews of the State itself. A public health law enacted in 1939 cannot be expected to meet the demands of non-communicable diseases, modern pandemics, and the health challenges of the twenty-first century. The proposed Note Evaluating Regulatory Impact (NERI) and the Tamil Nadu Access to Regulations, Acts and Other Materials (ARAM) Act speak directly to a principle that has long animated the study of federalism and governance: that citizens cannot be bound by laws they cannot find, and that the quality of governance is measured not only by the laws enacted but by the institutional discipline with which they are made and kept accessible.

It is perhaps Justice Louis Brandeis who best captures the opportunity before Tamil Nadu. States in a federal structure, he wrote, are free to serve as laboratories, experimenting with novel socio-economic laws and policies, with successful models available for replication elsewhere. The vitality of Indian federalism depends upon the willingness of States to exercise their constitutional autonomy with courage and imagination. *Mandate 2026* is precisely such an exercise of imaginative statecraft.

This report is not merely an academic exercise; it is an invitation to public dialogue, a spur to legislative action, and a worthy contribution that makes future reforms possible.

Hearty congratulations to the editors, contributors, and the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. My best wishes to all those who read, debate, and act upon this work.



Justice Kurian Joseph

Introduction

This book arrives at a pivotal moment in Tamil Nadu's history. In May 2026, for the first time in nearly six decades, a new party took office, marking a generational shift in the state's political landscape.

It takes office at what seems an inflection point, both globally and at home. Artificial intelligence and robotics are unsettling our oldest assumptions about the value of work and the shape of a just society. Tariffs, inflation, wars, the threat of recession, the rupee losing its footing: this is the new normal. Nearer home, the pressures are distinct but converging: Tamil Nadu is ageing faster than it can renew itself, its finances are increasingly strained, and it must still negotiate for its place within the union.

But the new government also takes office with real advantages: strong FDI inflows, a dispersed industrial base and proliferation of global capability centres, high female workforce participation, among the highest education enrolment ratios in the country, a pioneering public health delivery system, a firm commitment to social justice

across caste, gender, and religion, and a mature administration marked by continuity of policy.

These advantages are not accidents of geography or history. They are the harvest of choices made and reiterated by a pragmatic people across generations: embracing modernity and tradition together, welcoming trade and investment while protecting workers' rights. From this came a rare marriage of progressive ideology and economic pragmatism, one that has lifted the floor and raised the ceiling of what a people can ask of their government. The choices made in this decade will shape the state for the decades that follow.

This book offers the new government recommendations as part of a progressive legal policy agenda: an opportunity to reiterate the pragmatism, justice, drive, and ambition that have characterised Tamil Nadu's governance and lawmaking.

We ask and answer ten critical reform questions for Tamil Nadu across three themes:

I. On Economy and Livelihoods, we ask:

Why do so many women farm in the state, but are still not recognised as farmers? Should the state jail its entrepreneurs for trivial lapses such as affixing a wrong postal stamp? Can gig work give Tamil Nadu's youth a livelihood that lasts, not just a job that pays? Should Tamil Nadu continue to treat agriculture as the default use of land at its present stage of economic development?

II. On Rights and Dignity, we ask: Can public buildings be called 'public' if persons with disabilities still struggle to enter them? How should the state meaningfully protect the freedom to choose a partner across caste lines? Can Tamil Nadu defend its pioneering transgender welfare framework that it spent two decades building?

III. On Institutions and Governance, we ask: As public health responsibilities scatter across new agencies, can a nearly century-old law still knit them into one system? How should the state curb its reflex to treat every problem with new regulation? Finally, if ignorance of the law is no excuse, can Tamil Nadu keep its promise of making the law knowable to all?

Tamil Nadu takes great pride in being a model state. This book is our contribution towards upholding stability, prosperity, and the rule of law in Tamil Nadu.

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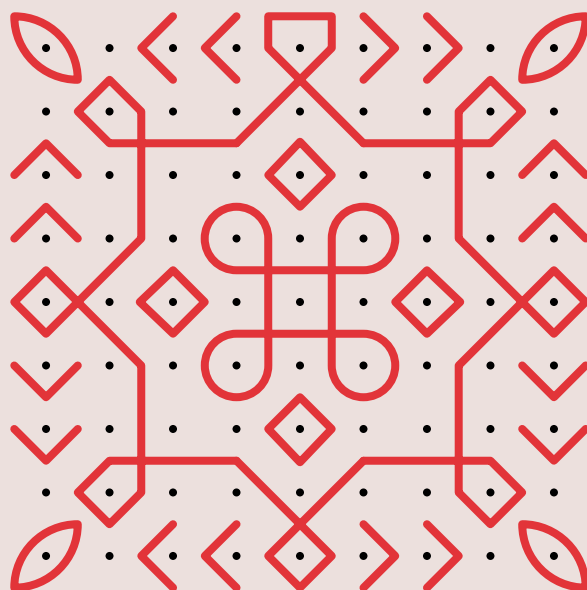
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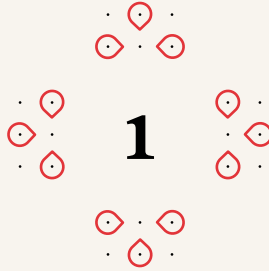
Create a modern, authoritative legal database and institutionalise it by enacting a Tamil Nadu Access to Regulations, Acts and Other Materials Act (ARAM Act).



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Economy and Livelihoods



Recognise Women Farmers



Authorities: Agriculture - Farmers
Welfare Department; Social Welfare and
Women Empowerment Department;
Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments:
Women Farmers' Entitlements Bill,
2011; Maharashtra Women Farmers
Empowerment Act, 2026

Issue

In Tamil Nadu's villages, women farmers carry out the lion's share of agricultural activities—more than 70% by some accounts. Men have increasingly preferred to take on managerial roles, like supervising and selling, leaving what they view as menial, labour-intensive work to women. With rising male migration to urban areas, agricultural activities are increasingly sustained by women farmers. Yet, they cannot reap what they sow: economic benefits, legal recognition, and entitlements that male farmers enjoy continue to elude women.

This lack of recognition stems from two sources: gendered social attitudes, and the state's own eligibility rules. Socially, women farmers' efforts are often dismissed as unpaid household help or unskilled labour rather than recognised as legitimate farming. In Tamil Nadu, women farmers have been vocal about how they are treated as farm labourers, and not as farmers.

The state perpetuates this bias through its own eligibility rules for agricultural schemes. In most households in rural Tamil Nadu, land pattas are registered in the name of a male family member, regardless of who actually works the land. The state takes this existing pattern of ownership as its starting point: it restricts access to government schemes for farmers who can prove land ownership, typically through pattas.

This excludes women farmers in two distinct ways. First, it excludes women who are *de facto* but not *de jure* owners: they cultivate family land, make its day-to-day

decisions, and bear its labour and risk, yet remain invisible to the state because the *patta* is registered in a male relative's name. Second, it excludes women farmers who are landless cultivators and agricultural labourers with no claim to the land. As a consequence, women farmers are denied benefits such as subsidies, crop insurance, and livestock insurance under schemes previously rolled out such as the Chief Minister's Mannuyir Kaathu Mannuyir Kaappom Scheme and the Kalaingar All Village Integrated Agriculture Development Programme.

Tamil Nadu must move beyond mere poverty alleviation and welfare measures for women in agriculture: it must acknowledge their labour and their increasingly dominant role in the state's agriculture sector by providing them formal recognition as farmers, irrespective of land ownership.

Approach

In order to better support and recognise women in agriculture, Tamil Nadu should adopt a two-pronged approach:

Recognise women as farmers in their own right. The state should, through legislation, define a farmer through the work she does rather than the land she holds, so that a woman who cultivates is recognised as a farmer regardless of whose name the land is in. Similar legislation was passed by the Maharashtra Assembly in July 2026.

Carry out a gender audit of agricultural laws and policies. The exclusion of women farmers is one instance of a wider pattern in which seemingly neutral laws disadvantage women, including with respect to

accessing training, technology, and markets. Tamil Nadu already conducts gender budgeting exercises across departments. Agriculture should become a designated focus area, with schemes evaluated specifically for whether they support women's economic empowerment and voice in governance.

The audit should examine not just the design of laws and eligibility criteria, but

socio-economic data and field practices, including the design of tools and equipment offered under subsidy schemes, to establish whether the support on offer actually reaches women. Its findings should feed directly into scheme redesign, so that the audit informs concrete changes to eligibility rules and scheme design. The audit would also help design more targeted support for other underserved sub-categories such as Dalit and Adivasi women farmers.

Solution

The government should enact a **Penn Vivasayi Vettri/பெண் விவசாயி வெற்றி (Woman Farmer's Victory) law** to recognise and support Tamil Nadu's women farmers. The law can be modelled on the Women Farmers' Entitlements Bill, 2011 and the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act, 2026.

The Penn Vivasayi Vettri law must do three things.

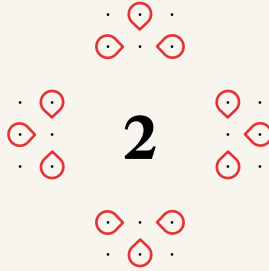
Recognise women as farmers in their own right. The law should define a farmer by farming activity, irrespective of land ownership. It should cover cultivation as well as allied sectors such as livestock, dairy, poultry, and fisheries, and extend recognition to landless cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers, and seasonal workers.

Introduce a Penn Vivasayi card to bridge access to existing schemes. The law should establish a Woman Farmer Certificate, together with a simple, time-bound process for application, verification, and appeal. This certificate, rather than the *patta*, should be recognised as a valid document for accessing agricultural schemes, subsidies, and cooperative credit.

Legally mandate a periodic gender audit. The law should mandate a periodic gender audit of all agricultural laws, policies, and benefits. The audit should be run by an independent body in collaboration with institutions such as the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women, together with agricultural economists, gender experts, and women farmer collectives. Its findings should be tabled before the legislature and published.

Such a gender audit will pave the way for similar audits of laws and policies administered by other departments to evaluate whether they adequately and equitably benefit women.

The United Nations declared 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer precisely to spotlight their essential role in agriculture—from production to trade—that often goes unrecognised. Tamil Nadu should, through a Penn Vivasayi Vettri legislation, demonstrate its commitment to women farmers not just in name, but through concrete, targeted support that addresses the specific barriers they face.



Decriminalise Trivial Business Lapses



Authorities: Law Department; Industries, Investment Promotion and Commerce Department; Guidance Tamil Nadu



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments: Tamil Nadu Business Facilitation Act, 2018; Tamil Nadu Government Business Rules, 1978

Issue

Tamil Nadu is one of India's most preferred destinations for investors and entrepreneurs. The state's ease of doing business agenda backs this: a single-window portal covering more than 200 services across 30-plus departments, a Biz Buddy grievance system that resolves investor issues in a time-bound and accountable manner, and deemed approval under the Tamil Nadu Business Facilitation Act, 2018.

Yet, this agenda coexists with the state's continued use of criminal law against regulatory non-compliance: a tool disproportionate to the lapses it punishes, and counterproductive to the investment climate the state has built. Of the 26,134 imprisonment clauses embedded in India's business laws, 1,043 are in Tamil Nadu—one of only five states to cross the 1,000 mark. Imprisonment is casually written into Tamil Nadu's business laws, criminalising the ordinary friction of running an enterprise—a delayed filing, an omitted register, or even a missing postal stamp.

Measure these offences against what the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), India's foundational criminal code, treats as a crime. Failing to produce a register for an inspector draws three months' imprisonment under the Tamil Nadu Industrial Establishments (National, Festival and Special Holidays) Act, 1958, the same three months the BNS prescribes for criminal trespass: entering someone's property with intent to intimidate them. Withholding information from a planning authority under the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act, 1971 carries six months' imprisonment and a ₹1,00,000

fine. The BNS sets the same six months for dishonest misappropriation: dishonestly converting someone else's property to personal use. A small farmer whose cattle stray into a reserved forest can face a five-year prison term under the Tamil Nadu Forest Act, 1882 (TNFA)—the same punishment that the BNS prescribes for attempted acid attacks, terrorism, and the sexual exploitation of trafficked children.

Even within a single statute, minor procedural delays and maliciousness are punished identically. Under the Tamil Nadu Industrial Establishments (National, Festival and Special Holidays) Act, 1958, a clerical delay in filing a register a day late draws the same three months' imprisonment as wilfully obstructing an inspector. Under the Tamil Nadu Payment of Subsistence Allowance Act, 1981, an oversight to collect a signature on an allowance already paid draws the same three months' imprisonment as refusing to pay the allowance altogether.

Criminal exposure operates differently from commercial risk, because it attaches personal liability to the entrepreneur: arrest, the lengthy legal process that follows, and a reputational hit that outlasts any verdict. This is not a cost a business can weigh and absorb; it is the fear of losing one's liberty and standing. Naturally, capital moves toward jurisdictions where a compliance failure draws a monetary penalty, not a criminal prosecution.

Approach

Criminal punishment is ordinarily reserved for conduct that seriously threatens life, liberty, public order, national security, or

other fundamental social interests. It is on this basis that the state claims the extraordinary power to take away a person's liberty. Yet, Tamil Nadu's laws routinely depart from this principle—for instance, under the TNFA, a person may face five years' imprisonment for stripping leaves from a tree in a reserved forest.

Such provisions reflect a longstanding drafting instinct to use criminal sanction as the default tool of enforcement, without first asking whether the conduct actually merits criminalisation. Intent, the severity of harm, and the availability of less coercive alternatives are the criteria that distinguish serious wrongdoing from an ordinary lapse, but they are often absent from consideration during lawmaking.

Tamil Nadu should therefore assess its criminal provisions against two anchoring questions: Does this conduct need to be a crime at all? If yes, then does the punishment fit the harm?

Section 21 of the TNFA shows why both questions matter. It prescribes the same punishment, two to five years' imprisonment, for setting a fire that endangers a

forest and allowing cattle to stray into one. The law treats potentially catastrophic environmental harm and an ordinary lapse of supervision as equivalent wrongs.

Setting fire to a forest may rightly remain a crime. But the punishment must still be tested for proportionality. The Indian Forest Act, 1927, for example, prescribes six months' imprisonment for similar conduct. Unless Tamil Nadu can justify a harsher sentence, it should reduce the prison term, increase the fine, permit compounding, or reserve imprisonment for deliberate or repeat violations. Straying cattle requires a different response. Arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment are unnecessary where a warning/notice, monetary penalty, or compensation can address the harm.

The objective is not weaker enforcement, but more intelligent enforcement. Serious harm should attract criminal punishment; disproportionate and excessive punishments should be rationalised; and minor or technical lapses should be decriminalised and instead dealt with through civil and administrative measures.

Solution

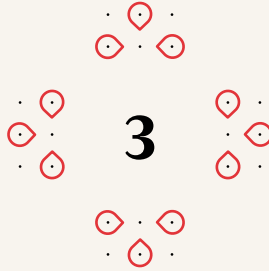
We propose two interventions.

Enact an omnibus Tamil Nadu Decriminalisation and Rationalisation of Punishments Act, or the 'Nambikkai Sattam/நம்பிக்கை சட்டம்'.

This will first require an audit of Tamil Nadu's laws, prioritising those that impact businesses through criminal sanctions. Each criminal provision within them must be broken down into the individual acts and omissions it criminalises, and each evaluated to determine whether it merits decriminalisation, rationalisation of punishment, or retention.

The provisions identified across laws for decriminalisation or rationalisation of punishments can be amended through the Nambikkai Sattam. Each decriminalised provision should be paired with the civil or administrative mechanism replacing it, and a clear adjudication and appeal pathway.

Embed proportionality into lawmaking. The Law Department should frame guidelines on how laws should target prohibited conduct: when to use a criminal sanction as opposed to a civil or administrative penalty. The Tamil Nadu Government Business Rules, 1978 should be amended to require that any instrument creating a new crime should conform to the guidelines, and require the department making the proposal to justify how the guidelines have been complied with. This will ensure that laws drafted in the future will not carry disproportionate punishments.



Create a GROWTH Record for Gig Workers



Authorities: Labour Welfare and Skill
Development Department; Information
Technology and Digital Services
Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments:
Code on Social Security, 2020;
Occupational Safety, Health and Working
Conditions Code, 2020

Issue

Gig work is transforming how India's young workforce enters paid employment. India's gig workforce grew from 77 lakh to 120 lakh between FY 2021-2025, a 55% rise in just four years, and now accounts for over 2% of India's total workforce. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025, the youth unemployment rate in Tamil Nadu was 14.1%, significantly more than the national average of 9.9%. Tamil Nadu can benefit from the availability and flexibility of gig work: nearly 75% of gig workers in Tamil Nadu are between 18 and 38 years old. Platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Rapido, and Urban Company have opened a new route into urban, non-farm work, for exactly the age group for which formal employment is falling short. Chennai is already among the five Indian cities with the highest concentration of gig workers, and an estimated 7-8 lakh gig workers now work across Tamil Nadu.

But today, gig workers in Tamil Nadu cannot consolidate their experience, ratings, and earnings (reputation data) into a portable record that other platforms acknowledge and display. Take a beautician, a plumber, or a home nurse who has spent two years on a gig platform, where customers choose them by their reviews, ratings, and past work. The worker has completed hundreds of jobs and holds a near-perfect rating on that one platform. But if the worker moves to another platform, because the platform changes its terms, stops offering the work they do, or deactivates their account, none of their reputation data moves with them. They start again from zero on the new platform, with nothing to show for their previous work.

Tamil Nadu has already acted to protect gig workers: extending legal protection to them by classifying them as 'manual workers'; announcing schemes on group insurance and e-scooter subsidies; and creating gig worker lounges. These measures have focused on social security and the delivery of welfare benefits.

Tamil Nadu now has the opportunity to make targeted interventions that will improve the lives of gig workers, who have increasingly begun to rely on platforms as a way to source customers for their skilled labour and earn a more sustainable livelihood. It can do so by giving gig workers more of a say in their transaction with the platforms: freedom of choice, insulation from excessive dependence, and enhanced bargaining power.

Approach

Dependence on the platform does not affect all gig workers equally. Where platforms allocate tasks algorithmically—like with bike taxis or food delivery—reputation is not a major factor and the nearest available worker gets the job. The customer wants their order on time, not a specific worker. But in areas like home services, beauty work, and home nursing, the mechanism is more a handpicked match: customers actively choose a worker based on displayed reviews and ratings. Here, reputation is not incidental. It is the asset that lets a worker earn more and get chosen more often than a newcomer with no track record. The portability problem is concentrated almost entirely at this end of the market.

A portable reputation record, sometimes called a 'GigCV', addresses this directly. It would let a worker carry verified proof of their work, ratings, and completed jobs into a new platform relationship, rather than needing to rebuild that proof from nothing. This is not a novel or untested idea. Some platforms in the Netherlands have already implemented a version of the GigCV, and

several other jurisdictions have proposed comparable portable-reputation frameworks.

This solves what is known as the 'cold start' problem: the disadvantage of arriving somewhere new with no way to demonstrate prior experience.

Solution

We propose a Tamil Nadu Gig (Record of Work and Transaction History) Act (GROWTH Act).

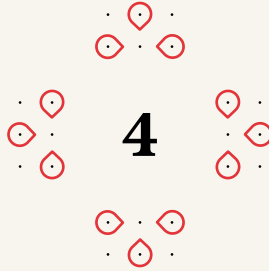
It should allow for the creation of a standardised record of reputation data—a 'GROWTH' record—akin to a GigCV. The legislation should impose two mandates on platforms where customers can handpick workers: allow gig workers to download their GROWTH record from a platform; and allow them to upload and display their past reputation data on equivalent platforms.

Implementation should begin with a pilot scoped only to the largest platforms. The law would require a 'notified platform' to allow workers to download their reputation data on request, promptly, in a prescribed standard format, and free of charge. And workers should be able to upload and display their GROWTH record on equivalent platforms. An obligation only to allow the download of reputation data is inadequate in a world where work is increasingly being intermediated by platforms. The legislation should set out the criteria—including the mechanism through which work is assigned—based on which platforms may be notified and equivalence obligations imposed.

The legislation should entrust the design and the authentication of the GROWTH record to a lean statutory authority. This authority should audit apps, maintain a list of equivalent platforms bound by GROWTH obligations, and monitor compliance with the data standard.

The law must be scoped narrowly, for two reasons. First, the Labour Codes, particularly the Code on Social Security, 2020, constrain what state labour legislation can do; legislation including on reputation data, can be sustained because the Labour Codes do not deal with conditions of work for gig workers. Second, gig work is a broad category spanning many business models and occupations, so regulation must be narrowly tailored, category by category, so as to not affect the flexibility that gig workers value.

Done well, the GROWTH record can deliver true portability of a worker's reputation, and give workers more of a choice, without imposing heavy regulatory costs.



Unshackle Land for Economic Growth



Authorities: Industries, Investment Promotion and Commerce Department; Housing and Urban Development Department; Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority; Directorate of Town and Country Planning; Revenue and Disaster Management Department; Municipal Administration and Water Supply Department; Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments: Tamil Nadu Change of Land Use (From Agriculture to Non-Agriculture Purposes in Non-Planning Areas) Rules, 2017; Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act, 1971; Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act, 1998; Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994; Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019

Issue

Land conversion regulation once served a legitimate public purpose. When agriculture was the principal source of livelihood and food security remained fragile, it helped ensure that fertile and productive land was not indiscriminately diverted.

The conditions that once justified this approach have since shifted. Tamil Nadu has only a minority of its workforce, 25%, in agriculture and allied activities, compared with 35% in industries and 39% in services. This is mirrored in agriculture's declining economic weight: the share of the primary sector in Gross State Domestic Product declined from 11.26% in 2014–15 to 9.16% in 2024–25. As structural transformation shifts land, labour and capital from agriculture towards more productive uses, the continuing relevance of conversion regulation must be reassessed.

Tamil Nadu's present conversion framework is poorly calibrated to this task. Land classified as 'agricultural land' requires a complex 'conversion' or 'change of land use' process. Even in areas without a zoning plan (i.e. non-planning areas), the Tamil Nadu Change of Land Use (From Agriculture to Non-Agriculture Purposes in Non-Planning Areas) Rules, 2017 (CLU Rules) impose anachronistic requirements, case-by-case approval, and a range of No Objection Certificates (NOCs).

The CLU Rules establish a multi-layered system of administrative approvals across four to five levels, up to thirty separate documents, and NOCs from multiple departments. The application must be made to the local authority, which needs

the concurrence of the Director of Town and Country Planning, who in turn needs the Collector's prior concurrence for wet land or the Joint Director of Agriculture's report for dry land. The Collector, before concurring, must physically inspect the site alongside the Deputy Director of Town and Country Planning and other officials, to ascertain the present status of cultivation, how long the land has lain fallow and why, and the impact of the proposed conversion on overall agricultural productivity. In *J. Prakash Pandian v District Collector* (2020), an applicant approached the Madras High Court after 'running from pillar to post for more than two years' for approval. The court directed the authorities to adhere to four-week timelines at each stage of the conversion process.

More fundamentally, the CLU Rules require that the Collector be satisfied that the land is not 'fit for continuing the cultivation'. This requirement assumes that land that is 'fit for' being used for agriculture *should* be used for agriculture alone. Worse still, the law does not explicitly explain or define this ground, making it extremely discretionary, and officials routinely route refusals through it. Arbitrary denials of approval under this ground can produce absurd results. The Madras High Court set aside a refusal based solely on the presence of a tree on the land—a refusal that effectively forced the applicant to cut down the tree and reapply.

The assumption baked into the CLU Rules—that each parcel of land must qualify as unfit for cultivation before it is put to other uses—is also at cross-purposes with farmers' interests. Because land that can lawfully be put to a wider range of uses

is generally more valuable, restrictions on conversion can significantly affect what is often an agricultural household's principal economic asset. The regime effectively freezes land in agricultural use, irrespective of whether cultivation remains the farmer's preferred use.

Approach

Over the last two decades, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, and Gujarat have significantly simplified the conversion process: establishing single window portals for applications, enabling automatic approvals, minimising the clearances required, lowering the fees, establishing strict statutory timelines, creating exemptions for broad categories, and lowering penalties. Telangana's reforms set up a natural border experiment: built-up area grew about 1.3x faster in Telangana's border districts than in the neighbouring Andhra Pradesh districts just across the line.

Having seen Telangana's progress, Andhra Pradesh has now gone the farthest, with a full-throated and wholesale repeal of the conversion framework through the Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Land (Conversion for Non-Agricultural Purposes) (Repeal) Act, 2025. The statement of objects and reasons to the repealing law emphatically

states that the conversion process was 'no longer relevant or necessary' and that 'its repeal is a crucial step towards promoting good governance.' Maharashtra has also substantially effaced the conversion process through the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code (Second Amendment) Act, 2025, which removes the time-consuming requirement of obtaining the Collector's permission, among other major reforms.

Tamil Nadu has set out on the path of simplification; among other measures, the government has moved the application process online to a single window portal integrated with other authorities and created deemed approvals for the conversion of dry land. These reforms may streamline the process, but the CLU Rules leave it captive to an official's judgement about whether the land should keep being farmed.

Tamil Nadu should institute reforms to abolish the conversion process in its entirety, keeping pace with a world where the default purpose of land is no longer cultivation. Abolishing the conversion process will help free the land market in Tamil Nadu's changed economy, bring in revenue, and eliminate a major checkpoint where officials can wield arbitrary discretion against citizens.

Solution

A series of targeted amendments will be necessary to effectuate such a reform. Unlike Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka, Tamil Nadu does not have a single statute that can be repealed to remove the conversion process. Instead, it has a complex web of statutes, rules, regulations, government orders, and other instruments that impose restrictions on

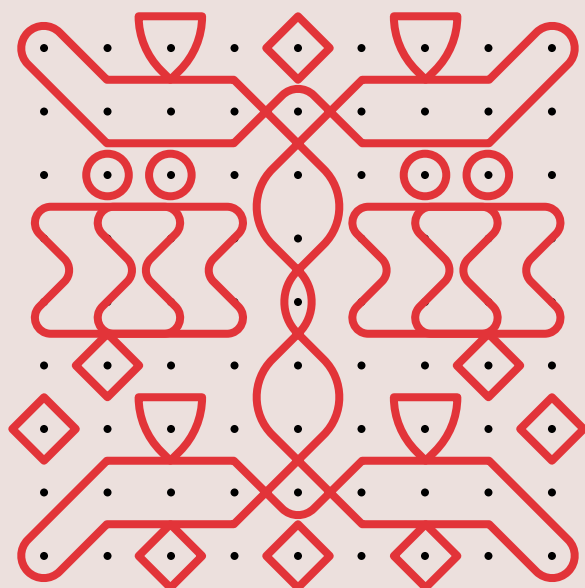
the use of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes. These include the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act, 1971 (TNTCPA), the Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act, 1998, the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994, the Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019, and the CLU Rules.

We propose two reforms.

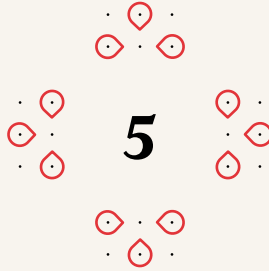
First, enact an omnibus amendment Act to abolish the conversion process entirely in non-planning areas. In areas outside the TNTCPA's zoning plans, the amendments should end the legal presumption that agricultural land must remain agricultural. Agricultural land should be free to move to other uses without case-by-case conversion approval. In effect, Tamil Nadu should substantially abolish the conversion regime, as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra have done, while maintaining other safeguards against harms like encroachment on government land and unauthorised building.

Second, enact a comprehensive Tamil Nadu Land Code or 'Nilam/நிலம் Code'. Tamil Nadu should replace its fragmented patchwork of land laws, rules, and government orders with a single, modern code. Requirements currently scattered across instruments should be consolidated into authoritative master circulars, making approvals easier to understand, navigate, and obtain.

Tamil Nadu has the opportunity to break down barriers that prevent land from being allocated to its highest productive use. By allowing land to respond more freely to changing needs, the state can unlock growth, accelerate investment, sustain livelihoods, and raise productivity for decades to come.



Rights and Dignity



Open Public Buildings to Persons with Disabilities



Authorities: Department for the Welfare of Differently Abled Persons; Housing and Urban Development Department; Public Works Department; Greater Chennai Corporation



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments: Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016; Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017; Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019; Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India 2021

Issue

In the 2026 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election, persons with disabilities arrived at polling stations to exercise their right to vote, only to find that they could not enter the building. This is not an isolated failure: 59.8% of persons with disabilities find it difficult, if not impossible, to access public buildings like government offices, schools, hospitals, and polling stations. This impacts close to 12 lakh persons with disabilities in Tamil Nadu.

The state government's own data reveals the scale of the problem. Of 49,550 public buildings in Tamil Nadu, only 26,769, roughly half, had ramps and handrails at the main entrance. 21,063 had accessible vehicle parking space; 13,035, only one-fourth, had accessible staircases. 1,209, merely 2%, had elevators with Braille-raised numbers on control panels. Fewer than half had accessible drinking water facilities, and disabled-friendly toilets. Even a building logged as a success on one metric may still be unusable as a whole; an accessible toilet is worth little if a person cannot reach it due to an absence of ramps or inaccessible parking. Each accessible feature can coexist with other barriers that render it futile.

The Supreme Court set out the consequence in *Rajive Raturi v Union of India*: inaccessible buildings, transport, and communication shut persons with disabilities out of education, employment, health-care, and public life altogether, deepening dependence and marginalisation.

Tamil Nadu has provided for nomination of persons with disabilities in local government bodies, potentially enabling around

14,000 of them to participate in local governance. Yet, the very buildings in which local bodies function remain inaccessible to those now meant to enter them.

Approach

Accessibility has not been built into the routine life cycle of public buildings in Tamil Nadu, and this deficit needs to be addressed for both new buildings and existing buildings.

The union government's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWDA) requires building approvals and completion certificates to comply with accessibility standards under section 44, and mandates retrofitting existing buildings under section 45. These standards are currently outlined in the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India 2021 (Harmonised Guidelines 2021).

However, new public buildings continue to be built inaccessible because Tamil Nadu's regulatory framework does not require otherwise. The gap lies between a clear union mandate and its absence from state-level building processes. The Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019 (TNCDBR) do not adequately incorporate accessibility mandates or prescribe processes to operationalise them: its accessibility provisions are limited in scope, invoke outdated standards, and carry no compliance mechanism.

First, TNCDBR's accessibility provisions in rule 43 still reference the National Building Code, 2005 (NBC 2005), which predates the RPWDA and relegates accessibility to an annex rather than embedding it as a

core design requirement. The NBC 2005's accessibility standards have been criticised and disregarded by accessibility experts, architects, and builders. The TNCDBR has not been updated to reference the current enforceable RPWDA standards under the Harmonised Guidelines 2021, which adopt 'Universal Design': building for use by all people to the greatest extent possible from the design stage onwards, eliminating the need for retrofitting later. According to the World Bank, adopting Universal Design from the outset adds only up to 1% to costs, and often requires no additional space.

Second, the TNCDBR does not make building approvals and completion certificates conditional on accessibility, as the RPWDA requires. There is no process to verify accessibility compliance at various stages and no designated authority for this purpose, no access audits, and no involvement of accessibility experts. A public building can be designed, built, certified, and occupied without meeting accessibility standards.

Additionally, a large body of existing public buildings, most built without accessibility in mind, sit outside the approval process

altogether. A significant portion of the 49,550 public buildings will continue to be inaccessible, unless they are rebuilt or substantially modified. Retrofitting—adding accessibility features to buildings that have already been designed and built inaccessibly—is the only route to bringing them up to current legal standards.

The RPWDA's retrofitting mandate under section 45(2) requires the government to publish time-bound action plans that prioritise accessibility for existing buildings providing essential services, such as hospitals, schools, railway stations, and bus stops. However, retrofitting existing buildings is significantly more expensive than building them to be accessible from the start. Retrofitting also carries a range of practical difficulties. In some older structures, fitting accessible ramps and toilets can compromise structural stability, and many cannot accommodate the gradient mandated for compliant ramps. These constraints are real, but they affect only a subset of buildings; for a large portion, the decisive obstacle is cost and the pace at which funds are sanctioned. Without earmarked budgets and clear ownership, retrofitting remains largely aspirational.

Solution

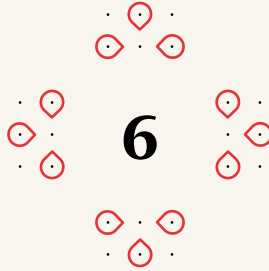
We propose two responses to address the accessibility deficit.

For new buildings, align the TNCDBR with union accessibility standards and integrate accessibility checks into the approval process. Ensure compliance with the RPWDA by replacing the outdated reference to the NBC 2005 with union accessibility standards reflected in the Harmonised Guidelines 2021. Pursuant to the *Rajive Raturi* judgement, the state government can frame minimum, non-negotiable, mandatory accessibility standards; the TNCDBR should meet this floor at the very least. As per section 44 of

the RPWDA, verify accessibility compliance at every stage of building approval through checklists and audits. Where a building is otherwise ready but has accessibility gaps, allow a provisional completion certificate tied to a binding, time-bound rectification plan, with penalties if deficiencies are not closed out in time, and a final certificate only once they are.

For existing buildings, develop a sequenced retrofitting action plan and establish a dedicated fund through a new Public-building Access and Disability Inclusion (PADI/ PBI) Scheme. Retrofitting existing buildings runs into two constraints at once: structural integrity and finance. Many older public buildings simply lack the physical room for compliant ramps, lifts, or accessible toilets, and sometimes the existing structure cannot safely take the load of such interventions. The first step is therefore a retrofitting plan. The Public Works Department should audit existing public buildings against the Harmonised Guidelines 2021, both for accessibility gaps and for structural viability, and release a sequenced plan identifying which buildings can realistically be retrofitted and which require alternative approaches. Essential buildings like hospitals, schools, and transit hubs should be prioritised. To defray the cost of retrofitting, a dedicated PADI Fund should release money in phases to the Public Works Department.

Together, these steps would move the state towards a system where accessibility is designed at the outset and systematically retrofitted where it is not.



Combat Violence Against Inter-Caste Couples



Authorities: Home, Prohibition and Excise Department; Social Justice Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments: Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023; Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023; Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989; Maharashtra Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2016; Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2025; Karnataka Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition (Eva Nammava Eva Nammava) Act, 2026

Issue

Honour killings are murders committed to punish relationships that violate caste norms. In July 2025, Kavin Selvaganesh, a Dalit software engineer, was hacked to death in Tirunelveli for being in an inter-caste relationship. His murder, together with a series of caste-based honour killings across Tamil Nadu, prompted the state government to constitute a Commission headed by Justice K.N. Basha in October 2025 to recommend measures to prevent such killings.

A traditional approach to crime where offences are prosecuted *post facto* is insufficient to address honour killings, because the killing is the end point of a longer pattern rooted in caste hierarchy. A woman's choice of partner across caste lines is treated not as a private decision but as a transgression against the community, which families and caste assemblies police through an escalating repertoire—social boycott, fines, threats, and finally, murder.

The inadequacy of looking at honour killings in isolation is evident from the data. Independent studies on Tamil Nadu claim that 400 'dishonour crimes', including killings, took place at a rate of six to seven a month across 2018-2023. But between 2020 and 2022, the National Crime Records Bureau, which tracked murders where honour was the motive, recorded zero such murders.

The problem has not gone unnoticed by the judiciary either. The Supreme Court has directed states to move beyond *post facto* prosecution towards proactive legal and administrative frameworks to pro-

tect inter-caste couples. It condemned the role of caste panchayats in Tamil Nadu in facilitating honour killings and atrocities against inter-caste couples. The Madras High Court has issued directions to create protective frameworks and ordered awareness programmes against honour killings. Nearly a year after Kavin's death and the Commission's formation, the law has still not changed.

Approach

Tamil Nadu must be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. The complex nature of honour crimes—killing as part of a broader scheme of events that include caste assembly diktats, social boycott, and sustained familial pressure—cannot be addressed by punishing just the final crime in isolation. Other acts of caste-based coercion that often precede the killing, which are currently treated as isolated offences, must be viewed as part of a coordinated pattern of community coercion.

The current response to honour killings fails on two fronts.

The legal framework is inadequate to deter honour killings. The first gap lies in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS), which treats an honour-motivated killing no differently from any other murder. It recognises caste as an aggravating ground for murder and grievous hurt only where five or more persons act together, so a typical honour killing—carried out by one or two family members—attracts no caste-specific liability at all.

Nor does the BNS capture the sequence of events that precedes the killing: the

collective, community-driven dimension goes entirely unrecognised. This departs from the principle of fair labelling—that an offence should reflect the true nature of the wrong committed—and the Law Commission of India has flagged it directly, finding that general criminal law is not equipped to address the collective coercion that enables honour crimes.

The second gap lies in the one statute that is caste-aware. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (PoA Act) applies only where the victim is from a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, and the perpetrator is not. That covers a single configuration—a Dalit victim and a non-Dalit perpetrator—and leaves out cases where the victim is non-Dalit, or where both parties are of different sub-castes.

Even where the law applies, it depends on police registering complaints and offering protection, and in practice this has proven unreliable. Activists have documented instances of police conducting informal proceedings, separating couples on their

own authority, and informing family members of a couple's whereabouts. The risk sharpens where investigating officers share caste ties with the accused; recent cases suggest such ties lead officers to facilitate harm rather than prevent it.

Other states have already enacted laws which take a more integrated approach to securing the autonomy of individuals in inter-caste relationships by attacking the broader range of cultural and social practices that lead up to honour killings. Maharashtra has enacted the Maharashtra Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2016. Karnataka has also enacted two laws along these lines: the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2025, and the Karnataka Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition (Eva Nammava Eva Nammava) Act, 2026.

Tamil Nadu should consider its own version attuned to local realities.

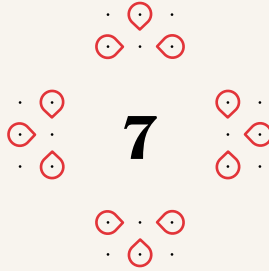
Solution

Honour killings and associated acts of violence are rooted in caste hierarchies. While legislation alone cannot eliminate these social evils entirely, it can play an important role in protecting inter-caste couples who are victimised by the system. We propose two interventions.

Enact a Tamil Nadu Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention of Honour Crimes (En Vāzhkkai, En Urimai) Act. This new law should prohibit the full range of coercive practices used against inter-caste relationships: social boycott, denial of employment or trade, blocking access to common resources, and caste assembly diktats. Protection should extend to every couple targeted, regardless of which communities are involved,

closing the gap the PoA Act leaves open. Like Karnataka's 2026 law, Tamil Nadu's law should recognise both physical violence and coercive practices, and make honour-based violence non-bailable. It should also build a preventive framework: mandatory police reporting duties, magisterial powers against apprehended boycotts, designated officers to assist those at risk, and interim protection orders with criminal penalties for breach. It should also require police to respond to complaints and requests for protection within six hours, like Karnataka's law.

Fully operationalise a protective architecture. Courts have already mandated special cells in every district, a 24-hour helpline, and safe houses for vulnerable couples. However, special cells are functional in only eight districts. The state government should commission an independent compliance audit across all districts, identify gaps, and set a fixed timeframe for meeting the court's mandate. Tamil Nadu should also make a state-level amendment to the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS) to require that First Information Reports filed by inter-caste couples facing threats be registered as soon as possible, making timely protection a legal duty.



Defend Transgender Recognition and Rights



Authority: Social Welfare and Women
Empowerment Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments:
Transgender Persons (Protection of
Rights) Act, 2019; Transgender Persons
(Protection of Rights) Amendment Act,
2026; Tamil Nadu Transgender Persons
(Protection of Rights) Rules, 2022; Social
Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme
Department, GO (Ms) No 71, dated 6th
November 2015

Issue

Tamil Nadu has been a pioneer in enacting protections for transgender persons, whose gender identity does not conform to their sex assigned at birth. It was one of the first states to adopt a transgender welfare policy. In 2008, it constituted the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board (TNTGWB), six years before the Supreme Court recognised a constitutional right to express and determine one's own gender identity. Crucially, the state understood that legal recognition is the route to welfare. It designed a system that recognised local transgender communities through government orders, allowing them to register with the TNTGWB, which in turn issued identity cards that made it easier for transgender persons to access welfare.

That inclusive framework, and the legal recognition through which transgender persons access welfare, are now threatened by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026, which amends the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. The 2026 amendment has drawn mounting criticism from the transgender community across the country for narrowing the definition of 'transgender person' set out in the 2019 Act, making it rigid and exclusionary. It effectively strips the right to self-determine gender identity, a right the transgender community fought long and hard for and won, first in 2014 through the Supreme Court's judgement in *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India* (NALSA), and then through the 2019 Act. In practice, this excludes many who were previously recognised: transgender

men, non-binary persons, genderqueer persons, and those who do not present in a socio-culturally transfeminine manner.

In Tamil Nadu, transgender persons with locally recognised identities such as *thirunangai* and *thirunambi*, not explicitly listed in the 2026 amendment, now face uncertainty over whether the law recognises them as transgender persons at all.

The 2026 amendment is also silent on what happens to existing beneficiaries, and this silence cuts two ways. First, a continuity question: for those who remain recognised as transgender persons under the narrower definition, does an existing identity card issued by the state government continue to hold, or must they undergo fresh verification, or even reapply, to retain benefits they already have? Second, and more troubling: for those previously recognised and given identity cards but excluded under the 2026 amendment's definition, does their prior entitlement to benefits survive, or are they simply written out of the framework, stripped of benefits and identity recognition the state has already granted?

Tamil Nadu has provided pensions, marriage assistance, business subsidies, self-help group loans, and affirmative action measures to transgender persons. It has instituted fee waivers, facilitated certificate name-and-gender changes, and set up transgender clinics. Tamil Nadu must now ensure that the uncertainty created by the 2026 amendment does not disrupt access to the welfare framework it has built.

Approach

The 2026 amendment is a union law, but how it plays out on the ground is not fixed. Tamil Nadu retains room to implement it in a way that protects transgender persons, including existing beneficiaries. Doing so requires answering two distinct questions: who the state recognises going forward, and how it treats those already recognised under the existing framework.

First, Tamil Nadu should clarify that it will continue to recognise, register, and thereby deliver benefits to transgender persons with locally recognised identities such as *thirunangai*, *thirunambi* and others. The 2026 amendment narrows recognition to a statutorily listed set of socio-cultural identities, such as ‘*kinnar*, *hijra*, *jogta* and *aravani*’. But these are not fixed legal categories with uniform meanings across states; they are labels drawn from specific regional and community usages that do not map neatly onto every state’s transgender population. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, while some transgender persons identify as *aravanis*, the term is not used widely and

does not encompass all transgender persons. A clarification from the state government that accounts for identities shaped by local usage, community practice, and administrative history would ensure that the 2026 amendment’s narrower terminology does not exclude transgender persons in practice, consistent with NALSA.

Second, Tamil Nadu should expressly clarify that existing beneficiaries will continue to be legally recognised and retain access to welfare schemes. State identity cards issued in Tamil Nadu under the 2019 Act conferred real entitlements, and nothing in the 2026 amendment takes them away. Two reasons support this. First, the 2026 amendment contains no provision invalidating existing state identity cards or requiring already recognised persons to reapply. Second, statutes are presumed to operate prospectively if there is no clear legislative intent to the contrary: a law affecting accrued or vested rights cannot be applied retrospectively unless the legislature says so expressly, and Parliament has made no such provision here.

Solution

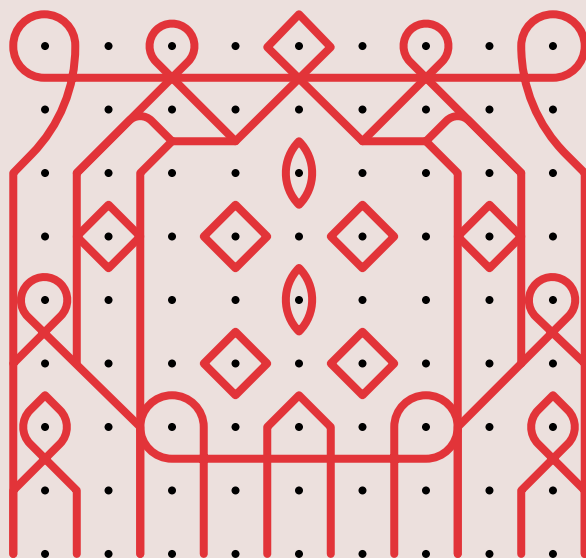
Tamil Nadu has spent nearly two decades building a welfare architecture for transgender persons. It must ensure that this architecture continues to operate effectively following the 2026 amendment. This requires two complementary interventions that can be presented as a single continuity initiative: **Thodarum Adaiyaalam/ தொடரும் அடையாளம்** (The Identity that Continues).

First, reaffirm Tamil Nadu’s existing recognition framework through a government order. The state government should issue a government order, modelled on GO (Ms) No 71, dated 6th November 2015, which implemented NALSA.

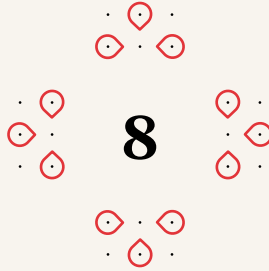
The government order should reaffirm that the state's existing administrative practice of recognising transgender persons comprehensively based on locally prevalent socio-cultural identities, including *thirunangai*, *thirunambi*, *shiv-shakthis* and any others shall continue. Such persons will continue to have recognition with the TNTGWB and access to state welfare schemes. The state government can do so by clarifying that the reference to *aravani* in section 2(k) of the 2026 amendment shall be construed broadly to include these recognised identities for the purpose of implementation in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu's position will be in line with *NALSA*, which recognises a constitutional right to express and determine one's own gender identity.

Second, preserve benefits for existing beneficiaries. The state government should amend the Tamil Nadu Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2022 to insert a provision clarifying that persons who obtained identity certificates can continue to avail welfare benefits and will not be required to undergo a fresh recognition process solely because of the 2026 amendment.



Institutions and Governance



Renew the Legal Foundations of Public Health



Authority: Health and Family Welfare
Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instrument:
Tamil Nadu Public Health Act, 1939

Issue

Tamil Nadu's renowned public health system still rests on the outdated Tamil Nadu Public Health Act, 1939 (TNPHA), enacted 87 years ago. The TNPHA, a pioneering law for its time, described as 'the fulcrum on which the entire public health superstructure has been built', is now increasingly a constraint. When dengue surged in 2023, the government had to curb mosquito breeding by relying on the TNPHA's unrealistically low fines, as low as ₹50, that no longer serve as a meaningful deterrent. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a severe crisis, the TNPHA had to be amended to force fit definitions of 'quarantine' and 'social distancing' into a law not built to deal with a modern public health emergency. When the state wanted to collect data on the incidence of cancer, a plainly non-contagious disease, it had to once again wrangle with the law and treat it as a 'notified' infectious disease, because the TNPHA did not have a framework for non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Tamil Nadu's public health superstructure has outgrown its statute. Tamil Nadu is a pioneer in innovative public health delivery. It has introduced a digital, early-warning Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme, pioneered telemedicine, and provided home-based screening, medicines, and care linked to a digital Population Health Registry. Amidst this innovation, the outdated TNPHA stands at odds. Even consolidated, up-to-date copies of the law are hard to find. In the words of a retired senior health official, government publications have not updated and published the TNPHA since 1993.

The lesson of all this is not despair but adaptation. Tamil Nadu has one of India's most effective public health systems, with a dedicated, specialised public health cadre which has acquired nearly a century of accumulated expertise. This system is Tamil Nadu's best hope of dealing with a dangerous, unpredictable world where the possibility of another novel pandemic is ever present, where artificial intelligence is making it easier to engineer dangerous pathogens, where climate change is redrawing the map of illness and disease, and where NCDs—heart disease, diabetes, cancer, chronic respiratory illness—now account for over 65% of deaths in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu's public health system was built on the TNPHA's singular, integrated vision of public health. It empowered the public health administration to weave its expertise through all the determinants of health—water, food, sanitation—and throughout all of government. Today, the system the TNPHA built is best served by renewing its foundations, so that it can once again provide an effective legal framework for Tamil Nadu's public health system.

Approach

The TNPHA was built for the public health problems of the 1930s and 1940s. New risks have arisen and it lacks the modern tools to combat them. Worse still, it is losing the integration with the rest of government that was its defining feature.

First, the TNPHA is increasingly disconnected from Tamil Nadu's changing institutions. When the TNPHA was written, it

carefully integrated the Director of Public Health (DPH) with local bodies because it saw public health as an integrated function. Local authorities work in collaboration with the DPH, who can direct the improvement of water supplies, and require additional staff, medicines, and equipment during an outbreak. Local authorities are required to give health officers adequate facilities and must obtain the DPH's approval when making zoning decisions.

But the administrative structure has changed vastly since independence: local bodies have multiplied, parastatals have been given wide-ranging functions, and many of these bodies now have expanded public health responsibilities under their own statutes.

Second, the TNPHA does not address the changed disease burden. NCDs, like diabetes or cardiovascular disease, require prevention and continuous monitoring. Modern public health laws give officials

the necessary tools: public-disclosure mandates, such as requiring food premises to display licence and safety information, and choice-architecture measures, such as mandatory calorie labelling on menus (New South Wales Food Regulation 2025). Instead, the TNPHA contains hyper-specific prohibitions that target outdated health risks using trivial punishments. Modern public health law would give officials guided discretion and a spectrum of responses to match the situation.

Third, the TNPHA is unsuited for modern public health emergencies. The TNPHA was designed to contain a local outbreak through notification and isolation, not for the coordinated, population-wide response a modern epidemic like COVID-19 requires. The TNPHA lacks a modern public health emergency framework altogether: a graded set of powers authorised in advance, bounded by safeguards, and built to lapse when the emergency does.

Solution

The TNPHA is foundational legislation, a landmark in Tamil Nadu's long effort to combat disease and protect the health of its people. It is time to replace it with a worthy successor: a law that is fit for purpose and a dependable framework through which officials can run the state's public health machinery, carrying into a changed world the quality the TNPHA pioneered in 1939.

We propose two interventions.

Replace the TNPHA with a new law that will retain the TNPHA's founding insight, and re-establish its integration across government. It should address modern challenges: NCDs, the next generation of epidemics, biosecurity risks, and artificial intelligence. It should equip officials with a modern, graded, and risk-based toolkit.

A task of this scale will succeed only if entrusted to a properly constituted committee with a clear mandate, expert staff in public health law and drafting, time proportionate to the work, and a remit to consult widely, including with departments whose work now intersects with public health.

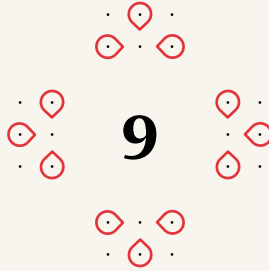
Until then, keep the TNPHA functional through targeted amendments: publishing consolidated, up-to-date versions of the TNPHA; removing cancer and snakebite from the list of notified diseases; and restoring penalties eroded by inflation. These are stopgaps, holding the line until the real work is done.

Note from the team:

In our *Briefing Book 2025: 15 Legal Reform Ideas for Tamil Nadu*, we argued that the TNPHA is outdated, and recommended targeted amendments to make it more people-centric and responsive to contemporary public health challenges, including non-communicable diseases.

Since then, we have had the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the TNPHA through conversations with public health officials, particularly in matters where we were called upon to provide legal opinions on the TNPHA's position and institutional context. This entry therefore takes a wider view of the problems with the TNPHA. It focuses, in particular, on how the TNPHA's original emphasis on systems thinking, coordination, and integration with other public bodies has been eroded over time.

Our approach and recommendations have accordingly been revised to respond to the scale and nature of these challenges.



Regulate Regulation



Authorities: Industries, Investment
Promotion and Commerce Department;
Guidance Tamil Nadu



Key Legislative and Policy Instruments:
Tamil Nadu Business Facilitation Act,
2018; Tamil Nadu Government Business
Rules, 1978

Issue

The Indian state has a reflex to regulate.¹ Every problem invites a new rule, a fresh licensing requirement, another form, yet another penalty. Over time these accumulate, and the cost of complying with them falls on citizens and businesses alike. As of 2020, there were an estimated 1,536 laws, 69,233 compliances, and 6,618 regulatory filings across union and state legislation. Vidhi's own *State of the System* report from 2025 found that there were 7,305 separate crimes in union legislation, over 75% of which had nothing to do with public safety.

Better regulation would unlock investment, lower transaction costs and compliance costs for businesses, and improve the everyday experience of citizens. TeamLease estimates that compliance costs for a small manufacturing business run ₹13-17 lakh a year nationally. And this affects Tamil Nadu more than many other states: it has 35.56 lakh Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), with 10.69 lakh in manufacturing, contributing nearly 30% of Tamil Nadu's industrial output. And these businesses face many pressures. Tamil Nadu has the second-highest MSME closures in India too—more than 35,500 units between FY 2021-2025.

There are many ongoing efforts to deal with the regulatory burden. At the union, the High-Level Committee on Non-Financial Regulatory Reforms, and the Cabinet Secretary's Task Force on Compliance Reduction and Deregulation,

are both making progress. Efforts in the states have been renewed by the Business Reforms Action Plan (BRAP). In Tamil Nadu, the BRAP has driven more than 357 business reforms and 92 compliance reforms, coordinated across 25 departments by the state's investment promotion agency, Guidance. As part of its ease of doing business reforms, Tamil Nadu has also decriminalised provisions under the Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act, 1998, the Tamil Nadu Catering Establishments Act, 1958, and the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Act, 1978.

These efforts, union and state alike, have been episodic and reactive—ad hoc bursts of trimming red tape that occur when a government turns its attention to the regulatory burden. But this is a Sisyphean approach. New regulation gushes in daily and overwhelms episodic trimming: one study finds roughly 42 regulatory changes per day, and 1,326 in May 2026 alone. The reflex to regulate has not been curbed. The gains from these drives are real, just as Sisyphus may near the top of the hill—but they are temporary. The cycle will repeat, because nothing has changed about how new regulation is made in the first place.

Approach

Episodic drives are inadequate because they lack an operational view of regulation—an understanding of regulation as a working system rather than a static list of rules. Business reforms tend to focus on the stock of past regulation. But there is the incoming flow, the continuous produc-

1 In this entry, we use the word 'regulation' in a broad sense, to include any instruments (from primary legislation to government notifications) that have the force of law.

tion of new regulation day after day, year after year. Unless the flow is disciplined, any reduction in stock is temporary.

The remedy is a review process that scrutinises regulations before they are made. Each regulation must be compelled to justify itself. In practice, this means putting a set of formal questions to the regulation-maker: What is the objective? Can it be achieved without regulation? Are the benefits worth the costs? How will it be enforced? Is there a better way to implement it?

Whether such a process survives depends on how it is built. Cross-country evidence

names six supporting practices: a formal political commitment, integration in the rule-making process, a dedicated oversight body, methodological guidelines, consultation mechanisms, and capacity building exercises. Two matter most. The first is a formal legal requirement to conduct the review, built into the ordinary business of government rather than run as a parallel exercise. And the second is a dedicated body to run it. An institutional home is a strong predictor of success: it signals lasting commitment, supports departments through reviews, and preserves learnings instead of letting them evaporate.

Solution

Tamil Nadu should institute a regulatory review process under which every new regulation must be accompanied by a **Note Evaluating Regulatory Impact (NERI / நெற்றி)**.

A NERI would attach to any instrument that creates or materially alters obligations for persons outside government. To carry weight, it must be a formal requirement, integrated into the regulation-making process through amendments to the Tamil Nadu Government Business Rules, 1978. For every proposal, the originating department must prepare a NERI that, in a standard form, describes the objective, the obligations or compliances created, and the likely impact on economic activity. This establishes a basic discipline: every department must consider, and state, a regulation's impact before making it.

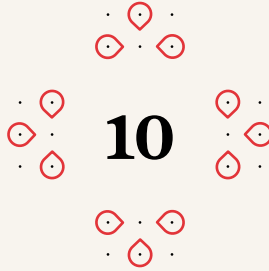
Some instruments bear more heavily on economic activity than others. The Tamil Nadu Government Business Rules, 1978 should therefore be amended to create a schedule of high-impact instruments and the departments that administer them. For proposals touching this schedule, the department must consult a newly established Regulatory Review Cell (RRC) while preparing the NERI.

The RRC should be a specialised team with expertise in the law and economics of regulation, and its role should be collaborative. It should work with the department while the NERI is being prepared—before the proposal leaves the department's hands or is forwarded to the Law Department—to identify a proposal's impact on business and sharpen

the department's assessment of it. Where the two disagree on impact, the department should record its reasons for proceeding differently. The Law Department or the Chief Secretary should also be able to seek the RRC's opinion on other proposals, drawing on its expertise where needed.

The RRC needs a clear institutional home, defined scope, and statutory timelines. Guidance is well placed to house it. It already works across departments to improve the regulatory environment and reads regulations critically—it has examined 88 laws across 11 departments and identified more than 1,300 compliances that could be simplified, digitised, or eliminated. Reviewing the likely impact of new regulation is an extension of the same judgement, and would build on the administrative continuity that has long been Tamil Nadu's advantage. The RRC's structure, scope, and obligations should be set out by amending the Tamil Nadu Business Facilitation Act, 2018.

Together, the NERI and the RRC would reshape how departments think about regulation. The institutional knowledge built through the process would compound and diffuse across government. Over time, the discipline of asking why a regulation is needed, what obligations it creates, and at what cost, would become part of how Tamil Nadu governs.



Build a Single Source of Truth for Law



Authority: Law Department



Key Legislative and Policy Instrument:
Tamil Nadu General Clauses Act, 1891

Issue

If ignorance of the law is no excuse, citizens should be able to find and access the law. But the law in Tamil Nadu today is inaccessible on three counts: it is not publicly available, navigable, or clear.

Consider a woman who wants to know how she is protected by the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Harassment of Woman Act, 1998. But the only copy available online is an undated, damaged scan of pieces of paper torn and stuck back together. Neither the police officer the woman approaches, nor the department that administers this law has anywhere reliable to look. The law exists. It simply cannot be accessed, not even by the person it exists to protect.

The law in Tamil Nadu is not navigable, because statute law spans Acts, rules, regulations, and a shifting stack of administrative directions of varying legal force that surface erratically as ‘guidelines,’ ‘notifications,’ ‘clarifications,’ ‘circulars,’ ‘SOPs,’ and ‘directions’. Tens of thousands of instruments are scattered across departmental websites and gazette archives, with no reliable way to trace how they fit together, or which has superseded which.

The problem of lack of access to law has economic consequences too. Businesses have to spend more on legal fees to find and interpret a flood of regulation. Uncertainty deters potential investment.

Even courts often struggle to find the correct version of a law, and sometimes to find the law at all. In 2024, the Delhi High Court refused to enforce an import ban on

Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* because the government could not produce a copy of the ban notification. The difficulty of accessing the law is felt most immediately and daily by government officials themselves, who are compelled to legislate in the dark. This opacity and inaccessibility also foster corruption: limited access to the law combined with unaccountable discretion.

No state in India has ever built an authoritative, accurate, and up-to-date online database for its own laws. While IndiaCode exists, it has largely succeeded only at consolidating and providing current copies of union laws. It has not made similar progress when it comes to state law.

Legislating—making statute law—is how the sovereign expresses its will, creates rights, and imposes obligations. Making those laws available and accessible to all its citizens is a core duty of the State. Tamil Nadu can be the first state in India to build a single source of truth for its laws.

Approach

Countries have successfully built widely used online legal databases. These include the United Kingdom's legislation.gov.uk, the United States' online US Code and e-Code of Federal Regulations, the European Union's EUR-Lex, and New Zealand's legislation.govt.nz. Each required gargantuan effort. Work was slow and painstaking: lawyers toiled away in archives, compiling, consolidating, and translating hundreds of printed law books by hand.

For the first time in history, Tamil Nadu can tackle this challenge with the tailwind of the AI revolution at its back, and do so at unprecedented speed and cost. Vision Language Models (VLMs) can now digitise historical documents with complex layouts—the crores of pages of regulation that have emanated from Fort St. George, and state gazettes that were previously impervious to traditional Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Large Language Models (LLMs) can then parse this dense legal text and accelerate the process of producing machine-readable, consolidated versions of the law.

In addition to digitising existing law, Tamil Nadu should institute reforms to ensure that new laws are ‘born digital’. Alongside digital copies of the Tamil Nadu Government Gazette, new laws should be available in a structured, machine-readable format, using a markup language suited to Indian law, such as the Akoma Ntoso standard developed at the United Nations and widely adopted for legal documents. Under this system, new laws would feed directly into a legal database, keeping each new legislation integrated into the single source of truth from the day it is made.

Solution

Tamil Nadu should embark on an unprecedented effort to consolidate its statute book and make every law accessible to everyone. In doing so, it will establish India's first state-level digital public infrastructure solution for the rule of law.

We propose a **Tamil Nadu Access to Regulations, Acts and Other Materials Act (ARAM/அரம் Act)** in supersession of the colonial, outdated Tamil Nadu General Clauses Act, 1891.

The ARAM Act should establish an official online repository for all legal instruments with the force of law, using AI-assisted digitisation to clear the existing backlog, and mandating a born-digital standard for everything made from this point on.

The ARAM Act should mandate that every new instrument should be born-digital and published in the repository as a condition of its legal force. It should carry forward Tamil Nadu's lawmaking traditions, and present consolidated versions of law in both English and Tamil.

The ARAM Act should also, as far as practicable, mandate the publication of administrative directions. While these are not statutory instruments in the strict sense, they guide both citizens and businesses. And they currently proliferate outside any consolidated record.

This repository should be maintained by a lean statutory authority with the legal and technical expertise to run it. This statutory authority will also ensure that technological tools, including AI, are applied safely and responsibly, incorporating administrative knowledge about lawmaking and manual review by expert lawyers.

It is cheaper and better to start this year than the next: every year of delay adds more instruments to the backlog that eventually have to be digitised, tagged, and made accessible.

In doing so, Tamil Nadu has the opportunity to embody the words of Thiruvalluvar, that '[o]f all the known truths, there is nothing more significant than truthfulness/ யாமிமய்யாக் கண்டவற்றுள் இல்லை எனைத்தொன்றும் வாய்மையின் நல்ல பிற' (Book I [Aram], Chapter 30, Kural 300). It can do so by establishing, for the first time in India, a single source of truth for law.

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