

TN TO NATIONALISE KARUNANIDHI'S WORKS: WHAT THIS MEANS

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The Tamil Nadu government, last week, announced that the collected works of former Chief Minister M Karunanidhi would be "nationalised" — making them freely available for the public to publish, translate and adapt. Here is how this works.

Copyright laws

Under the Copyright Act, 1957, an author has a bundle of legal rights included the right to reproduce, issue copies, perform, adapt, or translate the work in question. Upon the death of the author, the ownership of the copyright falls to her legal heirs.

Section 18 of the Act allows a copyright owner to "assign" the copyright "wholly or partially" to anyone she pleases, in return for compensation. A copyright for any literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work remains in place until 60 years after the original author's death. After this, the work enters the "public domain", meaning it can be used freely without permission from the former copyright owners.

Nationalisation of copyright

In 2001, the Tamil Nadu government established the Tamil Virtual Academy (TVA) to provide online education in Tamil language. The TVA has a scheme in which it collaborates with legal heirs of original copyright owners to assign the rights to specific works to the government. According to Tamil Nadu guidelines, the works selected for nationalisation are usually placed in the Public Domain and made available on the TVA's free commons website, this means "You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission".

The Tamil Nadu government has, till date, nationalised the works of 179 Tamil scholars, and has paid Rs 14.42 crore in royalties to their legal heirs.

Case of Ambedkar's works

Prakash Ambedkar, the grandson of Dr B R Ambedkar, granted the copyright for Dr Ambedkar's works to the Maharashtra government in the 1960s. In 1976, the state government established the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee which published the first volume of Dr Ambedkar's works in 1979 as part of a 22-volume series covering the collected works of Ambedkar.

In 2016, Prakash Ambedkar gave the copyright to the Nagpur-based Symbiosis Centre. The Centre holds all rights for most of the works of Dr Ambedkar and is involved in their translation

and digitisation. The works are available in printed and online formats. The Maharashtra government holds the rights to a few books that are distributed through the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute, Pune, while the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy at Pune University also holds rights to the rest. The Maharashtra government asked the Centre, through Prakash Ambedkar, to remove Dr Ambedkar's works in 2018, triggering this grant of copyright.