

## Story 8: “Not on the List, But in the Fight” – The Journey of Grace Banu

She was born as a boy in a Dalit family in Tamil Nadu — already carrying the burden of caste. But soon, another identity began to emerge: one that the world didn’t understand and refused to accept. She liked to braid her hair. She walked with softness. And her soul ached in a boy’s body.

Her name at birth was hidden in pain. Her true name is Grace Banu.

At school, teachers ignored her. Students tortured her — beatings, slurs, silence. One day, a classmate smeared feces on her notebook and said, “People like you don’t deserve education.”

She was in Class 6.

Her own family locked her in a dark room for weeks when she said, “I feel like a girl.” They said she brought shame. They feared the neighbors. And so, Grace was expelled — from home, from school, and almost from life itself.

She ran away from home. Slept on pavements. Begged for food. She even contemplated suicide at 15 — on a railway track. But then, a transgender woman named Mallika found her, held her hand, and said,

“You are not dirty. You are divine. You are not the end of your family. You are the start of something new.”

From that moment, Grace rose.

She joined the trans community in Chennai, survived through dancing at functions and occasional begging — but always kept books by her side. She studied for her Diploma in Computer Science, and became the first transgender student to be admitted in a Tamil Nadu engineering college with government support.

But her dreams didn't stop at a job or a degree.

Grace wanted to crack UPSC.

Because to her, it wasn't about rank. It was about respect. It was about sitting at the same table where policies are made — especially the ones that ignore people like her.

She started preparation alone. Bought second-hand NCERTs. Took help from online resources. No coaching center accepted her. When she walked into a library, people stared — some stood up and walked out.

Grace didn't give up.

She studied for four years, gave two attempts, and never cleared prelims.

She couldn't afford coaching. She didn't have caste privilege. She didn't have family support. But what she did have — was a voice.

Instead of sitting in silence, she roared.

She filed petitions demanding inclusion of transgender candidates under UPSC's reservation policy. She questioned why forms only had "male" and "female." She spoke on TV panels, in universities, at protests.

And while she didn't find her name in the final list of UPSC, she found it in the list of people who changed history.

Grace is now an activist, educator, and policy consultant. She runs mentorship programs for transgender youth. She helps fund college fees for others like her. She sits across bureaucrats and tells them:

"If you won't open the doors, I'll break the wall."

She may never enter Mussoorie's LBSNAA.

But every stone she lifts clears the path for those who will.

She isn't a failure.

She is a foundation.