

# Aravani as Citizen: The Forging of a Sexual Identity

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## ABSTRACT

Aravani is one of the transgender communities (male to female) in the state of Tamil Nadu who considers themselves as females trapped in male bodies. They are not mere cross dressers. Some of them undergo surgeries to realize their dream of becoming a complete female. They worship Aravana or Iravan, the son of Pandava prince Arjuna and Naga princess Ulupi. The Aravani of Tamil Nadu identify themselves as the third gender like Eunuch, Hijra, Kinnar, Kothi, Shiv Shakthi and Jogappa communities in other parts of India. The Hijra population is the most visible transgender population in India. Much before the historic Supreme Court Verdict of 2014, Hijras were accepted as the third gender in India. While Hijras have mythological, religious, and cultural moorings, it is their search for social and political acceptance that this paper aims to study. Borrowing from mythology, the Tamil transgender community, Aravani, has attempted to carve out its own space within the LGBTQ spectrum. This paper examines the role of the Aravani movement in forging a sexual identity for transgender people and its impact and influence on promoting the rights of transgender people. Autobiographical records from the community and secondary sources with cultural, religious, and mythological references along with articles highlighting social and political developments were studied to map the journey towards a sexual identity. The primary texts used in this study are *Our Lives Our Words* and *The Truth about Me*.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Hijras, Aravani

## 1 Introduction

The term transgender has become an umbrella term denoting a wide range of categories such as male to female, female to male, cross dressers, and gender atypical persons. But some hijra activists may prefer the term hijra over transgender as it has a unique identity (Gayathri & Karthikeyan, 2016). Transgender community is one of the most socially disadvantaged groups in India (Shanmugam et al., 2022). Studies have shown that the transgender community members face more difficulties in performing their daily activities (Mishra, 2023). One of the earliest studies on transgender population of India was *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) by Serena Nanda where she had focused on the Hijra community of North India. Nanda defines "hijras as occupying an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women" (Nanda, 1990). When compared to their North Indian counterparts, Hijras of South India do not have a significant cultural role and they make a living by singing and dancing at weddings, child-birth related functions or begging (Gururaj et al., 2023).

Hijra community was always accepted and recognized in India. They form a part of our epics and mythology. Our ancient literature and temples give enough evidence that ancient India accommodated a whole range of sexual behaviours and that, Hijras were traditionally assigned with third gender. It can be stated that the identity of a Hijra is rooted in mythology, religion, and cultural practices.

In Indian mythology we see the depiction of transgressive gender possibilities. Hindu deities/divinities were depicted in multiple forms: male, female, neuter, and non-human forms. The Ardhanarishwar form of Shiva and Shakti, the female embodiment of Vishnu as Mohini, Shikhandi in Mahabharata, King Ila who became the woman Ila, Brihanala form of Arjuna when he taught princess

Uttara at Virata's kingdom in the last year of exile are notable examples (Pattanaik, 2014). Transgender communities are known by different names depending on their location. Some of the popular terms include Hijra, Aravani, Kinnar, Kothi, Shiv Shakthi, Jogappa and Jogti Hijra. Though they all come under the umbrella term of Hijra, each of these communities have distinct practices that make them unique and different from the Hijra community. Aravani is the Hijra community (male to female) in the state of Tamil Nadu which considers itself as females trapped in male bodies. They worship Iravan or Aravan son of Arjuna and Naga princess Ulupi. Aravanis are "Ritual participants in a cult very similar to the cult of Draupadi – the heroine of Mahabharata who is revered as a Goddess in South India" (Hiltebeitel, 1995). In the Mahabharata, Aravan is said to have a heroic death but folklore from South India say that he sacrificed his life to Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of Pandavas. Lord Krishna gave him three boons and one of the boons was to be married before his death. Krishna granted his wish in his Mohini form (Pattanaik, 2014). Aravan wanted to witness the war as the second boon. He witnesses the entire 18-day war through his severed head. At the end of the war, Krishna dropped Aravan's head into a river of reeds, and he was reborn. Adopted by a king, he killed the demon Kuttacaran thereby earning the name Kuttantavar or Koothandavar and the temple was dedicated to him at Koovagam. The recreation of Aravan's sacrifice happens in the annual Koovagam festival at the Kootandavar (Aravan) temple in Ulundurpettai, Kallakurichi district near Villupuram where Aravanis get married to Aravan in a ceremony and enter widowhood after the ritual sacrifice of Aravan. Parallel to the re-enactment ceremony, a Miss Koovagam Pageant is held to select the most deserving participant from the transgender community. The winner is tied the 'thali' or mangal sutra (smeared with turmeric paste) at the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Transgender persons from every district of Tamil Nadu participate in the event apart from other state participants. These eighteen days of the Koovagam festival are considered very important for transgender persons and especially the Aravani community as it is the only time when others acknowledge their true identity.

"Unlike those who identify exclusively with the category of transgender, thirunangais' (a respectable term to denote Aravani) formations of self and subjecthood draw not only from modern and secular discourses such as those of human rights and identity politics but also from religious discourses and practice" (Tom & Menon, 2021).

The non-normative sexualities in Hinduism are echoed in the Kamasutra which illustrates non-procreative and non-normative sexual practices. From ancient times till the medieval Indian period in history, non-normative gender and sexual identities were accepted. Queer spaces were acknowledged. The semi sacred status and the positions they enjoyed in the royal courts changed drastically with British rule. Members from transgender communities were employed to collect taxes during Mughal rule (Arondekar, 2009). So how and why did queer minorities get marginalized in India?

As reported by Dasgupta, (2011) Foucault claimed that "sexuality-based identity categories were invented in 19th century Europe and that prior to this invention, these didn't exist." With the coming of the British and colonial rule, queer spaces were compromised. Sexuality-based identities, especially binaries were quickly adopted by colonialists. They in turn tried to erase long existing queer spaces by supplanting these binaries. Unfortunately, it became a part of the modernizing project which continues even after independence. While law makers focused on the rights and livelihoods of religious minorities, backward classes and castes, sexual minorities were ignored.

The 'Tritiya prakriti' or third form of existence which was common and tolerated in pre-colonial India became unacceptable under colonial rule (Boxi, 2021). Western culture defined gender as a dichotomous entity and there was no room for a third gender in their belief system (Nanda, 1990). British officials accused 'eunuchs' of being kidnappers who kept their communities alive by kidnapping children and training them as prostitutes (Hinchy, 2014). The Criminal Tribes Act passed in 1871 considered the transgender community as a criminal tribe. The British conveniently used the template of 'criminal tribes' to label hijras as a threat to society. The moral and body policing done by Britishers cornered them further. In modern India, transgender communities experience alienation from mainstream society in all walks of

life such as education, employment, housing facilities and are at a higher risk of violence as well (Mondal et al., 2020).

## **2 Aravanis of Tamil Nadu**

The transgender persons (Male to Female) of Tamil Nadu are call themselves as Aravanis. The term Aravani has a direct connection to Aravan and Hinduism; hence it has religious connotations. There are, however, several derogatory terms used to describe them such as ‘Ali’ (neuter), ‘Pottai’ (sissy) or ‘Ompathu’ (number nine). Terms like Ali and Ompathu can be perceived as derogatory and hurtful.

The Thirunangais are Tamil transgender persons. Prior to the advent of the Thirunangai movement, Tamil transgender persons were known as Alis. The term Ali was used pejoratively to identify with Islam to further distance and fracture the cultural identity of Tamil transgender individuals. In 1996, the district police commissioner of Villupuram Mr. Ravi coined the term Aravani to signify their devotion to Lord Aravan. For the first time, the name Aravani was not only culturally significant but also a positive name for the community. The coinage is considered by many Thirunangai activists as a historical turning point of the community’s movement towards social and political mainstreaming. The Miss Koovagam pageant emerged as an off shoot of the Koothandavar festival. It was held every year at the time of the festival and provided a secular platform to highlight Thirunangai talent and social concerns. The search for sexual identity and Dravidian identity were coterminous. No where is it more highlighted than the Ms. Koovagam pageant. Winners of the Ms. Koovagam pageant were selected based on their ability to reinforce Tamil culture and iterate Tamil notions of femininity. The pageant and the festival together became the focal point of regional and global attention towards the transgender community propelling increased NGO and government interventions towards health, social and political reforms of the Aravani/Thirunangai community.

The term Thirunangai (respected woman) was suggested by late Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi’s DMK government in 2006 as a respectful gesture towards the community. Hence many of them prefer to call themselves as Thirunangai. Instead of considering them as the third gender they are still identified as females. Thereafter the Aravanis began to identify as Thirunangais. Also, Thirunangai being a secular term, compared to the religious connotation of Aravani, was better suited to articulate the different socio-political agendas, and demands of the community. During the tenure of AIADMK party, the term Thirunangai was scrapped and the term ‘Moondram Paalinathavar’ (third gender) was brought in. The transgender community of Tamil Nadu vehemently opposed it citing the reason that ‘Moondram Paalinathavar’ kicks them out of the gender binary and makes them feel abnormal as they do not fit into the normal gender norms. The term also establishes a gender hierarchy which transgender people at the bottom of the hierarchy.

### **2.1 Gender Identity**

Hijras defy the rigid gender binaries (Chatterjee, 2018). Despite being gender fluid, they prefer to identify as women. Hence some even describe them as trans-women. The acceptance of the terms Aravani (wife of Aravan) and Thirunangai (respectable woman) are also because of the feminine connotations. Even the banners at the Miss Koovagam pageant such as “The Villupuram Aravanigal (Magalir) Nala Sangam” (The Villupuram Aravani (Women) Association) project the Aravanis as Magalir or women. Ms. Koovagam pageant also promoted a refined feminine conduct and deportment on stage in contrast to the perception of transgender individuals as loud, bawdy, and uncouth. Though they emotionally identify as women and wish to project themselves physically as women it is difficult to maintain a non- male identity in mainstream society. All legal and professional documents such as birth certificates, ration cards, passports, voters cards school records etc. identify them based on sex not gender. A constitutional third gender category would grant the Thirunangai a minority status and enable them to access reservation and government benefits. This need, to reclaim legal and professional space, gave momentum to the third gender movement. It was

felt that while claiming a female identity may help in social integration a third gender identity would enable legal, economic, and political rights.

## 2.2 Community Affiliation and Association

All Aravanis/MTF Hijras are affiliated to jamaats. Jamaats are communities with specific subculture, socio economic and legal system, and matriarchal kinship system.

“During the Nawab of Arcot’s regime, the Muslims and Hindus belonging to Hijra community used to sit together and discussed things on Jamaat platforms. One of them established a jamaat in South India as well. But with the entry of Nayakkars, the jamaat system was abolished for a while. The community members used to have some informal ‘underground’ meetings which was not recognized” (Revathi, 2012).

In Mumbai, the hijra community which has seven houses, have Nayaks of the house who make decisions on adoption of chelas or daughters of gurus. In the Aravani system, the daughter of one family will be given as daughter in law to another hijra through a process called as ‘Madikattuthal’. Unlike Mumbai hijra families, Aravanis take such decisions together with all relatives.

A typical hijra family hierarchy and terminology is as follows (Revathi A., 2010):

Badudadi- great grandmother’s guru

Daadaguru- grandmother’s guru

Nanaguru- guru’s guru

Guru- mother

Kaalaguru- guru’s sister

Gurubai- sister

Badagurubai- elder sister

Chotagurubai- younger sister

Chela- daughter

Naathi-chela- granddaughter

Chandichela- great-grand daughter

Sadak- naathi- great granddaughter’s daughter

In the beginning, there was only one Jamaat in Tamil Nadu. A leader was appointed for the Jamaat. Any hijra wanting to taking admission had to pay Re.1 and a quarter. Jamaats follow a matriarchal hierarchy. There is a ‘Guru’ who is considered as the mother of all the members. It is the duty of the guru to teach the profession to the members. Jamaat meets are known to be held in Erode, Madurai, Salem, Trichy, Thanjavur, and Theni. The announcement of daughters, grand-daughters, and sisters (gurubayis) are made at the Jamaats. New members to the Jamaat are accepted only if they are attracted to men. If they are attracted to women, then they are not allowed entry. Cheating and making an entry into the Jamaat is strictly prohibited.

## 2.3 Customs and Rituals

According to flower vending Ayah, “during the initiation process, a plate of flowers, fruits and betel leaves is placed in the middle. A public announcement is made on the adoption of daughter or daughter in law which is followed by a feast. In Mumbai, nose piercing is an essential ritual before adoption whereas in Tamil Nadu such rituals are not mandatory” (Revathi, 2012).

Older Aravanis/hijras act as gurus/mothers, take on chelas and daughters and provide support, mentorship, and protection to their chelas. In return, the chelas offer obedience, devotion, and financial support to the gurus.

Any hijra member who wants to be a 'Chela' (disciple) must select a guru. At the Jamaat several questions are asked to the chela, like "how many gurus you earlier had? Have you been part of any families? Why did you quit? Which family were you part of when you had nirvanam? Have you taken any goods from the earlier family?" (Revathi, 2012)

These questions are asked to check if the chela had done anything wrong in the earlier family. The Jamaat tries to solve the issues. For example, the expenditure on the chela will have to be borne by the first guru if she leaves her for another guru. To avoid such betrayals, these questions are asked in public. Similarly, there are other rules in the Jamaat. When a chela leaves a family and move to another, the loan taken by the chela will fall on the new guru. It will have to be paid at the Jamaat. Sometimes these loans are written off.

The guru chela system in Tamil Nadu is different from Mumbai. Each system works only in the respective state. A transgender person can have a guru in her mother state and outside it. The chelas who have a guru in Tamil Nadu and not in Mumbai are considered as having no guru at all as per Mumbai system. Once the person is accepted as a chela, an announcement is made, and others clap their hands. After which the chela seeks the blessings of the elders.

*"To make me a chela of the Mumbai guru who lived in Kamathipura, they took me to Byculla, where the naiks of the seven houses reside. I was taken to a house where I was to become a chela. All the seven naiks were there seated on a mat. They had asked me if I had become a chela before and for what house of hijras, or if this was the first time I was accepted as chela. I said I had been taken as a chela at a Jamaat in Tamil Nadu. At which they said, "Beta, that doesn't work here-we are asking about Mumbai, Delhi. Were you ever taken as a chela in these places? When I said no, they declared that I was a ghorī moorathan, that is, a person becoming a chela for the first time." (Revathi A., 2010)*

There are no written legal rules in the Jamaats, but in general everyone tries to abide by the rules. For instance, wearing a skirt is very important for the approval from the community. In a Jamaat, a chela must do whatever the elders ask her to do. They should respect them, Chelas' clothes should not touch the elders' clothes. A chela should never be seen without bangles, earring, nose-ring, and anklets. Cutting of hair is prohibited and shaving of facial hair is prohibited, instead it must be removed using a plucker. A share of earnings of the chela has to be shared with the guru.

The community can adopt daughters or sons. But before adopting sons, the community members should make sure that the adopted sons respect the community and if they agree to the condition, they must pay Rs. 25 to the jamaat and become the sons. These sons are generally married and have their biological children. These children are taken care of as the grandchildren and that is how the community members satisfy their maternal instincts.

## 2.4 Nirvanam Process and Sex Reassignment Surgery

To complete the transformation, from emotional to physical identification with the feminine, Nirvanam is propagated. Nirvanam is also not considered as mandatory in Tamil transgender communities. Nirvanam is the removal of male genitalia to complete the transformation process from males to females. Nirvanam is generally done by a Thayamma (a senior transgender) or a doctor. Some community members, prefer to do it under a Thayamma, as there is a general belief that Nirvanam performed by a Thayamma, will make one look exactly like a female. Before nirvanam, Mata Puja will be performed, and the members seek blessings of the elders. The previous day of the nirvanam, they feed the ones, about to undergo the ritual, well. After making them happy, the penis is tied with a jute rope in the night and in the early morning hours they are taken to the puja room and the penis is cut off with a knife. The blood from the wound is smeared all over the body as a part of the ritual and hot oil is applied on the wound. Regular cleaning of the wound is done for forty days. Medicated smoke is fanned over the wound and hot oil is poured at

regular intervals. The elder members of the community pay visit with gifts and blessings. On the fortieth day, a function called a 'kappu' is held in which facial hair is removed from the roots and haladi mehndi function takes place. They wear new dresses, cover their face, and go to the nearby water body with a pot of milk and pour the milk there and come back with water. This function is called as 'paluruthal' (milk function) Only then are they allowed to see their face in the mirror. From then on, they start living as a 'real woman' (Revathi A., 2010).

Some of them get the nirvanam done from the doctors as well. Typical pre surgery and post-surgery procedures are followed for it. Hijras undergo difficulties in getting the surgery. Indian society is generally not in favour of sex reassignment surgeries. Things are slowly changing now.

In Chennai, sex reassignment surgery is done at Kilpauk Medical College and Chennai Central Government Hospital. The procedures like emasculation (removal of male genital organs), vaginoplasty (surgical construction of vagina), labiaplasty (construction of labia) are done free of cost. Breast augmentation surgery is done as well but the implants must be purchased by the person. After registration, the applicants will have to go through a medical check-up and undergo counselling sessions. Generally, a support letter from the community is asked for before the surgery. The rituals after the surgical nirvanam are like traditional nirvanam process. All these rituals are their attempts to conform and reinforce their feminine identity. These parallel the rituals followed by the heteronormative women of the region.

Nirvanam is not mandatory and there is no discrimination against those who have not undergone nirvanam, possibly because it is painful and risky. Therefore, while focusing on HIV and AIDS prevention, NGOs and the state governments should help with sex reassignment surgeries. The Aravanis who are traditionally devoid of supplementary income cannot afford modern sex reassignment surgeries. Only those with a powerful desire to rid themselves of male markers and have courage can face the nirvana by a Thayamma. Poverty and medical avenues for nirvana force them to undergo nirvana by a Thayamma within the jamaat. There is no discrimination of any form but those who have undergone nirvanam and those who have not with the former group enjoying a respectable status than the latter (Revathi, 2012). Hijras could be born into families following different religions or castes but once they undergo nirvanam the rituals are conducted according to the community and they all worship 'Pothraja Matha' riding on a cock, also called as Bahuchara Mata. The Goddess Bahuchara-Mata is invoked in the Nirvanam process in the Hijra communities (Pattanaik, 2014). Apart from Bahuchara Mata, many of the community members invoke Sufi Pirs (Pattanaik, 2014). The transgender community exists as a separate community. Unlike mainstream society there is no room for communal riots or social evils like untouchability. Gayatri Reddy demonstrates 'the fluidity of hijras' identities. Even when they identify as Muslims, they take part in Hindu rituals specifically related to the worship of the goddess Bahuchara Mata (Reddy, 2005).

## 2.5 Death

In the Aravani community, the guru is the one who takes care of the chelas in good and bad. With the death of the guru, chelas become widowed and are supposed to observe widowhood. It is the custom of the community. The chelas of the deceased guru wear bangles and bindi on the forehead. The Aravanis from the Chaukan house (who performed the final rites) come and break the bangles, wipe off the bindi and strip off the flowers. Chelas must observe widowhood for forty days and during the period can wear only white. The widows are not supposed to step out of the house for forty days. On the fortieth day, two rituals are performed. One in the Hindu way in the morning where a brahmin does the pooja, whereas a concluding ceremony called as 'roundap' is done the Muslim way where widowed Aravanis get coloured saris gifted by other members (Revathi A., 2010). Properties owned by gurus are inherited by chelas (Naik, 2017).

## 3 Socio Political and Economic Identity of Aravanis

Aravanis mainly live outside their families, leaving behind their blood relatives. Very few families accept their identity as an Aravani. According to Vanitha, an Aravani, 'families are kind to Aravanis as long

as they provide for the family in cash or kind' (Revathi, 2012). However, this is rare, because most Aravanis lack educational and vocational skills to earn a decent living and that persists. In earlier times, Aravanis used to live and die in poverty. They used to live in common places like 'choultries' and they earned a living through singing songs. Aravanis engage in sex work, vegetable selling, household work for a living and in some instances, running a hamam as reported by Revathi. Also, some of the Aravanis used to shift to North India and joined those Jamaats, perhaps hoping for better living standards. There they also joined the begging and badhai groups. Badhai income is from visits to celebratory events such as births and marriages. There are a miniscule number of transgender individuals who can break the socio-economic barriers of poor education and low income such as Manobi Bandyopadhyay, Principal of a college in West Bengal and Kalki Subramaniam, Activist.

"The Jamaats also exercise socio economic control over the members. A chela must take the permission of the guru before venturing into any business activities other than prostitution. If the permission is not sought, it will result in serious penalties. A chela can leave the guru and the community, but it is considered as a bad gesture. Such chelas are not welcomed whole heartedly by other community members, they find it difficult to find a place for their business activities in any area under the jurisdiction of the jamaat" (Naik, 2017).

Jamaats provide refuge and shelter but also prolong isolation and insularity of the Aravani community. The overwhelming majority of Aravanis live in poor economic conditions with an uncertain future. In the beginning, the state governments' public health initiatives were mainly focused on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. NGO activities also centered around health issues. Thereafter, as the Aravanis collectivized and received more coverage, they and their NGO allies focused more on economic and identity issues. It was no longer health but human rights which spurred the movement forward. NGOs such as Sangama, Salem Thirunangaigal Nalla Sangam, Sahodari Foundation and the various SHGs across the state aim at the economic independence of the community. SHGs promote the enhancement of the skills and capacity building of the members. Participation in the decision-making activities of the SHGs helps to boost the confidence of the members (Suguna, 2015). These NGOs have been training the Aravanis with skill sets to enable them to earn a living usually through self-employment in the small-scale sector such as beautician training, masala powder making, imitation jewelry making, soap making etc. The most difficult thing in a transgender individual's life is to earn a livelihood through decent means. Banks offer loans up to 15 lakhs with 25% subsidy to the self-help groups as a part of employment assistance. These loans enable the community members to start up with different businesses such as provision stores, rearing of milch animals, laundry units, plying autos, starting with small production units such as soap, napkin, and milk products.

### **3.1 Activism, Reforms and Journey to Citizenship**

The Aravani movement gave voice to the centre-margin tussle for social and political space. Aravani activism challenged the hegemonic structures within which gendered identities are constructed with members of the community defying a rigid gender binary definition.

A writ petition was filed by a group of activists in the Madras High Court in 2004 and the court ruled that transgender people can opt to vote as a male or a female. In 2014, the Supreme Court of India granted legal recognition to the transgender community as the third gender. The court also ordered to treat them as socially and economically backward class, to entitle them to specific privileges and rights. The category of transgender has now to be considered in issuing passports, driving license, ration card, voters' card and for social security schemes (Gayathri & Karthikeyan, 2016).

The state of Tamil Nadu has taken remarkable steps to bring parity for the community. Tamil Nadu along with Kerala were the first states to come up with a transgender welfare policy (Chakrapani, 2013). Tamil Nadu Aravanigal Welfare Board/Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board (TGWB) under the Ministry of Social Welfare was formed in the year 2008 as the nodal body to address the issues and needs of transgender populations. Several factors have played a crucial role in the formation of the board. The

support from political parties, acceptance of the community by the public and media and activists and advocacy groups was instrumental in the formation (Chakrapani, 2013).

After examining the Supreme Court Order, the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission recommended to include Aravanis or Thirunangais into the Most Backward Classes category. Following the recommendation of the Commission, the Tamil Nadu government added Thirunangai or Aravani in its list of 'Most Backward Classes' on 6th April, 2008. Government officials should issue "MBC" certificate to the members who had been recognized as transgender by the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board, so that reservation benefits can be accessed.

The board has initiated different schemes for the welfare of the community. All Aravanis with the TGWB identity card are eligible for receiving TG-specific schemes of TGWB. The board addresses the needs as an agency to initiate schemes on income, shelter, education and health care specifically for the TG community and as a platform to connect different government departments to facilitate schemes for TG people (Chakrapani, 2013). Under the various schemes, eligible applicants are given funds for education and self-employment. A short stay home was established in Chennai as a temporary shelter for crisis ridden community members and for out of state transgender members visiting Chennai. The government of Tamil Nadu has special schemes for providing housing facilities along with Indira Awaas Yojana funded by the central government. TGWB helps transgender members to get registered in the employment exchange and aids with sex reassignment surgeries in select government hospitals in Chennai. Transgender community members are provided with ration cards even when they live alone without families. The website of TGWB says that, till 2020 five transgender community members were recruited into the Police Department, two in the Health Department, four in the Social Welfare Department and eight in the Government Medical College, Thanjavur District. The Government of Tamil Nadu has instituted an award of One Lakh Rupees and Citation to encourage members of the third gender, who have made significant contributions to improve the lives of the community members, and to those who have built a career of their own.

Gayatri Spivak poses the question, 'Does the subaltern speak?' The Aravanis of Tamil Nadu have traced their heritage through Indian mythology and culture by naming themselves after Iravaan. They have tried to wipe away the derogatory references and shaming. The journey from Pottai to Aravani and Aravani to Thirunangai is a post-colonial response of the subaltern reclaiming agency and voice in the search for gender equality and citizenship.

#### 4 Conclusion

Hijra population is the most visible transgender (MTF) population in India. Ironically, in a country where male is privileged over female, transgender groups prefer to be identified as female. They do not identify with Aravan but with Mohini, his wife. Aravanis have built a cultural identity by identifying with the Indian mythology. The hijra population is a closed group with a religious, cultural, and historical background. Unlike in the west, it is accepted within Indian society as a third gender and now with legal recognition too. The social and political changes in the outside world will impact the closed world of the Hijra Jamaat. Increased NGO activity, media scrutiny and exposure, expanding national and global networks will act as catalysts in the change process. Neither the social nor the economic structure of the Jamaats can sustain in the present-day scenario of globalization. The secretive age-old structure of Hijra Jamaat cannot guarantee citizenship rights. While the Jamaat may satisfy the emotional and communal needs it cannot ensure or protect human rights. Community based organizations, NGOs, and government initiatives, while promoting health and socio-economic concerns have created a politically dynamic site for the assertion of gender and human rights. The Supreme Court Judgement of 2014 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in January 2020 are landmarks of affirmative action. Though there is much still to be done, in the words of Kalki Subramaniam, "The rainbow is shining bright and beautiful. I see hope. I see a better future for our generation of queer Indians. I see India as a place that can uphold LGBTQ rights in the world. And I see India as a pioneer of transgender rights in the future".

## 5 Declarations

### 5.1 Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### 5.2 Publisher's Note

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