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INDIA'S SUPREME COURT recently passed a landmark ruling to legally recognise transgender people as a third gender. Human rights groups are calling this new ruling *historical* as it will help an estimated over 3 million transgender people in the country get their rights.

The Indian court states that "It is the right of every human being to choose their gender, giving rights to those who choose to not identify themselves as either male or female." The court added, "The spirit of the constitution is to provide equal opportunity to every citizen to grow and attain their potential, irrespective of caste, religion or gender."

Transgender people, or *Hijras* as they are known in India, are renowned in South Asian history and have even appeared in Ancient Hindu texts. Despite their distinguished position in the past, transgender people, which includes transsexuals and the eunuchs of

India, have often been the victims of discrimination and abuse. This new ruling will allow this minority to join welfare programmes especially for the less privileged so that it may help them in economic and social issues, as well as enable them to get quotas in jobs and education. Moreover, this minority will also be recognised under a third gender category in official documents.

India isn't the first country to legally recognise transgender people as a third gender. In 2007, Nepal's Supreme Court ordered the government to banish all laws that discriminated against sexual orientation and gender equality. Meanwhile, Bangladesh also legally recognised the third gender when the government approved a proposal of the Social Welfare Ministry to identify the rights of transgender people by allowing them to use their gender in official documents.