

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN TAMIL SOCIETY - ANTIQUITY AND ITS CONTINUITY

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Abstract:

This article explores the idea of social justice in Tamil society by tracing its roots from the Sangam Literature and archaeological discoveries to contemporary welfare policies in Tamil Nadu. Drawing evidence from these aforementioned resources, this article demonstrates how concepts such as equitable distribution of resources, universal access to education, women's economic participation, and social mobility were present in early Tamil society. The study also highlights the setbacks of these ideals, primarily caused by rigid hierarchies in the medieval period, as well as the revival of egalitarian values through the Dravidian movement.

It examines the role of modern Tamil Nadu's welfare policies, including reservation, universal healthcare, educational assistance, women-centric schemes, and social security programmes, and positions them as contemporary expressions of these historical values. By connecting literary traditions, archaeological evidence, and modern governance, the article presents Tamil Nadu as a significant case study in the pursuit of social justice.

Keywords: *Social Justice, Sangam Literature, Tamil Society, Dravidian Movement, Reservation Policy, Educational Equity, Women's Empowerment, Welfare State.*

Introduction

What is social justice? How to define it without sounding rhetorical? What comes to mind is the statement of John Rawls: "Justice is the first virtue of social

institutions." Not merely because this short statement connects the concepts of social institutions and justice, but because it consciously identifies the idea of justice as the first virtue of

social institutions, whether primitive or modern.

The concept of social justice evolved continuously across different eras and lenses. Anthropologically, it originated and progressed from small-scale tribal reciprocity to managing diverse, globalized identity structures. Socially and culturally, it moved from the idea of basic legal equality to advocating for fair resource distribution in a digital, capitalist world. The idea of social justice had a strong economic undercurrent, and distributive justice has been its major concern at every stage. In simple terms, social justice is innately, essentially, the equitable distribution of opportunities, wealth and privileges within a society. Its foundational core is human dignity, ensuring equal rights and worth. But it is largely an ideal, a goal. The path to social justice has always been difficult.

Tamil Nadu is a front-runner in certain areas of governance in India—as the performance indicators speak loudly and clearly. These include widespread healthcare access, high educational enrolment, industrial workforce diversity, robust social safety nets and female economic empowerment.

In terms of universal access in Public Healthcare Infrastructure, Tamil Nadu ranks among the top Indian states in the NITI Aayog Health Index. The state has achieved some of the lowest Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR) in India. Nearly 100% of births happen in medical

facilities, ensuring safe childbirth for all caste and income groups. Tamil Nadu leads India with a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education of nearly 47%, which is double the national average. High enrolment is driven directly by a comprehensive 69% reservation policy that ensures marginalized communities access professional courses, and this has made the classrooms in Tamil Nadu more inclusive.

A vast network of affordable government arts, science, and engineering colleges prevents urban-rural educational divides in the field of education. This is not a small achievement.

In the field of Industrialization, the state boasts the highest number of factories and the largest factory workforce in India. The Entrepreneurial Diversity achieved in Tamil Nadu is remarkable. Tamil Nadu has the highest number of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) owned by Scheduled Caste (SC) entrepreneurs in the country. Industrial hubs are spread across tier-2 and tier-3 cities like Coimbatore, Tirupur, and Hosur, indicative of decentralized growth, preventing wealth concentration in a single capital city.

Considering public welfare schemes as Rights or Entitlements is something new to the Indian mindset. The Mid-day Meal Scheme was pioneered by Tamil Nadu. All successive governments have added some value to this, and the scheme was, a few years

back, upgraded to include breakfast, dramatically improved school retention and eliminated classroom hunger.

Universal PDS is another classic example. Unlike target-based systems in other states, Tamil Nadu's universal Public Distribution System supplies subsidised food to every citizen, eliminating basic survival disparities. Likewise, free bus travel for women has drastically cut commuting costs, expanding their access to work and education.

Women's Economic Empowerment is another key aspect of Tamil Nadu's growth story. Tamil Nadu employs nearly half of all women working in India's organized manufacturing sector. Early legal reforms giving equal inheritance rights to women laid the groundwork for structural gender equality. The massive Pudhumai Penn and Magalir Thittam initiatives have institutionalized financial independence for millions of rural women.

But the core objective of this article is to investigate what is unique about Tamil society, its culture and values that made such reforms possible and universally acceptable. However, before tracing the roots of concepts such as social justice, the spread of education across sections of society, the role of women in the formal economy in the ancient Tamil texts and archaeological findings, we may touch upon developments during the last century which resulted in an appreciable model of development.

The Justice Party, also known as the South Indian Liberal Federation, was a major political party in British India's Madras Presidency. It was founded on 20th November 1916, to represent non-Brahmin communities and challenge the prevailing Brahmin dominance in government jobs and education. Periyar launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 with the prime objective of democratizing knowledge. He took an informed position that true independence required liberating the intellect (Arivu Vidutalai) from religious and caste-based monopolies. In 1920, the Justice Party won the elections (the first under the Montague-Chelmsford reforms) and formed the government in the Madras Presidency and introduced the landmark Communal Government Order (G.O.) of 1921, pioneering the concept of caste-based reservations in administration and education. This order was a landmark moment. This relentless emphasis on breaking elite educational monopolies is why Tamil Nadu implements a 69% reservation model, the only state to do so. This long-standing policy has engineered a nationwide-leading 47% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, making colleges universally accessible to the masses instead of an elite few. Thus, the achievement of Tamil Nadu in spreading education, breaking monopoly and addressing the issue of urban-rural divide is not an overnight development.

One such example is the abolition of the Devadasi System and Women's

Economic Empowerment. For the Dravidian Movement, gender equality was not a secondary goal, but an inescapable prerequisite for social justice. Alongside leaders like Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Periyar fiercely championed the elimination of the Devadasi system (temple-dedication rituals that degenerated into systemic exploitation). The movement used its publications, such as Kudi Arasu, to demand radical shifts—female property ownership, legal divorce, and reproductive autonomy. This systematic dismantling of patriarchal institutions directly produced the workforce dynamics of modern Tamil Nadu. The state currently employs nearly 43% of all women working in India's organized manufacturing sector. This remarkable achievement has its roots in the pioneering efforts of the Dravidian movement. Landmark welfare schemes—such as the Pudhumai Penn monthly stipend for girl students and free state bus transit—are direct policy lineage from Periyar's core philosophy that financial autonomy is essential to self-respect.

Delinking rituals from Legal Rights is another area of the progressive social initiative Periyar spearheaded. In 1925, Periyar introduced Self-Respect Marriages (Suyamariyathai Thirumanam). These were weddings conducted completely without Brahmin priests, Sanskrit rituals, or dowries, often prioritizing inter-caste and widow

remarriages to explicitly challenge caste hierarchy. In 1967, when the first Dravidian party took state power under C.N. Annadurai, its very first legislative act was to pass the Hindu Marriage (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, granting full legal validity to priest-less Self-Respect marriages. This set a powerful legal precedent within India—the secular state could validate human unions based purely on mutual consent, bypassing entrenched traditional hierarchies.

One more case study could be from the Public Health front. One can confidently say that there is no match for Tamil Nadu when it comes to Public Health infrastructure and service. Health care is almost considered an entitlement. One can choose high-end private sector health care facilities. No doubt, Chennai has emerged as the Health Care Capital of India and Health Care Tourism, as foreign patients come to Chennai for treatment and also visit some tourist sites. The government sector health care infrastructure of Tamil Nadu is a role model.

Universalism is the keyword over the old notion of charity. How could this be a possibility? The South Indian movement strongly rejected the concept of caste-based destiny and religious charity, replacing them with a framework of universal citizen rights. Periyar's rationalism dictated that bodily health, nutrition, and physical well-being were material realities that the public sphere had to safeguard, rather than leaving them to religious philanthropy. This

foundational philosophy explains why Tamil Nadu rejected the "targeted" or means-tested welfare models common across many Indian states. Instead, it built a universal Public Distribution System (PDS) and a robust public healthcare network where medical treatments and food security are guaranteed universally, preventing the stigmatization of marginalized groups. This has resulted in measurable achievements, as pointed out at the outset. The state has achieved some of the lowest Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR) in India. Nearly 100% of births happen in medical facilities, ensuring safe childbirth for all caste and income groups.

Then a question arises naturally whether this focus on "Social Justice" is a post-European concept (probably due to exposure to Western education and thoughts) or whether it had ancient roots in the context of Tamil culture and sociology? The answer is that it had its ancient roots deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of Tamils.

Spread of Education

The ancient literary sources help in explaining the spread and primacy of education from a social, political and governance point of view. This is reflected in the concepts of knowledge-based society, knowledge-based economy and knowledge-based governance.

Having seen the evidence of elite-dominated social order in medieval

times, it is nothing but natural to entertain a question in our minds whether the lofty ideal of primacy for education and education for all sections of society—advocated by Sangam's texts was an unverified imagination or expectation.

The author of the below mentioned Sangam poem, being a Pandya king himself is quoted with the title "*Aryapatai Katanta Nedunchezhiyan*" – meaning "one who crossed the Aryan army" – his statement has to be taken seriously and verified, because it sounds like announcing an "Education Policy" of his times or his government which was contradictory to the norms prevailed elsewhere, particularly the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent.

உற்றுழி உதவியும் உறுபொருள் கொடுத்தும்
பிறற்றைநிலை முனியாது கற்றல் நன்றே;
பிறப்போ ரன்ன உடன்வயிற்று உள்ளும்
சிறப்பின் பாலால் தாயும்மனம் தீரியும்
ஒருகுடிப் பிறந்த பல்லோ ருள்ளும்
மூத்தோன் வருக என்னாது அவருள்
அறிவுடை யோன்ஆறு அரசும் செல்லும்
வேற்றுமை தெரிந்த நாற்பால் உள்ளும்
கீழ்ப்பால் ஒருவன் கற்பின்
மேற்பால் ஒருவனும் அவன்கண் படுமே.

(*Purananuru 183*)

This Tamil king, *Nedunchezhiyan*, appears untouched by such regressive influences of birth-based discrimination. Instead, he invites people from all walks of life to pursue education.

Even if someone could not afford a tutor, he encouraged them to pay through labor and learn whatever they could. He also advised his subjects to remain humble before their teachers

and to compensate them fairly. The most striking aspect of the poem is its assertion that social status is not inherited by birth but earned through wisdom and knowledge.

To support this argument, the king says that even a mother with multiple children would not necessarily value the eldest the most, but rather the one who was the most educated. Likewise, he states that even kings would seek the counsel of learned individuals, and that a person from a lower caste could be sought after by those of the forward caste if they attained education. No classical literary tradition could have afforded to make such an explicit and bold statement, which was absolutely antithetical to the northern Brahmanical traditions. What is celebrated here is not the distinction created by birth, but the distinction created by learning and wisdom.

No literature can match Thiruvalluvar, who declared: "Education is the only indestructible wealth. All other material riches are not true wealth." He further stated that an unlearned person, even if born into a prestigious or "upper" family, possesses no real value or dignity compared to a person from a "lower" family who has acquired education. True nobility is determined by education, not by the circumstances of birth. This idea clearly shows continuity in the thought process.

However, over the centuries, society became increasingly rigid. Under the

oppressive caste system, education and dignified employment were denied to many communities. This long history of exclusion enabled certain communities, particularly the forward castes, to accumulate significant social and economic power, while others remained trapped in marginalization and poverty. Then came the changes over the last 100 years, which have resulted in Tamil Nadu emerging as a leading state in education, which we have already discussed.

If someone considers the above lines from Sangam literature or Thirukkural to be a lofty ideal proposed, they are mistaken. There are archaeological excavations that endorse the primacy of education.

Graffiti, Common People's Writing

There are certain personal names mentioned in Sangam texts that are also found inscribed in Tamil scripts on pot sherds excavated at Sangam Age archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu. Names of certain Tamil rulers and places are also found inscribed in Early Tamil (Tamil) epigraphy from different parts of Tamil Nadu. What does it mean? Who could have written the names on earthen pots used in Sangam Age households? Either a pot maker or one who purchased the pot and used it. Both were among the ordinary members of the then society. These were not the State-sponsored "inscriptions" where one can assume the role of certain elites and professional scribes. The Tamil-

inscribed pottery is certainly indicative of the spread of literacy at the grassroots. Look at the number of women poets who wrote poems included in the Sangam corpus. Look at the occupation patterns of so many Sangam poets as revealed by the epithets and identity markers revealed as parts of their personal names. People who belonged to various segments of society and who pursued various kinds of occupations for their livelihood have written numerous poems included in the Sangam corpus.

There are numerous ‘undeciphered markers’ known as graffiti which appear in pottery found in archaeological sites of Tamil Nadu, including Keeladi, Kodumanal, Arikamedu, and numerous other places. They do not simply seem to be a form of abstract markings or signs, but a significant means of communication among common people. It was noted that several graffiti found in Tamil Nadu are parallel to the signs of the Indus Valley Civilization. Many of these marks match the Indus signs, indicating the continuity of sign usage and communication over an extended period.

Principles of Social Justice and Voice for the Voiceless

From the Sangam age to the present day, our Tamil society has continuously attempted different forms to ensure social justice in education, employment, and social status. The idea of four-way division (caturvarna) and categorizing different segments of society under

one of these four varnas, birth-based exclusion, and keeping certain segments of society as ‘outcastes’ was a dominant feature of Indian society as a whole. In ancient Tamil society as well, this concept started raising its head slowly at some point in time, and we have evidence to that effect from within the Sangam texts themselves. But what is more important is the response Tamil society was giving to this new idea of caste. The 24th Poem of *Purananuru*, composed by *Mangudi Kizhar*, perfectly puts forth a counter viewpoint. The poem lists four flowers, four foods, and four segments of people, and none of the flowers and foods represent an idea of rootedness. The “four foods” listed are millets and cereals—not rice. Rice was well-known and a celebrated food grain even at the time of the Sangam Age. But this poet refuses to portray rice, neither as an important “four foods” nor as an object of offering to the “God” of Tamil society, which was nothing other than the set-up stone (*Natukal*) established in honor of the clan hero who gave up his life to defend his people.

**...துடியன் பாணன் பறையன் கடம்பனென்று
இந்நான் கல்லை குடியும் இல்லை; ...**

In these lines, *Mangudi Kizhar* speaks about the “principal clans” in his view, which were *Thudiyar*, *Panan*, *Paraiyan*, and *Kadamban*. Importantly, several of these are linked with music and performance practices. In today’s context, these clans are oppressed, and few are listed as scheduled castes.

The other important lines from the same poem reads:

கல்லே பரவின் அல்லைது

நெல்உகுத்துப் பரவும் கடவுளும் இலவே.

These verses of *Mangudi Marutan* indicate that the ancient Tamil people did not worship gods to whom paddy offerings were made, but instead worshipped hero stones erected in memory of the bravest heroes who died on the battlefield. It might not be claimed that ancient Tamil society was “casteless” and free from “hierarchy” – but certainly consider this as an effective articulation of the voice of the voiceless, a sort of cultural politics!

Distributive Justice

One of the other important principles of social justice is distributive justice – equal distribution of resources and rewards.

Interestingly, Tamil literature from the later Sangam period reflects the theme of injustice and inequity. In *Paripadal*, poet *Kaduvan Ilaveyinar* writes about *Thirumal* and the popular episode of *Parkadal*.

.... நின் புகழ் உருவின, கை;

நகை அச்சாக நல் அமிர்து கலந்த

நடுவுநிலை திறம்பிய நயம் இல் ஒரு கை,

இரு கை மாஅல்!...

The poem refers to the myth in which Devas and Asuras together churn the ocean to obtain the elixir of immortality. Yet when the elixir emerges, it is ultimately distributed only to the Devas. In these lines, the poet appears

to criticize the partiality shown in the distribution of the elixir, describing one of *Thirumal*'s hands as unjust for failing to maintain fairness between the two sides.

A literal or symbolic reading of these verses will show that ancient Tamil literature had always implied distributive justice and had the confidence to challenge unequal distribution and moral partiality, even from God himself.

The ancient Tamil social value system clearly recognizes hunger as a disease and, above all, poverty as a social injustice and failure of governance. The term '*Pacipini Maruthuvan Illam*' in *Purananuru* 173 (literally, the house of the doctor who cures the disease of hunger by distributing food") is a thought-provoking one.

Economic Role of Women in the Sangam Era

In the Sangam period, women from all walks of life enjoyed better rights not merely in name, but in practice as well. From protecting the family to engaging in trade and even participating in war, there were very few restrictions on what women could or could not do. The social climate of the time further enabled the advancement of women in various aspects of life.

Between the Sangam age and the contemporary period lies a long phase in history during which women were often treated as secondary to men under the influence of rigid religious structures. Women's movements and

choices became closely tied to ideas of family honour. Though traces of such attitudes still survive in some sections of society, Sangam literature presents a different picture, one in which women were recognized as equals and actively participated in the economic life of their families and communities without hesitation.

Maduraikkanchi, one of the important works in the Sangam corpus, describes elderly women entrepreneurs engaged in trade, selling various goods in the busy bazaars of Madurai city.

There are older women of fine beauty, with long braids of white hair that resemble the white conches of the vast ocean, carrying in beautiful bowls, fragrant flowers and goods desired by the people.

(410, *Maruthan Ilanaganar, Maduraikkanchi*)

In the same poem, the poet introduces us to a woman shopkeeper who works till late at night at her shop and sleeps inside the same shop, wearing her jewels.

பணிலம் கலி அவிந்து அபங்க காழ் சாய்த்து,
நொடை நவில் நெடுங்கடை அடைத்து மடமதர்
ஒள்ளிழை மகளிர் பள்ளி அயர
(625, *Maduraikkanchi*)

Besides depicting the scenes of nightlife of an ancient city, these lines convey the safety and security ensured by the rulers of the time.

In *Natrinai* 118, poet Perunkadunko introduces us to a woman selling flowers at the marketplace. Similar to *Perumpanarruppadai*, in the verses 160–162, which describe a woman who sells buttermilk.

நாள் மோர் மாறும் நல்மா மேனி
சிறு குழை துயல்வரும் காதில், பணைத்தோள்,
குறுநெறிக் கொண்ட கூந்தல் ஆய்மகள்
(160–162, *Perumpanarruppadai*)

These verses describe a woman with a dark complexion, neatly parted hair, bamboo-like shoulders, and small earrings swaying in her ears, engaging in trade.

The following lines from *Perumpanarruppadai* reveal a woman's economic skill and talent.

அளை விலை உணவின் கிளை உடன் அருத்தி
நெய் விலைக் கட்டிப் பசும்பொன் கொள்ளாள்,
எருமை நல் ஆன் கருநாகு பெறுமம்
(163–165, *Perumpanarruppadai*)

After bartering the buttermilk for paddy, the woman uses her earnings to feed her relatives. Instead of buying gold with the remaining earnings, she skillfully invested it in more buffalo, cows, and calves. These verses provide evidence of her understanding of savings and reinvestment.

Another poem from *Akananuru* speaks about a fisherwoman who barter fish in exchange for pearl ornaments.

...தன் ஐயர்
காலைத் தந்த கணைக் கோட்டு வாளைக்கு,
அவ் வாங்கு உந்தி, அம் சொல், பாண்மகள்,
நெடுங் கொடி நுடங்கும் நறவு மலி மறுகில்
பழஞ் செந் நெல்லின் முகவை கொள்ளாள்,
கழங்கு உறழ் முத்தமொடு நன்கலம் பெறுமம்
(*Akananuru*, 126)

Though the poem is intended to celebrate the abundant resources of the ancient Tamil world, it also highlights that women had the freedom to trade

their produce and purchase whatever they wished.

Another poem from *Akananuru* describes a woman bartering salt for paddy.

**நெல்லும் உப்பும் நேரே ஊரீர்!
கொள்ளீரோ?" எனச் சேரிதொறும் நுவலும்...**
(*Akananuru*, 390)

The lines suggest that salt and paddy held equal value during the Sangam period. One may also infer that women living along the seashore travelled towards the fertile farmlands of the *Marudham* region to trade their produce.

The women of the *Marudham* agricultural landscape, known as *Uzhathiyar*, are vividly described in the *Purananuru* poem 61. They are portrayed as being engaged in the task of weeding *Neidhal* and *Aambal* flowers from the agricultural fields.

**கொண்டைக் கூழைத் தண் தழைக் கடைசியர்
சிறு மாண் நெய்தல் ஆம்பலொடு கட்கும்,
மலங்கு மிளிர், செறு**

The above poems illustrate that women of all five ancient landscapes of Tamil society were involved in various works, economically supporting their families and communities. However, it should also be noted that women were not restricted to trade and farm work, but were also given duties traditionally performed by men.

In the *Kurinci* verses (41–45) of *Pathitruvalu*, women guarding their farmlands are portrayed with remarkable realism. The poem recalls raised watch platforms in the fields that even tigers feared to approach. Yet, the women

of the Sangam Age did not hesitate to take on the responsibility of protecting these lands, carrying out the task with confidence and competence.

Women were present within wartime spaces as well:

**குறுந்தொடி முன்கை, கூந்தல் அம் சிறுபுறத்து,
இரவுபகல் செய்யும் திண்பிடி ஒள்வாள்
விரவுவரிக் கச்சின் பூண்ட, மங்கையர்
நெய்தலும் சுரையர் நெடுந்திரிக் கொள்கி,
கைஅமை விளக்கம் நந்துதொறும் மாட்ட**
(45–49, *Paththuppaattu*)

The above verses portray women accompanying men to war camps and assisting them in the aftermath of battles. The poem also describes women carrying shining swords around their waists while lighting the lamps, in case of a sudden attack from enemies. Such references clearly indicate that women were capable of handling weapons whenever necessary.

The range of occupations undertaken by women did not end there. Sangam literature also mentions women engaged in professions that later came to be looked down upon by society, including women liquor vendors and courtesans.

The women who operated shops preparing and selling liquor were known as *Ariyal Magalir*, while courtesans were referred to as *Paraththaiyar*. However, these occupations do not appear to have been regarded as dishonorable within ancient Tamil society.

In addition to physical labour and trading, women of the Sangam age also received education and became

celebrated poets of their time. The Sangam corpus contains the names of nearly 32 women poets. We might have lost many references to several other women poets and their works over time. But the very presence of women poets in ancient Tamil society highlights the fact that education was not limited to men alone.

Avvaiyar was one of the most prominent poets of her time. Her close rapport with *Adhiyaman* is reflected in a celebrated poem that portrays the king's magnanimity in gifting her the rare *amla* fruit, believed to possess the power to prolong life. The episode illustrates the respect and patronage that women poets received in the royal courts of ancient Tamil society.

Meanwhile, women poets did not make any attempt to please the rulers and to retain patronage. It is evident from the 66th poem in *Purananuru*, written by *Venni Kuyathiyar*.

...நின்னினும் நல்ல னன்றே
கலிகொள் யாணர் வெண்ணிப் பறந்தலை
மிகப்புக முலக மெய்திப்
புறப்புண் ணாணி வடக்கிருந்தோனே ...

In this poem, *Venni Kuyathiyar*, like an ordinary poet, celebrates the war victory of *Chozha* king *Karikalan* over the *Chera* King *Neduncheralathan*. But her conduct became extraordinary when she began to praise *Neduncheralathan*, who committed suicide after the war, fearing that his wound might be misunderstood as a mark of cowardice. *Vennikuyathiyar's* bold assertion

in front of the winning king himself showcases the intellectual confidence and independence of the women poets of the Sangam age.

Unfortunately, Tamil society miserably failed to retain this social practice. Following the Sangam age, women's rights were temporarily suspended due to the deep-rooted religious framework. However, modern Tamil society shows keen interest in regaining many of the lost values. This ongoing trend is reflected in the number of women-centric welfare schemes introduced in recent years.

Women's Welfare and Economic Justice

Housewives' role is considered to be the most strenuous but least incentivized in the world. The *Kalaingnar Urimai Thogai* scheme, rolled out in September 2023, provides Rs. 1,000 to eligible women heads of families through direct bank transfer. The purpose of the scheme is to increase the financial independence of women and lessen the financial burden of households. Government data showed that over 1.06 crore women benefited in the first phase of the scheme.

Magalir Vidiyal Payanam is another important initiative that allows women, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities to travel free of cost on selected government buses. During the Sangam era, women travelled across the landscapes to exchange goods for fish, salt, and other

commodities. Likewise, today, women travel in search of employment and economic opportunities. Free bus travel in government buses offers crucial financial relief to such working women and, in turn, indirectly strengthens their economic participation and contribution to society.

Education and social mobility

In Tamil Nadu, education has been a primary vehicle of social justice for a long time. The government has launched several schemes to increase educational opportunities and decrease the economic constraints on students.

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme aims to take care of the nutrition of school-going children, while the *Tamil Pudhalvan* Scheme financially supports boys from economically weaker sections. The *Pudhumai Penn* Scheme encourages women to complete higher education and provides financial support for women's studies, by improving their employability and supporting women students to go beyond their hereditary jobs. The government has also worked on strengthening educational infrastructure under the *Perasiriyar Anbazhagan* School Development Scheme and *Perunthalaivar Kamarajar* College Development Scheme to enhance the schools and colleges with digital facilities and advanced infrastructure.

These programs enhanced educational opportunities and provided support for first-generation students to improve their social condition.

Youth Development and Employment

In addition to empowering women, Tamil Nadu has always been a state that invests in its future generation. The *Naan Mudhalvan* Scheme is one such example of Tamil Nadu's vision for global dominance in every sphere. This particular scheme prepares school students for real-world challenges by providing them with skill training, career guidance, and employability training. This state-sponsored effort connects schools to long-term economic and professional growth.

Healthcare and Public Welfare

Healthcare, as mentioned earlier, is a major component of Tamil Nadu's social justice model. The *Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam* Scheme carried healthcare services directly to patients' doorsteps, particularly helping elderly people and those suffering from chronic illnesses. This scheme provided health check-ups, medicines, and physiotherapy support as part of its outreach efforts.

The *Innuyir Kaappom – Nammai Kaakkum* 48 Scheme introduced cashless emergency treatment during the first 48 hours following road accidents. The scheme improved emergency healthcare access and helped reduce deaths caused by road accidents. Together, these initiatives underlined the government's emphasis on accessible and public-oriented healthcare.

To strengthen the employment,

income, and livelihoods of farmers and rural communities, the government introduced a separate Agriculture Budget, focusing on agricultural development, irrigation, and farmers' welfare.

The state also extended free electricity connections for agricultural pump sets, thereby reducing cultivation expenses and benefiting small and marginal farmers. These measures reflected the continuation of policies rooted in agrarian and rural welfare.

Housing and Infrastructure

Kalaigarin Kanavu Illam (KKI) was a scheme for affordable housing support to the vulnerable communities and the economically weaker sections. Similarly, the *Thozhi* Hostels Scheme provided the provision of safe accommodation for working women and female students with the aim of women's education and employment in urban areas. These programs were designed to enhance social security and access to infrastructure for the deprived.

Special attention was paid to the welfare of school-going Adi Dravidars and Tribal students. The government launched the Ayothidasa Pandithar Housing Development Scheme to address the issue of the habitations of *Adi Dravidars* and has also created the *Tholkudi* Scheme to ensure the livelihood of tribesmen. The financial support and subsidies to entrepreneurs belonging to marginalized groups, such

as women entrepreneurs and sanitation workers, were provided in accordance with the Ambedkar Entrepreneurship Development Scheme. The upgrading of the roads and village infrastructure had a positive impact on economic opportunities, as well as facilitating connectivity.

The Tamil Nadu government's programme was always rooted in social justice as a part of the "Dravidian Model". The state's primary schemes and initiatives were aimed at educational advancement, women's empowerment, public healthcare, rural upliftment and social equality. For many family members, these schemes gave them direct relief and the opportunity to have a good education and access to a range of healthcare for better living conditions.

The journey of establishing social justice in Tamil Nadu has been a long endeavor. Though the Sangam era ensured the fair distribution of resources among its people without any discrimination, contemporary Tamil Nadu is yet to reclaim its lost legacy. However, the Dravidian movement's education reforms, reservation systems, welfare-governance, and inclusive development initiatives, with a succession of welfare programs for women, school-going children, youth, farmers, workers, and the vulnerable, have been playing a significant role in expediting the process of attaining social justice for all.

The commitment to ensure social

justice in its full form is still a work in progress. The path has been full of challenges and will be so in the future as well. But recognizing the roots of social justice has very deep and ancient roots in our social context, which gives more encouragement to remain hopeful. The medieval setbacks and the Dravidian revival in modern times and its continuing legacies are perfect case studies of the past, present, and future.

Author Profile:

R. Balakrishnan is a retired bureaucrat and an Indologist and has been consistently working in this field for the last 35 years. He follows a multi-disciplinary approach to map the post-Indus migrations and trace the carried-forward legacies of the Harappan Culture. His publication 'The 'High-West: Low-East' Dichotomy of Indus Cities: A Dravidian Paradigm' is considered one of the most significant pieces of evidence adduced in favor of the Dravidian Hypothesis of the Indus Civilization. Renowned Indus Scholar Iravatham Mahadevan has hailed this book as the "most remarkable among the Tamil works published so far on this subject". His views on the Indus Valley Civilization and place-name evidence are part of the school curriculum in Tamil Nadu. His magnum opus "Journey of a Civilization: Indus to Vaigai" (2019) and its Tamil translation "Oru

Panpattin Payanam: Sindu Mudhal Vaigai Varai" (2023) have made a significant impact in the area of Indus studies and Indology. He was awarded Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) by Periyar Maniammai University for his contribution in the field of Indology and particularly his work on the Indus Valley Civilization.

He has done extensive research on the multi-layered prehistory and cultural heritage of Odisha. His book *Aabaddh Padachinha* is the Odia translation of his research articles on Odisha, its history, culture, and heritage.

Balakrishnan is a creative writer in Tamil. Some of his publications are *Anbulla Amma* (1991), *Siragukkul Vaanam* (2012), *Nattukkural* (2016), *Panmaayak Kalvan* (2018), and *Ippadi Oru Theeya* (2023). He is a lyricist, and his album, inspired by *Thirukkural*, is a huge success. He has given a series of lectures on Sangam literature named "Sanga Surangam" and they have been published in three volumes. He is from a place called Natham near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. He had his graduation and post-graduation in Tamil Literature.

Balakrishnan has 34 years of illustrious career as an IAS Officer. He is a 1984 batch officer in the cadre of Odisha. He worked in various capacities in the Government of Odisha and the Government of India. He has a

specialisation in Disaster Management and Election Management. He has served in the Election Commission of India as Deputy Election Commissioner twice. He served as Additional Chief Secretary (Finance) and Development Commissioner. After his retirement, he served as the Chief Advisor (Special Initiatives), office of the Chief Minister,

Government of Odisha. Millet Mission of Odisha, Odisha Virtual Academy, Odisha Knowledge Hub Lecture Series are a few of his many initiatives in Odisha.

He is currently the honorary consultant of Indus Research Centre (a research wing of Roja Muthiah Research Library) in Chennai.

