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From the shadows

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Participants walk the ramp at a beauty competition for the third sex in New Delhi

You spot them at traffic signals, wearing makeup, brightly coloured sarees and flowers in their hair, mocking and demanding a few bucks. Their visibility has been limited to this and some social occasions where they, again, turn up to ask for money. A misunderstood community suffering from social stigma, the third sex in India has for long been kept out of the mainstream.

But times, they are a-changing. Today, you can see them hosting [TV shows](#), acting in serials, getting driving licences, contesting elections, working in call centres and modelling for calendars. The third sex in India is slowly coming out of the closet and entering the mainstream. And, they are

finally getting their long overdue support from the government and NGOs. The Tamil Nadu government in fact recently decided to grant them official status and give them ration cards.

Rose, the first member of the third sex to anchor a chat show, on a Tamil [TV channel](#), says, "I wanted to challenge society, wanted to make people understand the real me. I realised this could be possible only through media, which can reach the masses. Hence, I developed a concept and approached a television channel, which appreciated my idea. Thus, my chat show was launched on a Tamil channel."

The show was an instant hit and Rose's producer is all praise for her. "When all other TV channels asked 'why Rose?' our point was 'why not Rose?' She has the right attitude, is smart, intelligent and with excellent communication skills, which are the pre-requisites for any anchor and that was enough for us," says programming head, Pradeep Milroy Peter.

Rose is one among many path-breaking members of the third sex. Rahul Singh, an activist with the Naz Foundation, says many of his friends from that community are working in call centres and running their own businesses. Family acceptance is also gradually coming. He recalls an incident where a middle class business family not only came to terms with its child's transsexual status but have also accepted her marriage. She had gone through school and college posing as a male. It was a shock to the family when she decided to follow her heart but the parents have accepted her now.

Others like her are also finding life partners outside the community. Padmini, for instance, married her boyfriend Prakash and has been accepted by her in-laws.

According to Lakshmi Bai, project director of Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI), "It's very important to make people aware of their talent. Recently, some of our members from the third sex participated in a regional [quiz show](#). Impressed by their performance, the anchor herself said that it was the first time that somebody had answered all the questions right. People were amazed and started calling them up. In fact, their families also came forward and were reunited with them."

Modelling, dancing, politics... their horizons are expanding like never before. While Shabnam Mausi of Bhopal became the first member of the third sex to win an assembly seat some years ago, Sridevi from Bangalore is making waves in the modelling [circuit](#). Recently, she was featured on a calendar by photographer K Venkatesh, who met her walking the streets and found her striking enough to offer modelling assignments. Going by the response to the recent exhibition of her photographs, Sridevi is excited about the future.

Like her, Padmini, a 27 year-old transsexual, has found artistic acceptance as a Bharatanatyam [dancer](#). She performs at stage shows in Mumbai and Chennai and soon will be acting in a serial alongside Tamil star Khushboo. "I have been told my role is not going to be one of those typical roles reserved for members of the third sex but will project them as part of the

mainstream society," she says.

Rahul Singh says employers in metro cities are becoming open to having transsexual employees. Akkaamma from Bangalore, born as Jagdish, says, "When I was in college and faced discrimination, I had no option but to quit studies because there was no help and nowhere to go. But now, 10 years later, with NGOs supporting our cause, there is a new sense of confidence in our people. They are willing to take up the fight to be accepted."

The number of incidents of discrimination against their members at work and in families has also reduced in recent years. "Until a few years ago, we used to get about 100 cases of discrimination a month but now it is only 10-12," says Akkaamma, who works with the Sangama trust, an NGO for the marginalised sex.

She feels the TN government's move will go a long way in giving her community a life of dignity. Official status means they can now get driving licences, ration cards and passports. Revathi from Bangalore is one of the few who have driving licenses, acquired with great difficulty. She now rides a scooter to work.

As Rose puts it: "Now, with the success of my chat show and widespread appreciation from all segments of the society, my family has slowly accepted me. Many people have been calling me to say 'I want to be like you'."

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