

Negotiating Free Transit: Street Level Bureaucracy and the Implementation of the Fare Free Bus travel for Women in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: Tamil Nadu operates as a robust welfare state through a “Dravidian Model” that prioritizes social justice, equity and human development, resulting in high literacy, better health outcomes and significant poverty reduction. The implementation of welfare schemes often reshapes the functioning of street-level bureaucracy where frontline public servants translate policy into practice. This paper examines the impact of the fare free bus travel scheme for women in Tamil Nadu on Street level bureaucrats, particularly employees of the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation. This scheme has significantly increased women’s mobility, access to economic and social opportunities. However, it has also transformed the daily roles, responsibilities, discretionary practices of bus conductors, drivers and administrative staff.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study analyses how the scheme affects workload, accountability, Service delivery and interactions between citizens and frontline workers. It highlights emerging challenges such as revenue adjustments, operational pressures and the negotiation of authority and empathy in public service. This study contributes to the literature on welfare governance by highlighting the often-overlooked administrative consequences of social policies. It underscores the need to integrate frontline perspectives into policy design and implementation to ensure sustainable and effective delivery.

Keywords: Street-level Bureaucracy, Welfare Schemes, Public Service Delivery, Fare free travel, Women’s mobility, Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

Welfare Governance is successful when the policies and schemes reach or benefit the intended population of the public to the fullest extent. These measures help and maintain the growth of a state. Welfare is sustained when there is no leakage of the benefits from the concerned and socially downtrodden who are uplifted and are included in the society for overall development. Thus a developed society becomes a result of good governance. Street level Bureaucrats are the ground level contacts/workers/agents/officers who are in direct

touch with the beneficiaries/ civilians/commoners/ the general public to whom such policies or schemes are designed.

In Tamil Nadu women are provided with the scheme of travelling in ordinary buses without any charges called the Magalir Vidayal Payanam Thittam (MVPT) since 2021. To avail this free travel the person has to be a woman and the trip limit was 30 km via state run transport. There is no application or identification process to avail this offer. The scheme will be expanded as the “Vetri Payanam” (VT) from October 2, 2026 to all delux and Moffusil Buses too.

The Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) is the institution which is making the scheme a reality. The frontline workers the conductors, the drivers, route inspectors, the route mapping supervisors etc., who are in direct contact with the beneficiaries-the women, face operational constraints on the bus in transit. This paper will discuss on the issues, challenges, and recommendations to enhance the delivery of the scheme.

Review of Literature

Much literature has been perused to understand the scheme, the beneficiaries, the street level bureaucrats, the challenges they face in implementation. Welfare schemes are central to inclusive government, particularly in developing regions where access to public goods remain uneven (Vijaybaskar, Kalaiyaran, 2014). Tamil Nadu has long been recognized for its progressive welfare policies and the introduction of the fare free bus travel for women represents a significant intervention in promoting gender equity and mobility (Porter. G, 2011). Urban public transport is a corner stone of inclusive development (Lucas, 2012). Particularly in growing cities like Chennai. Women who often rely on public transport than men, face constraints such as cost, accessibility and safety issues which limit their mobility and participation in socio-economic activities (Pochar J, etal, 2004)

Since its launch, lakhs of women have availed the benefits (Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission, Impact Assessment – 2024) of this scheme and the numbers keep growing daily. As per the survey Rs.888/- monthly which is an average of 11.4% of their monthly income. Around 28% women who avail the benefits of MVPT earn less than Rs.5,000/-per month. On an average 51 trips a month are made every day. The various such schemes across India have been studied. The “Zero Ticket Bus Travel (ZBT) for Women in Delhi (Anand Tiwari, 2006) also indicates such schemes in Punjab, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telanganan by August 2022.

While much attention has been given to the beneficiaries, less focus has been paid on the role of the street level bureaucrats (Brodkin, E.Z.,2011). The frontline workers responsible for implementation in the ground level. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how the scheme influences the functioning of bus conductors, drivers and administrative staff within the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC).

Objectives

1. To analyse how policy delivery affects the attitude of the street level bureaucrats
2. To evaluate how empowerment happened for women.
3. To examine the welfare efficiency trade off.
4. To determine how changes happened in the operations of the institution.
5. To find how these challenges can be overcome and complete delivery can be realized.

Theoretical framework:

The concept of street level bureaucracy developed by Michael Lipsky (1980) refers to Public Service workers who interact directly with citizens have discretion and coping strategies which significantly shape policy outcomes. In this fare free travel scheme conductors, drivers are not merely service providers but key actors who interpret and enforce policy on the (ground) bus. Their interactions with passengers especially women beneficiaries become critical sites of governance (Hupe P & Hill, M 2007). Their behaviour compliance is crucial for the success of the scheme.

The Capability Approach to wellbeing elaborated by Dr. Amartya Sen (1980) applied to Transport theory explores the capacity to mobilise people that gives them freedom, access and opportunities to social progression. The scheme, MVPT soon the VP utilizes this idea to empower women with access to education, work, gender equity and thereby social justice.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, exploratory design relying on

- Semi structured interviews with the TNSTC conductors and drivers
- Field observations during trips to and from on the buses a beneficiary without bias
- Informal discussion with female passengers
- Secondary data from government reports and media sources

The analyses and discussion focus on understanding behavioural changes, operational challenges and institutional responses.

Findings

Impact on street level bureaucracy

Increase Workload and Operation Pressure: to issue Zero Ticket and manage the crowds for conductors, Schedule maintaining and passenger volume for drivers.

Changing Nature of Discretion: Conductors became free to manage crowds when financial transactions were reduced.

Citizen Bureaucrats Interaction: conductors claimed that conflict issues due to overcrowding, arguments flared between male and female passengers, positive interaction with women.

Revenue and Accountability concerns: the scheme had a direct negative implication of financial burden on the already loss making TNSTC.

Emotional Labor and Public Service Ethos: Frontline workers often balance empathy efficiency. Expectations and demands on the staff have increased.

Impact on welfare delivery

Effective implementation depends on the aligning policy goals with institutional capacity and frontline realities. The scheme represents a significant welfare intervention aimed at

Enhancing women's ability: 57 lakh women benefitted

Reducing financial burden: household savings around Rs.888/-

Increasing work force participation: 42% women attendance in labor

Promoting gender equity: increase of women ridership

Source: Government Press Oct 31, 2024

Impact on operation of the institution

Transport demand patterns: 2,578 new buses worth Rs.9,143.70 crore.

Financial sustainability of public transport: 1310 old buses refurbished, basic salary increased by 5% (TNSTC Operational Report, 2024)

Operational Efficiency of service providers 25% of national awards won (Times of India, 2023)

Positive Institutional outcomes:

- Despite the challenges the scheme has produced several benefits for TNSTC
- Increased Public Relevance as a social welfare institution and not just a transport provider
- Higher Ridership Stability: Improves service utilization roles
- Environmental benefits: Shift from private to promote sustainable transport systems
- Social Impact Alignment: Align institutional goals with inclusive development and gender equity.

Negative Institutional outcomes:

The weak financial position has cost employee satisfaction issues: Workers wait for retirement benefits as their salary deducted amount for retirement benefits are utilized for the organization's day to day operations. They have to wait for reimbursements from the government for such spending.

Infrastructural issues: The low floor buses, are often Air conditioned which are not part of the welfare scheme, the steps to the buses are many and cause difficulty for the women passengers.

Poor maintenance of bus stops poses a problem during rain (absence of shelter) nights (lack of lighting) and seating (during long waits)

Administrative issues: Political pressure from local politicians to change bus stops disrupting the route mapping.

Recommendations

The fare free travel policy has been deliberated and delivered and has been hailed a success socially and economically, however the operations of the Institution is still suffering. After much analyses and discussions, the following recommendations have been suggested.

For Government:

1. Ensure adequate subsidy allocation-timely compensation to MTC to offset Revenue loss and transport financial mechanisms
2. Policy Monitoring and Evaluation-Period impact assessment and data driven policy adjustment

For TNSTC

1. Increase Fleet Capacity- Introduce more buses during peak hours and reduce overcrowding
2. Improve Service – Enhance punctuality and Optimize route planning
3. Digital Data Systems-Use smart tracking for passenger flow, data-based scheduling
4. Automated teller machines and smart cards for ticket punching instead of paper tickets

For Street Level Bureaucrats

1. Awareness Programs: Educate women travel nights and safety
2. Skill Development Linkages: Integrate mobility with employment programs
3. Infrastructure and Safety improvements
4. Training on adequate feature of the scheme
5. Skill development on conflict management and crowd management.

Other action needed

1. Improve bus stops and waiting areas
2. Ensure better lighting and security
3. Introduce women friendly transport devices (the SOS buttons in the bus)
4. Long time sustainability measures
5. Explore partial fare models for higher income group. Explore the voluntary give up of the scheme just like the subsidy gas by Central Government, the senior citizens fare concession in trains etc.

6. Promote Public private partnerships.
7. Integrate with sustainable urban mobility planning.
8. Transparency in grievance redress.

Limitations

- The study relies entirely on the interpretations on the opinions of the frontline workers and the passengers who were part of the scheme as well as the primary sources like the Government reports and press releases along with the secondary sources. Quantitative studies could reveal more nuances regarding the implementation of the scheme, and its impact on the street level bureaucrats.
- This qualitative study was not able to find out about the grievance redress process and the measures and compensation available for the women riders. A few buses carried a number in print painted within the bus claiming to help in case of grievance but was unable to follow it up due to the reluctance on the workers to talk about it. The study can be further extended to the Customer Grievance mechanism or the redress machine for the women travellers in the transit within the bus will take the scheme as notch up as delivered and a real success.

Conclusion

The Fare free travel scheme represents a transformative initiative with significant social welfare benefits. However, the success of the scheme due to the street level bureaucrats, their adaptations and experiences is the reality. On the welfare side it increased ridership, female mobility, and enhanced public relevance. On the institution side it created financial dependence on subsidies, intensified operational pressures and required structural and administrative reforms. A significant change happened which is the Public funded institution becoming a social welfare tool that is aptly delivered by the Street Level Bureaucrats with their experience and coping strategies.

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