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Aravani (Transgender)



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Synonyms

Hijra; *Thirunangai*; Transgender; Transsexual; Transwoman

Introduction

Aravani is a Tamil term for male-to-female transgendered person also known as transwoman and transsexual in many other parts of the world. An *aravani* is a male by birth but chooses to become a woman as the individual feels that he is a woman dwelling in a man's body. Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* defines "transgender" as a broad category, referring to people "who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain the gender" [1]. They are popularly known as *hijra* in the northern parts of India. The male after he undergoes the emasculation is known as *aravani*. The term "aravani" could have originated from the myth of Aravan from the Mahabharat, which is often quoted by the male-

to-female transgenders in Tamil Nadu, who also consider him as a deity and worship him. Aravan or Iravan is the son of Arjuna and Ulupi, a Naga Princess, who fell in love with Arjuna while she was traveling in Eastern India [2]. He is a minor character in the epic nevertheless a crucial one. There are two versions of the stories of Aravan which is commonly narrated in many parts of India [3].

Mahabharat and the Myth of Aravan

In the *Mahabharata*, one of the two epics of India, Iravan dies in the Kurukshetra War. In South Indian folklore, he agrees to be sacrificed for Pandavas to gain victory in the Kurukshetra War. In the Mahabharata War, Iravan fights on the side of the Pandavas, along with his Naga warriors. On the eighth day of the war, Iravan finds Shakuni killing Pandava soldiers by shooting arrows on their back. For this trickery, the entire legion that Shakuni commanded was killed by Iravan and Naga warriors. Duryodhana who witnessed the destruction of a large part of his army ordered Alambusa, a demon with magical power, to kill Iravan. While Iravan took the form of an enormous snake, Alambusa took on the form of an eagle that flies through the air and chops off the head of Iravan who was engaged in a combat with Shakuni, who was one of the prime antagonists of the grand epic *Mahabharata*. Iravan was killed through trickery. Alambusa was later killed by

Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima [4]. This version of the myth is commonly narrated in the northern parts of India.

The South Indian Version of the Myth of Aravan and the Koovagam Festival

The story of Aravan in Tamil Nadu is a different one when compared to the one narrated in certain other parts of India. Aravan is the presiding deity of the temple at Koovagam, a small village about 30 km outside Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu. In the *Mahabharata*, it was prophesied that the Pandavas would win the battle of Kurukshetra only if they sacrificed a “perfect” male from among themselves. Aravan, the virgin son of the Pandava prince Arjuna, offered himself up for sacrifice. But he had a request: that he is allowed to spend one night as a married man. No king was willing to give his daughter in marriage only to have her widowed the next day, so finally, Lord Krishna assumed a female form and married Aravan, and after a night of sexual bliss, Aravan was sacrificed. The Aravan myth is often narrated by aravanis, but the practice of visiting the temple in Villupuram is recent and goes back to 50 or 60 years [5]; it is Aravan or Koothandavar which marks the annually held festival of Koovagam in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. Many aravanis from various parts of India and also outside India take part in the festival which is an enactment of the Aravan myth from *Mahabharata*. Every year, during the first full moon of the Tamil month of *Chithirai* (April–May), aravanis congregate at Koovagam to commemorate this ancient narrative [6]. The festival was initially a local one celebrated by the people of the Vanniyar community from the whole district [7]. The festival which goes on for 2 days is a time for *hijras* (plural form of Urdu/Hindi word for male-to-female transgender) to socialize and have revelry and fun [8]. On the first day, the *hijras* become wives of the male deity *Koothandavar* (also called *Aravan*); they tie the *taali* (mangalsutra) or the sacred thread around the neck, which is a symbol of married women. This *taali* is given by the priest of the temple. The next day, the *aravanis* become widows of the same

deity and express their anguish by wearing white saris, breaking their bangles, taking off the flowers from the hair, wiping off their *pottu* (a religious mark on the forehead worn by Hindu women), and wailing loudly by beating their chests. “Hijras participate by the thousands in this festival . . . and ritually reaffirm their identification with Krishna, who changes his form from male to female” [8].

Occupation

The aravani’s main source of income is from dancing at funerals and in stage performances, sex work, and begging. Aravanis in Madurai are also professional mourners. Professional mourning, known as *oppari* in Tamil, is when mourners usually unrelated to the family are invited by the members of the family to mourn their dead. The mourners wail aloud expressing the good and exemplary deeds of the dead person on behalf of the family members. The mourning goes on from the morning of the funeral till the body is taken for cremation.

The Familial System of Aravanis in Tamil Nadu

In order to provide a sustenance and sense of family, an aravani adopts another aravani and the cycle goes on. While the system is followed all over India, it is more stringent in northern and some parts of southern India. The one who adopts is known as *guru* or teacher and the one who is adopted is known as *chela* or disciple. The *guru-chela* relationship is a highly hierarchical one and largely mediates the interpersonal affairs of the aravanis between their community and those outside the community as well [9]. The *guru-chela* relationship is also seen as a mother-daughter relationship where the adopted is the daughter and the adopter is the mother. Further, the relationship extends to the next adopted aravani, who becomes the granddaughter of the first adopter. The system provides a sense of a community to

the transgenders who are often unaccepted by their family members and Indian society at large.

Tamil Nadu's Role in Embracing Aravanis

The Tamil Nadu government has been supportive of the community by providing ration cards, admissions into colleges and university with scholarships, and a transgender welfare policy which allows them to avail free gender reassignment surgery in government hospitals and alternative livelihood opportunities [10]. Tamil Nadu became the first state to provide the aravanis with health-care support and insurance in 2007 [11]. *Ippadikku Rose* (2008–2009) is the first talk show in India hosted by Rose Venkatesan, a male-to-female transwoman. The show discussed issues of sex and sexuality and was aired on Vijay TV, one of Tamil Nadu's popular channels. Kalki Subramanian is a popular transgender rights activist, public speaker, artist, and founder of Sahodari Foundation, an organization for creating awareness of transgender rights. She had the honor of being invited by the Harvard Business School, Harvard University, to speak on behalf of the sexual minorities and represent the Indian transgender community in March 2017 [12]. Pritika Yashini, born Pradeep Kumar from Dharmapuri district, becomes India's first transgender police officer in Tamil Nadu in March 2017 [13]. Esther Bharathi became the first transgender pastor of a church in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu [14].

Conclusion

In recent times, the title aravani in Tamil Nadu is increasingly replaced by the term *Thirunangai*, where *Thiru* is a Tamil honorific prefix which means sacred or holy and *Nangai* means girl.

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