

# The Brides of *Aravan*



*The struggle for third-gender recognition in Tamil Nadu has achieved surprising success despite the area's conservative reputation*

## MAUREEN NANDINI MITRA

IMAGES BY: TOM PIETRASIK



**T**HE DIMLY LIT CORRIDORS of Arcot Hotel are rank with the smell of sweat, cigarettes and stale beer. The hallways ring with loud chatter, raucous laughter and the occasional scream. The summer heat is sweltering. Half-open doors reveal grungy rooms crowded with large women in various stages of undress. Pink petticoats, padded bras, hair extensions, sequined saris, miniskirts—some on, some off. Out in the passageways, a few men hang about, hungrily eyeing the women who stride out of the rooms. One grabs at Kalki as she walks past, dressed in a modest salwaar-kameez, her glossy hair pulled back in a ponytail. She turns and speaks to him softly before she gently extricates herself and moves on. The man suddenly seems reduced, almost bashful. The hunter looks hunted. But this isn't surprising. For Kalki Subramaniam isn't quite who she seems. Out here, all definitions, all identities, are fluid. The only certainty is that in this packed hotel I'm the only naturally born woman. The rest are *aravanis*, *kothis* and *panthis* (transgenders, feminine homosexuals and their seemingly straight male clients).

The Arcot sits on PJN Road, just off of National Highway 45 in Villupuram—a dusty town in Tamil Nadu about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Chennai. Though it's an important trading centre for agricultural goods like paddy, groundnut, sugarcane and coconut, on most days Villupuram is just another sleepy Indian town. But tonight is the night before the annual Koovagam village temple festival, where thousands of aravanis from across south and central India have gathered for the celebrations. Despite the nearly unbearable heat, the town pulses with activity. Hotels are packed, alcohol flows freely at local bars and large crowds descend on transgender beauty pageants hosted by an aravani rights group.

"This is basically a weeklong sex-fest," explains Kalki, who identifies herself as a 'transwoman.' We're shooed out of our spot on the tiny hotel room veranda by an aravani dragging an eager young man along with her, so we sit indoors with four other aravanis—all Kalki's friends—while the two get it on outside. Apart from me, no one seems discomfited. For most aravanis, sex is work. It's about money and putting food on the table. There's no embarrassment attached to it. And on this particular occasion, sex ties in neatly with Koovagam festival lore.

The presiding deity of the temple at Koovagam, a tiny village about 30 kilometres outside Villupuram, is Aravan. 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 Pandav prince Arjuna, offered himself up for sacrifice. But he had a request: that he be 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 female form and married Aravan, and after a night of sexual bliss, Aravan was beheaded.

Every year, during the first full moon of the Tamil month of *Chittirai* (April-May) aravanis converge at Koovagam to commemorate this ancient narrative. The transgenders of Tamil Nadu identify themselves with the female form Krishna assumed for his night with Aravan. Hence they call themselves aravanis—wives of Aravan (as opposed to *hijras*, the term common to the rest of India).

.....  
An aravani getting 'married' to Lord Krishna.

At the temple grounds, thousands of visiting aravanis (as well as young men from around the region for whom Aravan is a family deity) act out the role of Aravan's bride. Dressed in their best saris they line up outside the temple carrying offerings of camphor, coconuts and bananas in small plastic baskets. Inside, amid a breathless crush of jostling bodies, clanging bells and the overpowering smell of the burning camphor, the priests tie turmeric-coated sacred marital threads around the aravanis' necks and allow them a split-second audience with the idol of Aravan.

Later, the aravanis celebrate their 'wedding night' through countless acts of sex with panthis—something more than just clients this night—in the fields and groves around the village temple. All through the night shadowy figures disappear and emerge from behind trees and bushes. (Kalki later dreamily described how she had a “wonderful time” in a coconut grove with “two handsome young sons of a farmer.”) As dawn breaks, the aravanis emerge to mourn the inevitable death of their mythical husband. A giant, garland-laden effigy of Aravan is pulled through the narrow village streets before being ceremonially beheaded and set to flames. The aravanis then don widow's weeds, break their bangles and grieve with an intense—albeit rather contrived—passion.

The Koovagam festival serves to validate the aravanis' place within a traditional social structure. It's a place this



sexual minority has long been struggling to carve out for itself by appropriating local rituals, folklore and legends in different parts of the world. Over the years, however, the festival has also morphed into a unique space for trans-genders in southern India to bond, share experiences, and coordinate their campaign for recognition. In the process, they also manage a bit of guilt-free debauchery.

**INDIA'S TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY** has more than 4,000 years of recorded history. As per Hindu mythology, hijras represent the half-male, half-female image of Shiva—an image symbolic of a being that is ageless and sexless. The hijras' third sex dimension is said to infuse them with 'Shiva shakti' (the power of Shiva) and give them supernatural powers to bless or curse.

Mythological associations aside, hijras have always been a fringe group in Hindu society; feared and hated for their gender bending and sexual non-conformity far more than they are revered for any Shiva shakti. Segregated and excluded from most occupations, they often turn to begging and sex work to earn a living. It's an existence fraught with danger; they are often victimised and degraded by both clients and the police. Indeed, the Indian transgenders' struggle for day-to-day survival often trumps their fight for basic human rights.

But this has been changing in recent years. And nowhere is it more evident than among the aravanis of Tamil Nadu.

In 2009, the Tamil Nadu state government began providing free sex-change surgery, the only administration to do so outside Cuba and Brazil. The same government recently established a transgender welfare board for its estimated 80,000-strong aravani community that offers special third-gender ration cards, passports and reserved seats in government-run educational institutions. Priya Babu, one of ten transgenders on the Aravani Welfare Board and a respected social worker, talks of a state-wide transgender census that should be “completed soon.”

In the social sphere, too, the state has taken bold steps where others have hesitated. In December, Chennai hosted India's first-ever nationwide transgender beauty pageant, drawing 120 contestants from across the country, paving the way for the January launch of 'Indian Super Queen 2010'—a talent hunt contest with a one million rupee cash prize that culminated in a spectacular finale in Mumbai on 21 February. Back in 2008, Chennai was launching ground for both *Ippudikku Rose*, a Tamil TV talk show fronted by a transgender—another first in India—and the release of a mainstream Tamil film, *Karuvarai Pookal*, starring an aravani.

“Earlier there was 100 percent discrimination and torture of the community, also a lot of violent behaviour,” explains Geetha Amma, a senior aravani who's lived in Chennai for over two decades. “Now there's a lot of awareness so 80 percent less aggression,” she estimates. “Public discrimina-

**LEFT:** Kalki, a transsexual, has advocated for transsexual rights for over a decade. **FACING PAGE:** An aravani adjusts her sari prior to a locally organised beauty pageant.

tion has come down by 60 percent.”

What could have led to such major liberalisation in a typically conservative state? Simple answer: AIDS.

India's first HIV-positive cases were diagnosed among Chennai's female sex workers in 1986. This resulted in a deluge of state and privately funded intervention programmes aimed at Tamil Nadu's sex workers and sexual minority groups. Aravanis, who turned out to be the most vulnerable sub-group among sexual minorities, received special attention from these programmes. AIDS awareness forums provided aravanis with a platform to speak out on issues that impact their lives.

“Why the aravanis of Tamil Nadu feel more empowered, is because they have been included in these HIV intervention programmes for over 23 years,” says Supriya Sahu, former project director of the Tamil Nadu State Aids Control Society (TNSACS), “whereas in many other states these programmes have only just begun.” A petite, no-nonsense administrator, Sahu was with TNSACS from 2006 to 2008, and is still popular among aravanis for her sustained advocacy work. Her most successful campaign sensitised the state police force to the rights of sexual minorities.

“When I joined TNSACS, many aravanis and MSMs (‘men who have sex with men,’ ie., homosexuals and bisexuals) would complain about police harassment,” Sahu says. “So we launched a massive programme involving transgen-

ders, MSMs, sex workers and HIV-positive people and the police. This was crucial because usually the aravanis' first point of contact with the State is the police.”

Seven thousand police personnel were trained over a one-year period, starting from the deputy inspector general to officials at local precincts. Sexual minority members conducted classes that focused on dispelling the myth that gender non-conformity was unnatural. They also stressed aravanis should be treated with dignity.

“It's changed the relationship between cops and aravanis,” Sahu says. “Now many aravanis call me to say that these days they can walk into a police station and file a complaint!”

Government support aside, Tamil Nadu's aravanis are fighting for mainstream acceptance with a gusto unmatched by hijras in other parts of India, says Sunil Menon, a flamboyant gay-rights activist who promotes safe sex among Chennai's MSM community. “They have gone from place to place, they have picketed, they have campaigned. The transgender group here has been visible and proactive. They have made things work. They aren't just sitting waiting for things to happen. That's why I'm so proud of them.”

**T**HE OFFICE OF THE Social Welfare Association for Men (SWAM) stands on a narrow street near Saidapet station in Chennai. The shabby, two-storey build-





An aravani leaving a bar close to Koovagam. Many clients of transsexual prostitutes frequent such establishments.

ing with a spacious concrete courtyard and three adjacent shed-like rooms serves as a drop-in centre for local gays, lesbians, transgenders and HIV-positive persons. It's a space where they can get medical advice, food, counselling and spend a few hours relaxing in a non-judgmental environment. When I meet up with Kalki here a day after the Koovagam festival, she's lying on a straw mat in the courtyard, heads together with five other aravanis, playfully singing in Tamil; her outstretched arms holding above her head a laptop with an inbuilt webcam, recording their song.

A dark-skinned, elegant beauty, Kalki embodies the changing face of the Tamil Nadu aravanis. This soft-spoken aravani has carved out for herself a life and livelihood that transcends her transgender identity. She holds a Masters degree in journalism and mass communication and works as an independent media specialist developing web-based projects for clients. A well-known figure in the Chennai queer circles, Kalki runs the Sahodari ('friend' in Tamil) Foundation, a web-based outfit campaigning for transgender civil and legal rights. She often travels around the country giving talks in schools and colleges on gender-variant people and writes about her experiences as an activist on her personal blog: [kalki.tblog.com](http://kalki.tblog.com).

Her latest enterprise is a matrimonial website for transsexual women, [Thirunangai.net](http://Thirunangai.net). Probably the first of its kind, the portal lists profiles of transwomen in search of life partners. "We are getting a lot of attention. Men are writing

to us from all over, Malaysia, Singapore, Sweden..." says Kalki. *Thirunangai*, incidentally, means 'respectable woman' in Tamil. Though no marriages have been fixed so far, Kalki is optimistic. "More than anything, the idea is to raise the issues of marriage and adoption rights for aravanis," she says. She intends to expand the site into a transgender resource portal that would include information on jobs, health, government welfare schemes and current news. On the professional side, Kalki is working towards a second Masters degree in international relations. She envisions herself working with UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) someday, as India's cultural ambassador.

In essence, what sets Kalki apart from most aravanis is how absolutely comfortable she is in her own skin. Given the usual in-your-face, aggressive approach of most aravanis, Kalki's quiet self-assuredness comes as a bit of a surprise. But then again, she's had the privilege of a (reluctantly) supportive family and higher education—both rare luxuries among her more impoverished aravani sisters.

Though she grew up in a well-heeled businessman's family in Coimbatore, Kalki's as comfortable in the hardscrabble world of destitute aravanis as in the rarefied air of university lecture halls.

"I've been connected with the community since I was 13, so I know how it works," she says. "I know why there is so much aggression, why they beg, sell sex...everything."

She was only eight when she began noticing that she



A significant portion of an aravani's income comes from prostitution, often solicited around truck stops.

wasn't like other boys. "I was very effeminate," she recalls. "I liked doing things girls did. I loved flowers, the colours pink and lavender, and glittery dresses. I bought my first lipstick when I was ten, a bright red Lakmé shade for 24 rupees. By the time I was 13 there was so much harassment at school that I started bunking and spending all my time at a park that used to be frequented by aravanis. That's where I met my first guru. Soon I began to go out with them publicly, for movies, tea, etc. One day, my father's friend spotted me with them. There was a big showdown at home that evening. My father thought I was having sex with them. So I had to come out and tell the truth."

Kalki underwent sexual reorientation surgery in 2006 and remains under hormone therapy and laser treatment to reduce facial and chest hair—an expensive procedure increasingly popular among aravanis. She's proud of her developing breasts, another outcome of hormone injections. "You want to see?" She pulls up her shirt to reveal one budding breast without waiting for a response. "My family isn't very happy with the situation, but they accept it. After so many years only last year my sisters gave me gold studs and saris as gifts."

"I was the only son in the family," she laughs self-deprecatingly, "now I'm one of three daughters."

**T**HE OXFORD COMPANION to Medicine defines transsexualism as "a passionate lifelong conviction that one's psychological gender...is opposite to one's

anatomical sex." Most transgenders are born physically male, and a very small percentage are born hermaphrodite. Though Indian transgenders typically dress as women and refer to themselves as female, the National AIDS Control Organisation lists transgenders under the MSM category and leaves the specific identification up to the individual. "As far as we know, more than 90 percent of them haven't undergone (sex change) surgery," Sahu says.

Aravanis themselves consider hermaphrodites to be authentic transgenders. The second most respected group are those who have had their male genitalia surgically removed

**"I've been connected with the community since I was 13, so I know how it works," Kalki says. "I know why there is so much aggression, why they beg, sell sex...everything."**

by a Thai amma, a senior aravani who cuts off the penis and scrotum without anaesthetic—an emasculation ritual they call *nirvanam*. These days, the operation is frequently performed under anaesthesia at local hospitals and nursing homes of dubious repute. An aravani's position in the community hinges on whether she has undergone *nirvanam*.

An aravani's position in the community hinges on whether she has undergone castration. "It really depends on how powerful you want to be," says Kalki. "If you really want an important place in the community, you have to have it. Your seniority depends not on your age, but on how early on you've had [nirvanum]."

"It really depends on how powerful you want to be," says Kalki. "If you really want an important place in the community, you have to have it. Your seniority depends not on your age, but on how early on you've had [nirvanum]."

Aravani families replicate matriarchal societies with each unit, or *jamaat*, comprising of a guru and several *chelas* (disciples). Chelas are expected to give their income to their guru, who manages the household, herself usually a current or former sex worker. As the guru ages and can't find clients, she comes to depend entirely on the earnings of her stable, sometimes forcing her chelas to perform sex work against their will. Becoming a hijra is a process of socialisation into the *jamaat* starting with a gradual assumption of femininity—wearing female attire, observing certain rituals, and culminating in nirvanum.

There's a lot of pressure within the community to undergo nirvanum despite the risks involved, says Dr K Rajendran, a general practitioner who has been treating and counselling aravanis at SWAM for over 15 years. "I advised Kalki not to do it, but she didn't listen. It's very difficult to dissuade them."

Medical experts say the operation, performed independent of medical technology, can lead to death due to shock or septicaemia (blood poisoning caused by infected wounds). Persistent infections and urinary tract problems are common among those that survive the ordeal.

Hospital operations aren't much better. Operations are usually performed by unqualified doctors for just 5000 to 7000 rupees (qualified private doctors are too expensive for most aravanis). The state government may well be offering free sex change operations but aravani welfare board members admit few government hospitals have doctors qualified to perform such surgeries.

For gay activist Sunil Menon, the most aggravating aspect of the nirvanum tradition is the pressure it exerts on kothis to opt for castration. Kothis loosely define themselves as non-English speaking homosexuals who always take a female role during sex with other men. Typically, they depend on aravanis for support and sustenance due to lack of support systems for homosexuals in mainstream society.

"It has a lot to do with the need to belong," Menon says.

"If I'm poor and I feel different and I want to belong and I don't have resources, I join the aravanis. And once you plug in there's a false sense of security. I've lost many young men this way. Many kothis later regret getting operated on. It's the one thing I've been fighting [the aravanis] over for years."

Menon also believes the Koovagam festival actually pushes kothis to become aravanis. "They see all these aravanis with all their beautiful saris, gold jewellery and they go: 'Oh my God, I want to be like her.' You have to be really grounded to not be influenced by all that."

**T**HE STRING OF RECENT LEGAL VICTORIES for aravanis mirrors the achievements of the wider Indian homosexual community, including the July 2009 Delhi High Court judgment decriminalising homosexuality and the November 2009 Election Commission decision to allow transgenders to be listed as 'others' on electoral rolls and voter identity cards. But these advances have also exposed deep divisions within the transgender community where identity, family and power structures are concerned.

Transgender relations can be particularly strained between the poor majority and their few upper-class sisters.

Take the case of TV talk show host, Rose: a US-educated former web designer with a master's degree in biomedical engineering. Rose (formerly Ramesh Venkatesan) declared herself a transgender five years ago and began associating closely with Chennai's aravanis. Yet, these days, the mere mention of her name enrages most local aravanis who allege Rose callously dumped them once she achieved fame. "She's a fake," spits out Soumya, one of Kalki's close companions.

Latent anger boiled over into violence on the last day of the Koovagam festival when a group of aravani mourners shoved Rose around as she was being filmed by an international TV crew. (Rose demanded 50,000 rupees to be interviewed by *The Caravan*. *The Caravan* doesn't pay for interviews.)

Then there are others, like 34-year-old Lakshya, a Chennai-based classical dancer who refuses to be part of the *jamat* system but has a hard time evading the aravanis. "I stay away from them but they say 'no matter what you say you belong to our community,'" she says backstage during one of her performances.

Lakshya used to be Panthapilli Rajappan Rajesh, a well-known professional dancer and choreographer who trained and taught at the Kalakshetra Foundation, a premier institute of Indian classical dance, music and fine arts. After years of searching for a comfortable identity, Lakshya finally underwent sex change surgery last year. Now she is struggling to re-establish herself as a female dancer. "When I converted I felt like I'd just changed my dress, that's all," she says. "Nothing else had changed."

Lakshya insists she has no intention of associating with other Aravanis simply because they happen to share her identity. "I can't bear the *jamaat* rules and regulations," she says. "I don't want to be part of a separate community. I want to be a mainstream woman."

**“M**AINSTREAMING HAS TO HAPPEN,” Supriya Sahu agrees. “Now that transgenders are becoming aware, it’s just a matter of how it happens and how fast it happens.”

Though Tamil Nadu is already showing the way, the journey is bound to be a long one. A recent People’s Union for Civil Liberties report on human rights violations against transgenders notes that though many transgenders are being educated and holding non-traditional and visible occupations such as social work and politics, “their continuing stigmatisation keeps them at the fringes of society, subject to formidable problems of oppression, humiliation, discrimination and violence.”

For every Kalki, Rose or Lakshya, there are many impoverished and marginalised aravanis and hijras. Even access to the benefits earmarked for them is problematic. The issuing of transgender identity cards, for example, has already become a matter of much confusion among Tamil Nadu officials who, given the fluid nature of definitions within the community, are hazy about who qualifies as aravani.

Sahu foresees seemingly small things, like whether hospitals should admit them to a male or female wing, which public bathroom they should use or which jail cell they to put them in pose huge challenges for authorities. Much more needs to be done, she says. “Right now we just don’t have enough data. All states must conduct a census that should include information like how many are educated, to what level, etc. Only then can suitable training and livelihood programmes be thought up to meet their needs.”

Then there’s the matter of violence and oppression within the community itself. Exploitation at the hands of the jamaat guru is still a common phenomenon, says Vivek Anand, CEO of the Mumbai-based Humsafar Trust, an established support group for transgenders and sexual minorities. “When one leaves home to become part of the gharana (family) of hijras one is looking for self-expression, but then you realise that you have become part of a structure that accepts you for what you are but wants a pound of flesh for itself.”

Anand talks of developing state policies giving transgenders rights to marriage, inheritance, property and health but adds that policy changes alone won’t be enough.

“There’s need for public discourse on the aravani/hijra community to help people become more accepting of them,” he says. “One has to understand that these communities have been marginalised and neglected for so long that they have developed a deep-rooted anger and hostility towards mainstream populations that often finds expression in aggressive behaviour.” A dialogue, says Anand, would help society become more tolerant of effeminate children and acceptance from biological families would help reduce the number of people joining hijra communities.

“Any social change takes time and requires affected communities to stand up and speak for themselves,” says Anand. “Until Indian transgenders unite and fight for their rights, mainstreaming will continue to remain a distant dream.”

Big picture concerns aside, a more pressing matter preoccupies most aravanis—the quest for love. Every aravani



**Aravanis in Vilappuram and Koovagam gather to celebrate Aravan’s marriage to Krishna.**

I met yearned for a soul mate and a lasting relationship. Some, like Lakshaya, hang on to emotionally destructive relationships hoping someday their partners will come to value the depth of their devotion. Others are willing to put up with ‘husbands,’ who more often than not have ‘regular’ families they go home to, just to have a man around once in a while. This holds true for Kalki too.

A new boyfriend she was to meet with that night calls and cancels their date. Kalki has been through a string of failed relationships, but insists she’s “looking for quality,” for someone who will accept her as she is. “I want a man who’s intelligent, kind and compassionate and, of course, has an athletic body! But that’s going to be difficult to find,” she says, strolling down the dimming streets of Saidapet late at night. It’s been a long evening for her, trailing her friend Soumya as she unsuccessfully cruises for customers. As shop shutters rattle close behind us, Kalki pauses to light a cigarette. “I should stop smoking,” she says, rolling the butt between her thumb and forefinger. “My friends tell me it’s a masculine habit that doesn’t suit me anymore.” She gazes pensively at the street. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s worthwhile becoming a woman. Doesn’t seem like it’s all that great.” ■