CHAPTER 3: ARAVANI ACTIVISM, COLLECTIVIZATION AND MOVEMENT DEVELOPMENT

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I highlight historicity of transgender activism, collectivization, and movement development in Tamil Nadu. Various aspects of transgender movement such as aims and objectives, programmes and activities, various events of transgenders collectives are explained. Transgender welfare reforms and various transgender welfare schemes introduced and implemented by the state are also given.

3.2. Coining of the Term ‘Aravani’

The term aravani was given to hijras by Mr. Ravi, Indian Police Service (IPS) in the year 1998 during one of the beauty contest organized at Koovagam festival as part of HIV/ AIDS intervention programme for transgenders and MSM. The term aravani is considered a dignified term for transgenders in Tamil Nadu as compared to derogatory terms such as ali, ombodh, pottai, kattawandi etc.

3.2.1. Koovagam festival.

Koovagam festival is held every year during Chitra Poornima to worship the festival of Lord Aravan (Krishna and Gupta 2002; Mahalingam 2003; Chakravorty 2007). Story of Lord Aravan appears in the epic Mahabharata. Lord Aravan was the son of Arjun. Krishna and Gupta (2002) and Mahalingam (2003) have very well narrated the story of Lord Aravan.

According to folklore, a human sacrifice was required to win the Mahabharata war. The male required for sacrifice was expected to possess 36 male characteristics (known as Samudrika Lakshinam). Only Arjun and his son Lord Aravan had these characteristics. Arjun was the main hero in the war and hence Lord Aravan was chosen for the sacrifice. Lord Aravan was a bachelor and he expressed his desire to marry before his death. No king was ready to give his daughter knowing the fact that he will die the next day after his sacrifice. In order to ease the situation, Lord Krishna took form of a woman and married Lord Aravan. The next day Lord Aravan was sacrificed. After his death Lord Krishna (as a woman) underwent the ritual of attaining widowhood.
Aravanis consider themselves descendents and forms of Lord Krishna and hence they visit Koovagam temple every year to marry Lord Aravan. Aravanis mourn and weep the death of their husband Lord Aravan when he is sacrificed the next day, and they also undergo the rituals of attaining widowhood.

The temple of Lord Aravan is situated in Koovagam village in Ulundurpettai taluk, Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu. Hijras, aravanis, transgenders (from across India and many Asian countries), effeminate gay men, cross-dressers and many people from the queer community visit Villupuram town and the temple during the festival season. The temple festival is a public event. Cisgender men and women from neighbouring districts and from across Tamil Nadu also attend and participate in the festival.

The act of hijras worshipping and marrying Lord Aravan created aravani identity. The term aravani literally means one who worships ‘Lord Aravan’. The term aravani does not have direct significance or relation with the sex/ gender binaries. It has a religious-cultural background. Moreover the term is widely used across Tamil Nadu. It does not have any significance in Western-and-North Indian states and neighbouring south Indian states.

During the interview Mr. Ravi recalls “In Tamil the term ali means number nine. Earlier they used this term for aravani. Nine is a derogatory term which means neither male nor female. Even if there is any fight between some people they call ali, you are looking like an ali, and it is highly derogatory.”

Mr. Ravi recalls the miserable situation of transgenders when he was invited as a chief guest during the beauty contests and other HIV/ AIDS related events. He mentions that during that period hijras were denied rooms in the lodges. He intervened and requested the lodge owners to rent rooms to hijras. While interacting with heads of mainstream NGOs and hijra jamaat leaders, he learnt that hijras were harassed by men and hoodlums/ extortionists for free sex and for money while visiting the temple to participate in the annual festival. As a result he provided police security and protection during various events carried out during Koovagam festival. The real attention came to transgender issues when he coined the term aravani.

He further mentions “I was narrating this story and told that since you are all wives of Aravan you should be called only as Aravani. […] The Tamil Nadu government also recognized the term aravani, and after that the Aravani Welfare Board was formed.”

17 Interview with Mr. Ravi, IPS on October 21, 2010 in Chennai.
Participation of a police officer during the beauty contest event was highly covered by both print and visual media. This was how the term aravani was coined and it received immense media coverage. Since then the term aravani has been used for hijras and MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu.

3.3. Historicity of Aravani/ Transgender Activism in Tamil Nadu

Till a few years ago aravanis were mocked and ridiculed in Tamil Nadu. They faced violence mainly from police and hoodlums/ extortionists and their rights were violated. Moreover there was stigma attached with their gender transition and as a result they were discriminated. They avoided public places and used forest path to stay away from ridicule and harassment.18

Family is the first place of violation of rights, violence, and discrimination. In the absence of family’s support, many aravanis migrated to Western-and-North Indian states (and few in the east Indian states also) for gender transition, and joined the hijra community. The hijra community became a safe haven for gender transition, security, and alternative sources of livelihood such as begging, badhai (dancing) and sex work.19

3.3.1. Role of family.

When a person (man) comes out as a transgender his (her) status is not readily accepted. Parents and family members disown their child because of stigma attached with transgender identity. A person desiring to undergo gender transition and after leaving her parents house, finds security within the hijral aravani community, and in the absence of education and employment ends up into sex work and begging.20

Denial and lack of family support lead to transgender oppression within the larger mainstream society. Gender transition is observed both in rural and urban areas and also across various classes. However transgender situation differs in cities, towns and villages.

18 As shared by Ms. Rekha during the Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO on November 25, 2010 in Madurai town.
19 Much of migration pattern of hijras is from south India to the north Indian states (Kalra 2011).
20 Interview with Ms. Sheela on October 29, 2010 in Chennai.
In bigger cities and big towns there is family acceptance to some extent. However the acceptance is very slow. Ms. Ramya\(^\text{21}\) a leading transgender activist from a transgender CBO explains:

In some families the change has already started, they accept and they want the child to be back with them in their family whether he/ she whatever their gender may be. It takes a long time to accept the son transformed as a girl. But families have started accepting, it is a good change and it’s a good remarkable welcome.

Ms. Madhu\(^\text{22}\), Ms. Reshma\(^\text{23}\), and Ms. Sheela from Chennai have similar views. According to them the family has slowly started accepting gender transition of MtF individuals.

However acceptance of gender transition within the biological family can be viewed within the class-caste context also. Ms. Nikhila\(^\text{24}\) who hails from an upper-class and upper-caste background from Chennai highlights the class and caste politics associated with gender transition and acceptance by the biological family. She regrets that her gender transition was not readily accepted by her family members and they were uncomfortable with her transgender status. She was disowned by her family when she came out as a transgender.

Contrary to Ms. Nikhila, Ms. Shaheen\(^\text{25}\) who hails from a lower-middle class family from Chennai and identifies herself a transsexual woman and an individual transgender rights activist has a different perspective on her biological family. She considers herself to be fortunate for having an understanding mother and a supportive brother. Her gender transition was peacefully accepted by her family members and hence she was successful in accessing complete SRS. She also continued her higher education with family’s support. She gives credit to her family for her successful life and career. In her words:

My mom and brother were supportive and they got my name changed. I didn’t have to walk out of my house that was the difference between me and many others. That saved me from lot of sufferings. My mother wanted me to go for higher studies. I easily got jobs. During this process I never faced any stigma or discrimination. Right from my work to surgery everything went on very well.

Gender transition happens in towns and villages and there are stigma and discrimination issues there too. Aravani people from lower socio-economic status and lower-caste background are discriminated and are forced to leave their birth place. When they don’t live

\(^{21}\) Interview with Ms. Ramya on November 14, 2010 in Chennai.
\(^{22}\) Interview with Ms. Madhu on November 16, 2010 in Chennai.
\(^{23}\) Interview with Ms. Reshma on November 3, 2010 in Chennai.
\(^{24}\) Interview with Ms. Nikhila on November 2, 2010 in Chennai.
\(^{25}\) Interview with Ms. Shaheen on October 31, 2010 in Chennai.
with their biological family and live within the community (jamaat) system or live alone, their life is threatened by rowdies (hoodlums/extortionists) for sex or money and by powerful men in the village mostly from the upper-caste and upper-class. While have a Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO in Senji, Villupuram the following information was shared by group members:

We cannot stand on the road. When we go for sex work people threaten us and do not allow us to do sex work also. We cannot beg and cannot do sex work. We face lot of problems from rowdies. They beat and harass us. Police do not take our complaint as the accused are from the same village. Rowdies break our thatched roofs and break our mud pots and utensils. They break our doors also. If we go to the police they say that why are you living here. They also say all aravanis go to Mumbai for earning you should also go there and not live here. If aravanis are given house on rent men will come to their house for sex work. Situation in village is very different as compared to towns. In town there is some understanding whereas in villages people do not consider us a neither a man nor a woman. They will openly call us ombodhi and pottai.27

Primary respondents from Salem town and Madurai town shared that they were harassed for sexual pleasure (leading to unprotected sex) making them vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV. There is a relation with forced sexual assault and vulnerability to STIs. Mr. Balaji gives his insights on forced sexual assault and its relation with HIV infection:

We were looking at the connection between HIV and violence. People are stigmatized and discrimination. If there is stigma then there is isolation. We have seen the correlation.... Violence by the local people, the goondas (hoodlums/extortionists), the thugs is inflicted on transgenders or sex workers and they are raped without condom. People are sexually assaulted and usually that is gang rape. They can get raped and hence vulnerable to HIV infection.

Exploitation of transgender rights is not only observed within the family and larger society, but also exists within the closed aravani community system. Prof. Sita considers the aravani jamaat a family system for aravanis after leaving their biological parents house.

Many young transgenders run away and are also trafficked to Western-and-North Indian states. They live under a guru for many years and give their entire earning. This is sheer exploitation of individual (transgender) rights. These issues are not openly discussed and many times not challenged. Young and educated transgender activists and few non-transgender activists are unable to raise their voices against such exploitation because of

---

26 Group discussion held on November 18, 2010 in Senji, Villupuram.
27 Ombodhi is a Tamil term meaning number nine, pottai is also a Tamil term which was a derogatory term used for aravanis.
28 Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO on November 24, 2010 in Salem town.
29 Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO on November 25, 2010 in Madurai town.
30 Interview with Mr. Balaji on November 15, 2010.
31 Interview with Prof. Sita on September 17 and November 15, 2010 in Chennai.
strong *jamaat* system and very few opportunities for legal intervention. However there are also examples of legal aid given to trafficked *aravanis*. Mr. Kannan\(^{32}\) narrates a transgender trafficking incident:

Suresh (name changed) joined a *jamaat* in Chennai and a big *nani* (grandmother) took her to Pune and she was engaged in sex work and later went for emasculation. She was earning there. Once she escaped and came back to her house in Chennai and met her parents. Her parents went to police station and filed a complaint against many transgenders. Kolika *amma*\(^{33}\) (name changed) was arrested with two other *aravanis*.

Mr. Prakash Raj\(^{34}\) who was present during interview with Mr. Kannan adds “In the (transgender) federation different activities like mobilizing the community, addressing violation issues, problems during migration, trafficking problems etc. are also addressed.”

Acceptance of transgender within the family also depends on the attitude of people towards gender transition. Mr. Kumar\(^{35}\) a well wisher and supporter of transgender rights issues expresses:

If there is a disabled child born in the family then the parents will take care of that child, but if the same parents have an *aravani* child they will throw that *aravani* out of the house, and hence *aravanis* face so many problems after coming out of the family. So the first change should come from within the family. Some reasons for disowning an *aravani* could be a daughter in the house and it is perceived she will not get married because of the *aravani* in the house. Who is public? We all are public. If one transgender changes then it affects the entire family. Is there any problem because of *aravani* to the family? No. It is not like that. The family thinks that *aravanis* are not correct.

Primary respondents from big towns such as Madurai, Tiruchirappalli\(^{36}\), Villupuram, Salem, and Thoothukkudi\(^{37}\) districts shared that gender transition is not easily accepted, however the change has slowly stared and very few families have allowed their gender transitioned *aravani* transgender (earlier son) to live with them. There is stigma attached with transgender identity in small towns and villages because of which they are discriminated.

Both primary and secondary respondents shared that *aravani* migration outside Tamil Nadu has also reduced due to state’s support through welfare schemes and availability of alternative livelihood opportunities through IGPs. Some parents don’t want their child to live in the

\(^{32}\) Mr. Kannan was present during the interview with Mr. Prakash Raj on September 14, 2010 and he shared his views on trafficking.

\(^{33}\) *Amma* means mother.

\(^{34}\) Interview with Mr. Prakash Raj on September 14, 2010 in Chennai.

\(^{35}\) Interview with Mr. Kumar on September 13, 2010 in Chennai.

\(^{36}\) Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO on November 23, 2010 in Vengur village, Tiruchirappalli.

\(^{37}\) Interview with Ms. Rosemary on November 16, 2010 in Chennai.
aravani community. In such cases gender transition begins while still living with the biological parents. Ms. Shilpa38 who organized a meeting for parents of transgender expresses:

In one meeting parents of transgenders were called. Around 10-12 parents came for the meeting. Mothers still call their transgender child a son. One mother shared that she has given her property to her (son) transgender child. Upon hearing another parent got inspired and said that she’ll also give the property to her transgender child. In such patriarchal male dominant society, there are so much of unequal power relations. The moment a boy child is born there is lot of happiness. However when the family comes to know that the boy has changed to a transgender, it is very difficult for a parent to accept when a boy changes to a girl. Among the parents there should be a support group. If the parents accept the children why would they run and get into the community…. they are forced to get into sex work.

However it is also perceived that in the absence of family support many transgenders are unable to get proper legal help and support. Ms. Sheela highlights the importance of availing legal help and support if transgenders live with their biological family. In her words:

Many transgenders live with their family. Earlier they used to run to Mumbai, but nowadays the main leaders in various cities and towns stay back with their family. Also in Mumbai and Delhi the parents are not near. But here in Tamil Nadu the family and parents are very close, so if there is any problem for that aravani the parents will go and file a complaint against the accused.

However acceptance of aravani within the biological family is not easy. Gender associated with sex assigned at birth is deeply rooted in people’s mind and any change in the gender is not easily accepted. Prof. Sita highlights some of these issues:

Parents have started accepting the transition of their son as a transgender, but it is still a question whether people think automatically about their son becoming a woman or people just don’t think about that. People just don’t think in that way. People usually do not disown a disabled child but when transgender people transition they are thrown out of the family. The notion of sex and gender is embedded in the thoughts of people. Unconsciously parents do not think about their child transitioning from one gender to the other.

Sex assigned at birth and the corresponding gender is cultural norms and any change in either is not easily accepted within the larger society. The discussion in this section highlights the importance of acceptance of gender transition of transgenders by their biological parents and family members. While living with their family, transgenders can avoid harassment and abuses mainly from hoodlums/ extortionists and can also avail legal help with the support of family members. However gender transition acceptance is higher in city as compared to small towns and villages and also varies within the class-caste context.

38 Interview with Ms. Shilpa on September 8, 2010 in Chennai.
3.3.2. Violation of transgender rights and violence against transgenders.

In the absence of family support when aravanis/ MtF transgenders join the aravani jamaat or live an independent life they face various problems in their everyday life. Violation of transgender rights, violence and crime against transgenders mainly by police and hoodlums/extortionists, and stigma and discrimination attached with transgender identity within the mainstream society are some issues that exist in Tamil Nadu. Intensity of violations of transgender rights and violence against transgenders is very strong.

3.3.3. Harassment from police and rowdies.

Primary respondents from Salem town and Villupuram mentioned that they are harassed by policemen while they are engaged in sex work. Local rowdies physically and verbally assaulted aravanis. For e.g. some of their houses were broken, they were sexually assaulted, and were threatened to be killed.

Such examples demonstrate that transgenders in Tamil Nadu face serious threats from local rowdies and police which went unreported and unaccounted as their complaints were never taken in the police station. Contrary when they went to the police station they were humiliated and sent back. In such situation, transgenders are blamed for their own situation. People think that transgenders invite men for sex work, and as they are perceived to be always available for sex work, any assault (physical, sexual or verbal) on them is not taken seriously.

However when these aravanis approached local mainstream NGOs for support, the NGOs mediated and their pleas were heard by head of the villages or by the police and with their intervention the tensions were resolved.

One important observation was that aravanis cannot go out with their family members openly. Even if they go out with their brother, father or any male member from their family, police personnel suspect them to be clients of aravani and they take them to the police station for further inquiry. When aravani people travel in the bus they are looked as objects of sex work. It explains the vulnerability of aravanis in public places and while travelling alone. They don’t feel safe. Ms. Radhika emotionally shares her feelings:

39 Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO November 24, 2010 in Salem town.
40 Interview with Ms. Gayatri and Group discussion held on November 18, 2010 in Senji, Villupuram.
41 As shared by Ms. Radhika during the Group Discussion with members of transgender CBO November 24, 2010 in Salem town.
If a woman travels in the bus, or goes to a hotel, or goes to a cinema then they do not look at them strangely, but at the same time when we go to same places, people accept us to some extent but the police look at us only as sex workers. That is the only problem that we have here. We cannot go with our own brother. The police think he is our client, if we go with our sister the police think we are doing pimp work. If we go with mother the police think that both of us are in sex work.

This puts restriction on mobility of transgenders when they go out in public places with their mother, sister, brother and other family members.

### 3.3.4. Discrimination within the health set-up.

There is already stigma attached with the aravani transgender identity and stigma and discrimination faced by transgender PLHA (People Living with HIV/ AIDS) is more intense. Till a few years ago, transgender PLHA were treated badly and discriminated when they visited the GH for treatment or for other medical services. For e.g. Ms. Madhu shares that one of her transgender friend (a PLHA) was insulted by the medical staff and was asked to commit suicide by going under the train or to hang herself. Due to lack of proper medical attention, her friend died near the toilet in the hospital. Transphobia existed among medical practitioners too. A few years ago, transgenders were also made to sleep naked and were surrounded by a group of doctors for medical examination in the GH. Transgender bodies were seen as objects of research.

There is very less information on transgenders among health care practitioners. And there is lack of clarity on transgender sex and gender identity.

### 3.3.5. Access and use of public services.

Use of public transport, public toilet etc. is also an issue for many transgenders. In the train, women do not allow aravanis to travel in the ladies compartment while men too didn’t like them in gents compartment. However over a period of time women have got accustomed seeing aravanis travelling in ladies compartment and have slowly started accepting their presence in the compartment. There is a change in women’s attitude. Also when aravanis were put in the jail they were put in men’s cell (prison). This many times led to sexual assault. At present aravani cases are dealt in All Women’s Police Station.

Ms. Rekha shared an incident in which she was insulted by a cisgender woman when she tried to use a ladies toilet:

---

42 As shared by Ms. Rekha during the Group Discussion.
One problem is using the public toilet. When I went into the ladies toilet, one lady was standing outside the toilet, when I came out she said that you should not come in the ladies toilet. Then I asked her where should I go? She said that I should go in the gents toilet. I was explaining that the Chief Minister (CM) has given us recognition as a woman and there is no problem in using a ladies toilet. She was not ready to listen. One more time after 15 days I was passing through the same place, the same lady very loudly said that I should not use ladies toilet and she addressed me he. […] I was very angry and I fought with that lady.

3.3.6. Discrimination and bullying.

Housing was also an issue. Aravanis were not given houses on rent. The reason was that general public does not want aravanis to live in their locality. Ms. Sneha\textsuperscript{43} expresses “If any bachelor wants a room then they immediately get room. Similarly there are ladies hostel. But we don’t have any such facility. This is a very big issue.”

Attitude of general public also plays a vital role in creating stereotypes for transgenders. Ms. Nikhila iterates that as a kid, she was bullied and ragged by her classmates because of her feminine behaviour. She was teased in her adolescent and because of that for some time she had to pretend like a boy, but she could not resist herself and came out as a transgender. As a result she faced lot of trauma because of hiding her feminity and for leading a dual life. After her return from the U.S. she began her gender transition. She expresses the agony of leading a dual life:

\begin{quote}
Once I came out I was internally happy that I was truly myself for the first time but then externally everything turned against me. Before transition internally I was not happy and externally everyone was in favour of me. As long as I pretended to be a male I was treated normal. But once I started changing, society turned against me.
\end{quote}

Change of gender is not easily accepted. Gender is strongly anchored on sex assigned at birth. Gender transition is always critiqued and questioned at various stages of life.

3.3.7. Transgender acceptance more in the lower-class strata.

Mr. Prakash Raj mentions that lot of transgenders from lower socio-economic background live in slums. Discrimination is much less in slums as compared to the middle-class and upper-class of society. Aravanis in the slum gel well with general public (cisgender men and women) from lower socio-economic background. Aravanis do not have respect in the middle-class and upper-class. Aravani-phobia (transphobia) exists within the middle-class and upper-class. However there is a confusion why such phobia exists and Mr. Kumar shares his views on aravani-phobia:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Ms. Sneha on November 21, 2010.
\end{quote}
First of all people are afraid of aravani. And we don’t know what that phobia is all about. So the fear has to go first. There is some secret with the community, and aravanis do not come close to the society. There is a distance between the society and aravanis.

An interesting analysis of field data is that in urban areas the issues are related to rights, use of public spaces, transportation etc. while in the rural areas (especially in small villages and towns) the issues are centered on housing, alternative sources of livelihood, harassment, physical, sexual and verbal abuse etc. mainly by police and hoodlums/ extortionists. There is difference of issues in urban and rural areas.

3.3.8. HIV/ AIDS intervention programmes among transgenders.

HIV/ AIDS intervention programme has a larger contribution for transgender welfare and development. HIV/ AIDS project activities brought visibility to transgender rights violation and hardships faced by them in their everyday lives.

Prof. Sita recalls during the interview that initially there was no movement exclusively for transgender rights but within the HIV intervention programmes/ projects, issues of survival, dignity, option for employment, decent residences etc. were raised by aravani community members. As there was harassment from police and hoodlums/ extortionists, transgender murders (form of hate crime) etc. transgenders from various places within Tamil Nadu raised their voices against these incidents. HIV/ AIDS intervention programmes/ projects became a platform for raising transgender rights and violence issues.

HIV/ AIDS intervention programme in the 1990s in Tamil Nadu mark the inception of transgender welfare activities by mainstream NGOs. According to Mr. Senthil, head of NGO working on MSM and transgender issues, a research study conducted by WHO in Tamil Nadu in the year 1990 revealed that large number of sex workers and MSM population existed in Tamil Nadu. In his words:

It actually started when WHO wanted to do a study to identify Female Sex Workers (FSWs) in Chennai in the year 1990. They had hired an anthropologist from Amsterdam University to train this study to identify people who are in sex work. As an extension of the project they wanted to find out whether MSM and transgender existed. They thought that there were only 25 transgenders in Tamil Nadu and 10 of them were in Choolaimedu and those areas. And they said that MSM were not here, as homosexuality as understood as a western phenomena. The study was extended we identified 7000 homosexual men.

44 Interview with Mr. Senthil on November 1, 2010 in Chennai.
Like many other states, the then Health Minister of Tamil Nadu denied existence of Commercial Sex Workers (CSW) (Parameswaran 2004) and MSM. Later the state government became aware of CSW existence in Tamil Nadu. As a result Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society (TANSACS) was formed by the efforts and persistent lobbying of HIV/ AIDS aid workers across the state. This was the beginning of HIV/ AIDS intervention programme in Tamil Nadu. Later many NGOs mushroomed and they initiated HIV/ AIDS intervention programmes among the high risk groups such as CSW, MSMs, truck drivers and migrant workers.

As mentioned by Mr. Senthil, initially organizations such as Community Action Network (CAN), Community Health Education Society (CHES), Indian Community Welfare Organisation (ICWO), Association for Rural Mass India (ARM) etc. catered HIV/ AIDS intervention programme among MSM and transgender population in Chennai (few other organizations across Tamil Nadu too initiated intervention among MSM and transgender population).

Beauty contests events organized as part of HIV/ AIDS awareness programme by few mainstream NGOs during the Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu became an initial ground for raising issues such as violation of transgender rights, violence faced by transgender community while engaged in sex work or begging, and stigma and discrimination attached with transgender identity and also emergence of ‘aravani’ term.

Seckinelgin (2008) mentions the important role of NGOs in participating, contributing, and fighting against HIV/ AIDS disease. NGOs play an important role in advocacy, service delivery, and flexibility and this is the reason why the concept of agency is attributed to them. NGOs are seen as a link to the international organizations and the link is basically around resource and technical exchange. The role of the international organizations remains as providers and NGOs are grass-roots implementers. Funds available for HIV/ AIDS has opened areas for NGOs in treatment, care and prevention of HIV/ AIDS. By giving funds, the funding agencies also monitor the activities of NGOs. According to HIV/ AIDS policy framework funds allotted to NGOs is only for specific HIV/ AIDS intervention programme/ project.

Beauty contest organized during Koovagam festival and transgender rights issues deviate from HIV/ AIDS project specific goals. Though the beauty contest was part of HIV/ AIDS project work, it also became a platform to raise transgender rights issues. It is this uniqueness that will always be highlighted while discussing transgender activism in Tamil Nadu. Though
the focus of beauty contest was to gather larger crowd of transgenders, what was discussed by transgenders was more related to violation of transgender rights, stigma and discrimination, and violence faced by them in their everyday lives. Thus HIV/AIDS project activity/event became a platform for transgender collectivization and gave rise to transgender multiple voices which had no relation with HIV/AIDS.

There is adequate funding for HIV/AIDS intervention among the MSM and transgender population. However funds for transgender rights are scarce. There are very few funding agencies giving funds for transgender rights issues. In the situation of scarce funding, HIV/AIDS project related activities became a ground for simultaneously highlighting transgender rights issues in Tamil Nadu. With the available HIV/AIDS funds, there was not extra money required for office space, infrastructure, office maintenance etc. All these provisions provided under the HIV/AIDS projects were also utilized simultaneously by NGOs and CBOs, though not commercially for addressing other needs/queries of transgender community in Tamil Nadu.

In the situation of scarce funding, transgender CBOs are mainly dependent on local donors and philanthropists to continue their work at the grassroots level. Aravani transgender activists and non-transgender advocates have put in their personal efforts for transgender welfare and development activities. In the absence of adequate funding, transgender CBOs still strive to address transgender rights issues at the grassroots level, but they use the existing resources, and mainly it is their own time and efforts through voluntary work.

Many transgender groups in Tamil Nadu have made a significant difference with their activism. In the absence of funding these organizations have raised awareness, availed various government schemes, and engaged in various IGPs. Both transgender activists and non-transgender advocates have pooled in their time, money, efforts, and expertise for raising transgender issues. This demonstrates that in the absence of funding, community members with the help and co-operation of general public (i.e. non-transgender advocates) address issues. Funding is viewed a limitation in undertaking many other organizational activities and addressing transgender rights issues.

Mr. Balaji recalls that even before the state government reforms were introduced, many autonomous transgender groups in some districts in Tamil Nadu had initiated few welfare activities in their local area. He gives examples of Krishnagiri district where transgender groups contacted the district collector and requested houses for homeless transgenders. This happened even much before official declaration of transgender welfare reforms and official
introduction of the G.O.s. There were isolated transgender voices across Tamil Nadu by various groups and they raised transgender issues in their own local areas.

The role of mainstream NGOs in Tamil Nadu will always be appreciated for giving an opportunity to transgenders to work in their NGOs and also for providing services to the marginalized transgender population. Some these transgenders became well trained in those NGOs, they proved to be a trailblazer by initiating and forming their own organizations and groups.

One more reason for transgenders to take their welfare in their own hands was exploitation of funds for transgenders. Transgenders at the grassroots level felt that the NGOs mobilized funds for the community and the services were not reaching properly at the grassroots level. As Mr. Prakash Raj highlights:

Wherever you go, you’ll see that always the NGOs are like dictators. Transgenders felt that they wanted a separate organization for themselves and wanted to work independently. Aravanis wanted a separate platform for themselves. My personal thought is that there should be CBOs only represented by aravani people. The NGO is always in a fighting mode, but if CBOs are formed then the community can be developed a little more.

Much of the discussion on mainstream NGOs was around funding and NGOization of issues. It is a perception by transgenders at the grassroots level that mainstream NGOs catering to diverse groups are not sensitive towards transgender groups, and it is an understanding that if welfare activities are undertaken by people from same population then there are less chances of manipulation of funds.

Transgender welfare activities which was carried out by mainstream NGOs was slowly overtaken by transgender CBOs. At present transgender welfare and development activities are mainly carried out by transgender CBOs. However there are many mainstream NGOs that still cater their services to the transgender population.

3.3.9. Campaigns and events.

Issue based campaigns form an important part of movement. However transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu reflect that there was no proper issue based campaigns. Transgenders address issues as and when they arise. Nothing is pre-planned. There is no consensus on an issue. If any issue is felt necessary, aravanis and transgenders from various CBOs, federations, sangams, and groups assemble and raise the issues. Members of the
movement gather and disperse as and when the issues are addressed. Moreover the gathering is temporary.

Temporary gathering of groups to address an issues, and also dispersion when the issue is addressed is also an important feature of a social movement. There are few examples of transgender temporary collectivization to address an issue. Temporary gathering of transgenders to raise issue by various groups is well described by Mr. Gurumurthy.45 “I don’t know much about this Federation, there are so many forums that have been formed by transgenders at different point of time but all these forums have been left at some point of time without any continuous effort.”

Though some of these forums were temporary, these kind of temporary gathering highlighted transgender issues through various events such as filing of Writ Petition, Public Hearing, silent rallies, dharna etc.46

3.3.10. Support for voting rights.

On March 6, 2004, leading transgender activist Ms. Sheela with the help of a female lawyer filed a Writ Petition in the Madras High Court demanding voting rights for aravani people. The Madras High Court allowed transgenders to vote either as male or female (Venkat 2008). Transgenders were given the liberty to choose sex of their choice. Media played an important role in highlighting transgender voting rights issue when the Writ Petition was filed. After the court’s reply, aravanis enrolled their names and received their voter id as a female.

Prof. Sita recalls “Initially transgender activism was not in a movement form but there were groups that wanted to get citizenship documents like ration card and voting card and it was that time when a Writ Petition was filed in the Chennai High Court demanding voting rights for aravani.”

The Writ Petition is considered a bench mark for achieving transgender voting rights. According to Ms. Sheela, the Madras High Court officially permitted transgenders to cast their vote either as male or female.

45 Interview with Mr. Gurumurthy on September 15, 2010 in Chennai.
46 As shared by Ms. Sheela and Ms. Ramya during the interview.
3.3.11. Public Hearing.

Action Aid organized a Public Hearing in the year December 2007 to highlight plight of transgenders in Tamil Nadu and transgender rights violation issues. There were five jurists in the Public Hearing. The Public Hearing was held at the Guindy Pollution Control Board office in Chennai. Nearly 500 aravani people from Chennai participated in the Public Hearing. In the Public Hearing 36 strong cases of transgender rights violation were shared. These case studies highlighted problems faced by transgenders in their everyday lives. Issues such as violence and ill treatment, violation of transgender rights, isolation, and stigma and discrimination were highlighted. The event was extensively covered by the media. National Council Committee, National Police Committee and Government officials also participated in the event. Plight of transgenders living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) was also highlighted. Formation of a Transgender Welfare Board was suggested during the event. After the Public Hearing the Board was formed by the state government (Clarke 2010: 55).

3.3.12. Commonality of identities.

A dharna was staged by few transgender CBOs and various groups (registered and non-registered) from across Tamil Nadu in Chennai in the month of August 2010 against an organization AB (organization name changed) working on HIV/AIDS issues. Many leading transgender activists and aravani jamaat leaders participated in this event. Nearly 400 aravanis from 14 districts from across Tamil Nadu participated in the dharna.

The participants in the dharna demanded cancellation of AB’s project. It was alleged that AB had misused funds allotted for transgender and MSM HIV/AIDS intervention programme. The head of AB was also accused of misbehaving with transgenders.

Many primary respondents shared that the head of AB discouraged aravani people from undergoing castration and SRS. By doing so, the head had an intention to retain the (male) gender identity of transgenders. The head also had used abusive terminologies like ‘ambalai’ (man) to address aravanis. Aravanis felt offensive, humiliated, and felt a character assassination on their gender identity. Because of this behaviour many leading transgender activists and leaders resigned and left the organization. When the aravani staff resigned, the

---

47 Ms. R. M. Ramathal from the State Women’s Commission, Mr. Christodas Gandhi, Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, Mr. Sampath, retired commissioner, Mr. Kalamuthu, and Mr. Oases Fernandes, HRF. Names of jurists shared by Ms. Madhu during the interview.
48 I had an opportunity to visit the dharna spot and observe issues raised by various groups from across Tamil Nadu.
head filed complaints against them and put them behind bars. Victimized aravanis commented that false cases were filed against them. Moreover the head also interfered in functioning of the aravani jamaat system. The head discouraged younger aravanis from joining the jamaat and instead asked them to live an independent life outside the jamaat system. Aravanis felt that they were pressurized by a non-community member.

This aggravated a grudge against the head of AB and aravani jamaat leaders decided to bring this to the notice of funding agencies, the government, and other important institutions. When asked about the dharna, Ms. Kanamma an aravani jamaat leader and also head of transgender CBO actively engaged in transgender movement responded “They say that the aravani jamaat will not be given respect and it is similar like a katta (traditional) panchayat. Hence senior aravani leaders organized the dharna.”

Aravani community members filed a complaint against head of AB and during that time the case was under investigation. According to aravani leaders, the dharna was staged intentionally to show the strength, power and unity of the aravani jamaat.

Though the issue was not addressed immediately, community members gathered to raise their voice against people criticizing the aravani jamaat system. This kind of community collectivization explain gathering of community members with a ‘we-feeling’ and a strong resonance with the hijra, aravani, and MtF transgender identity associated with the hijra/ aravani jamaat sub-culture. It also helps us to understand that any threat on (gender) identity and culture is least tolerated and community members temporarily gather and disperse as the issues are highlighted or addressed. The dharna is a typical example of transgender mobilization around ‘culture’ and ‘commonality of identities’ within the culture.

3.3.13. Role of media.

Media has played an important role in highlighting transgender issues in Tamil Nadu. Though it is unsolved whether media uses transgender issue as sensational news, the role of media will always be appreciated for covering transgender issues.

Media was seen as a well-wisher by many primary respondents. During data collection process it was realized that mainstream NGOs, transgender CBOs, and various transgender autonomous groups working on transgender issues use media as a strategy to highlight

49 Interview with Ms. Kanamma on November 23, 2010 in Vengur, Tiruchirappalli.
transgender issues. Media includes print, audio, visual and electronic media (internet, blogs etc.). There is no particular style or strategy to raise transgender issues in Tamil Nadu. However during an organizational event, media is formally invited and many times a proper press meet is arranged (Press Release is also given during the meet). Newspapers form an important source in print media, and visual media includes various news channels. Media was invited and was present during important events such as Writ Petition, Public Hearing, dharna, silent rallies etc. organized in Tamil Nadu.

Media also plays an important role in depicting positive image of transgenders. Earlier the film industry depicted a very negative image of transgenders, with growing activism and repeated appeal to media by transgender activists, the negative roles of aravanis have lessened, and very recently there have been few TV serials and films made on aravani topic which showed the problems faced by the transgender community in their everyday lives.

A good example of positive impact of media can be learnt with the TV chat show Ipadika, Rose (Yours, Rose) on Star Vijay hosted by a MtF transsexual (and individual transgender rights activist). Ms. Nikhila who hosted the show recalls:

There was no positive image of transsexuals in the media. Media had a very funny depiction of transsexuals in Tamil films and Indian films, and it was very clownish or should I say like bad element. Media does not depict transsexuals as human beings and the right to live and right to dignity. Films treated transsexuals badly and treat them cheap, evil and dirty. As a result there was bad attitude towards transsexuals. I wanted to be a positive example and wanted to minimize the negative effect that was created by all these negative depiction. When I thought about films I realized it was very difficult to get into films and TV was much easier. I wanted to be a sensitive person to discuss social issues like transsexual issues and also many other sections of people who were denied basic rights, sexuality issues that were not totally talked openly in the media. So I developed this talk show concept and I went to one TV network and they pushed me out saying who allowed you inside. That was the kind of treatment I received.

Through some contacts and a snowballing effect, she got connected with right people in the TV industry and that is how she got an opportunity to host a chat show on a leading regional television channel. The show received high publicity even before it was aired. After the show there was lot of media attention on transgender issues in Tamil Nadu. According to her, media accelerated the entire process of transgender welfare, though the roots of activism were laid earlier, when the show was aired transgender issues received more focus.

50 Ms. Nikhila also shared that a press meeting was organized to share more information about the show and it was covered by regional, national and international media and the show became a successful hit.
Most of the primary respondents shared positive views about media and the awareness that is created through print and visual media in Tamil Nadu. They consider media as one of their well-wisher.

Theater is also used as a media strategy to highlight transgender issues in Tamil Nadu. For e.g. Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu a theatre group started by Sudar Foundation highlight transgender issues through their play. There have been two plays directed so far and have been staged at various platforms across Tamil Nadu. The play has received positive acclaim. The first play highlighted problems faced by aravanis in the absence of citizenship documents and the second play depicted plight of aravanis in their family, relationship with partners/ spouse issues, issues within the aravani jamaat, and transgender sexuality.

3.1. Transgender Welfare Reforms in Tamil Nadu

Thamil Nadu Aravanigal Association (THAA), Chennai is considered a pioneering transgender CBO for addressing various transgender issues. THAA gave a memorandum to the then Chief Minister (CM) demanding various rights and welfare schemes for transgenders in Tamil Nadu (refer Appendix 7). As a result many transgender welfare schemes were introduced in Tamil Nadu. Ms. Ramya from THAA recalls her experience of meeting the Social Welfare Minister when she submitted 13 points memorandum demanding various transgender welfare schemes:

We were taken to her chamber. She heard all our grievances and a memorandum was handed over to her. It was a giant leap step. It is the first memorandum given to the state government. Some 13 points were given in the memorandum. Out of that 10 points were approved by the government.

Ms. Ramya holds the view that after submission of memorandum, various transgender welfare schemes were introduced and implemented in Tamil Nadu. According to her, the state responded when community representatives collectively demanded various welfare schemes.

3.4.1. Transgender welfare schemes.

Some of the transgender welfare schemes introduced and implemented in Tamil Nadu include free Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) in the Government Hospital (GH)\(^{51}\), admission in

\(^{51}\) Refer RTI reply (Appendix 6).
government colleges with full scholarship\textsuperscript{52}, free housing scheme (Right to property)\textsuperscript{53}, and formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to develop the habit of savings and promote IGPs\textsuperscript{54} through SHGs. Transgenders in Tamil Nadu have Right to vote (either as male or female), get a ration (family) card\textsuperscript{55}, and Right to apply for a passport. The state has also issued transgender ids and health insurance cards. Tamil Nadu state has also conducted the first district wise state level transgender population count in 2009. According to the population count there are 2663 transgenders in Tamil Nadu (Government of Tamil Nadu 2009).

All these welfare schemes all-together have not been introduced by any other state in India. Many states in India have slowly started introducing similar transgender welfare schemes (UNDP 2010, nd; Daily Bhaskar 2012; Deccan Herald 2012; The Hindu 2012; Vishwanathan 2012).

Also my own participation as a participant, resource person and facilitator in various LGBT consultations (both Government and developmental sector)\textsuperscript{56} it is realized that transgender development in other states in India is still in the initial stages and Tamil Nadu is the only progressive state for introducing transgender welfare reforms and implementing various welfare schemes. Tamil Nadu remains an exception.

However it is observed that the welfare schemes are mostly focused on MtF population. The G.O.s does not describe services for FtM transgenders. Also transgender representatives in Transgender Welfare Board are mostly MtF individuals.

3.4.2. Transgender Welfare Board.

Tamil Nadu is the first state to form a Transgender Welfare Board in India. The Board was formed in the year April 2008. The Board has representatives such as aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals, non-transgender advocates from mainstream NGOs, and few government officials. This kind of governance explains involvement, dialogue, participation, representation, and inclusion of ‘the governed’ (in this case hijras, aravanis, and

\textsuperscript{52} Government of Tamil Nadu 2011b.
\textsuperscript{53} Government of Tamil Nadu 2009.
\textsuperscript{54} Government of Tamil Nadu 2012.
\textsuperscript{55} Government of Tamil Nadu 2011c.
\textsuperscript{56} LBT consultation meeting organized by SNEHA, Mumbai during July 5-7, 2010; Transgender – Hijra consultation meeting on the topic “Rights Here, Right Now – Policy Recommendations for the 12th Five Year Plan Approach Paper” by UNDP, New Delhi on December 3, 2010; Amaltas and The Humsafar Trust consultation to produce Programmatic Roadmap for Sexual Minority Groups in India on November 11, 2011 in Vadodara; Stakeholder Consultation on Gender and Inclusion by UNDP, India on September 4, 2012.
transgenders) by the state government for transgender welfare and development. Though the state has the power to introduce welfare reforms, it has also involved various stakeholders/actors for understanding transgender issues and plan appropriate welfare measures.

However FtM transgenders are not members in the Board. The FtM is a non-visible population as they do not come out openly as transgenders. Prof. Sita expresses that many FtM transgenders do not come out openly as a transgender:

There are so few here who are aware of FtM. That is why I feel it is important to talk about them also even though if they are not a big presence visibly. Because FtM people mostly don’t go for medical treatment … they stop with cross-dressing and most woman dress up in boyish clothes, and they become a cross dresser than a transgender and that is a problem. And if there is no visibility then there is a problem.

3.4.3. **Free higher education.**

Transgenders in Tamil Nadu are eligible to get admission in co-educational and men’s colleges and avail full scholarship through the Transgender Welfare Board (Government of Tamil Nadu 2008, 2011b).

Though there is scope for higher studies there is no guarantee of employment after education. According to primary respondents, majority transgenders are either school dropouts or uneducated. Many discontinue their education in their pre gender transition stage due to harassment in colleges because of their feminine behavior. Because of these reasons, aravanis have lower educational qualification and many remain unskilled. Moreover their transgender status is a hindrance by itself in accessing employment opportunities. There is lack of proper documents/credentials in the preferred gender for applying jobs. Employers and general public are also not fully aware of transgender issues and their problems and hence transphobia exists.

As Prof. Sita is working in an educational institution and has a teaching background, she considers free education a positive step by the state government:

They are addressing two main issues, the treatment and education. The SRS which can be offered by the government and that way I think it is a very good move and it is almost like a role model and I wish that the rest of the states should follow that. What we need to do as people within the state is to implement it with much more rigor.
3.4.4. Formation of SHGs and promotion of IGPs.

Most of the leading aravani, transgender/ transsexual activists are educated and have done schooling/ college, some work in NGOs, CBOs or work independently. Uneducated or illiterate unskilled aravanis work on daily wages as agricultural workers, provide food catering services, engage in IGPs (rearing cow, selling milk, selling vegetables etc.), work in petrol bunk, have tailoring units, manage snacks stall, and some work in NGOs/ CBOs. Those who do not get these opportunities, or are unable to do these work have no other choice other than to beg and do sex work. These reflect class position of transgenders. Higher the education, the more liberal attitude towards welfare and development, and they have an option to chose a better alternative source of livelihood on a higher rank. Educated transgenders lead the movement, those less educated are engaged in IGPs, and those deprived of education and unskilled continue with begging and sex work.

Tamil Nadu government through transgender welfare reforms promotes formation of transgender SHGs and IGPs. These IGP schemes are utilized by many aravanis in various districts across Tamil Nadu. For e.g. in Kancheepuram, Cuddalore and Vellore districts aravanis sell sarees and dress materials. In Madurai district they make masala (powdered spices), sell flowers and vegetables. Aravanis in Tiruchirappalli have purchased cows and are engaged in selling cow’s milk. While in Villupuram district they make phenyl, bathing soap, and washing soap.

All these schemes in Tamil Nadu are appreciated by both primary and secondary respondents but as Prof. Sita comments it is too early to assess the success or failure of government schemes. In her words “And also it is a bit too early. It is two years. It is too early to assess the success or failure of the government policy.”

While Ms. Shilpa has some different views on the government schemes. According to her the schemes are not sufficient “It is like the government is throwing some pieces of bones to dogs. The schemes introduced by the government are not sufficient. […] How many people are benefited by the Public Distribution System (PDS) card, ID card, surgery etc. Movement is successful if all the members are benefited.”

There are mixed views on transgender welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu. At this point of time it can be suggested that further detailed research study should be carried out across Tamil Nadu in the future to understand impact of transgender reforms and number of direct
beneficiaries at the grassroots level. Such research studies will be more beneficial if they are based on the rural-urban differences.

3.4.5. **Free Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) in Tamil Nadu.**

In the RTI reply received from Dr. Jayaraman, Professor & Head, Department of Burns, Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery, Government Kilpauk Medical College Hospital, Chennai it is mentioned that the state provides free SRS to transgenders because it was requested by the community members “The Registered Transgenders Association approached the Tamil Nadu government for the SRS procedure in aravanis. A meeting was held with all the Officials and Heads of institutions and the surgical procedures were started after proper physical, legal and psychological examination.” (Refer Appendix 6). As per the RTI reply till May 21, 2012, nearly 120 aravanis/ MtF transgenders have undergone free SRS in the Government General Hospital (GH) in Chennai.

Free SRS scheme for transgenders in the GH in Chennai, Tamil Nadu is considered a major achievement for access to transgender health care services especially related to sex change surgery. According to Dr. Jayaraman\(^\text{57}\), MtF transgenders are provided free SRS only after undergoing a proper physical and psychological test and a recommendation from the members of the Transgender Welfare Board members. There is a District Level Screening Committee that examines the health and psychological aspects of the transgenders and certifies them as transgenders. Free SRS is provided to only these certified transgenders.

Free SRS scheme attracts many hijras, aravanis, and MtF transgenders not only from within Tamil Nadu but also from other South Indian states to avail the scheme. However free SRS scheme is open only for transgenders of Tamil Nadu domicile.

\(^{57}\) Interview with Dr. Jayaraman on September 10, 2010 in Chennai.

\(^{58}\) Telephonic interview with Dr. Rakesh on December 8, 2010.
There is a proper process of providing free SRS in the GH in Chennai. The process includes registration of transgender names in the GH, a physical and psychological examination which includes full examination of the body including the genitals and tests like STIs and HIV, psychological examination is done by the psychiatrist at the GH, after complete physical and psychological examination of transgender patient, approval is taken from a team of gynecologists, psychiatrist and the plastic surgeon. A recommendation is also taken from a group of transgender activists (a team of two-three aravani transgender members certify that the aravani patient has an association with the hijra, aravani, transgender community and has been living in female attire for the past XYZ number of years) for the surgery, fixing an appointment for the surgery, post surgery a certificate is issued giving details about the SRS the transgender has undergone.

According to Dr. Jayaraman, during psychological examination transgender patients expressed their desire to become a woman and only wanted to construct a vagina. Transgender patients did not express their desire to have sex with a man. Having sex with a man was not the primary agenda of transgender patients. What transgenders stressed during the examination was that they had a discomfort with their anatomic sex and wanted to live as a woman. In the words of Dr. Jayaraman “Almost 90 per cent of them don’t want a vagina…. When we did the psychological exam and the psychiatric examination all these questions were asked and they said they don’t want to have any sex.”

Moreover feminizing hormone therapy is not compulsorily recommended before or after the surgery. Many primary respondents shared that they use oral contraceptive pills, abortion injections etc. for breast development (many times without consulting doctors/ endocrinologists). These birth control medicines are easily available over the pharmacists counter without any prescription. Transgenders are not aware of proper feminizing hormone therapy such as estrogen and anti-androgen management. They have a notion that contraceptive pills and abortion injections will increase their breasts size and make them more feminine.

All free SRS cost in GH is covered by the government. Transsexual patient is kept in the hospital for 10 days to two weeks. The GH also provides treatment for breast augmentation. However silicone breast implants costs are not borne by the government. Transgender patients purchase silicone implants from outside with proper prescription from the GH, and only breast augmentation surgery cost is covered by the GH. Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS) has not been preformed so far on any transgender/ transsexual patient.
The free SRS scheme in Tamil Nadu is considered a much safer procedure as compared to the crude castration/emasculcation process performed by quacks or Daima (older hijra/aravani). By undergoing SRS in the GH aravanis can seek health care professionals’ opinion and help and also visit the GH after post surgery follow-up.

Thus the state constructs a female body through medical intervention. However what brings the free SRS in Tamil Nadu into discussion is the medicalization dimension attached with it. According to APA and WHO transsexualism is a mental disorder (Winters 2008; Gooren 2011). The term Gender Identity Disorder (GID)59 is used by WHO (1992) and APA (2000) to deal with transsexuals who desire to seek medical intervention for sex change.

In many western countries transgenders and transsexuals are expected to fit under the sex/gender binaries after their gender transition (Hammarberg 2009). There are also issues related to change of name and sex on various documents and credentials. Moreover gender transition, change of name and sex, and availing SRS is rigid in many countries across the globe. For e.g. in Sweden, transgenders were forced to undergo sterilization in order to update their sex identification on legal documents, undergo SRS etc. (Ford 2013). However according to a recent court judgment, forced sterilization is not applied anymore in Sweden. Such examples demonstrate the rigid procedure transgenders have to pass through in their both pre and post gender transition and SRS stage.

The state of Tamil Nadu remains an exception in these lengthy legal and medical procedures. First of all there is no forced sterilization, secondly the image if hijra is embedded in religious-cultural background because of which there is an understanding that there are bodies outside the fixed sex/gender binary, and thirdly the state considers transgender community as its subjects who approached demanding various welfare schemes.

However Govindan and Vasudevan (2011: 100) critique the inability of Tamil Nadu state government to define transgender sex/gender. Various trans(gender) identities such as eunuch (E), transgender (T), female (F), aravani etc. were visible on various documents issued to transgenders. A MtF (transgender) person in Tamil Nadu can be male, female, or transgender on legal documents.

59 It is proposed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fifth edition (DSM-5) to replace the term Gender Identity Disorder with gender dysphoria (World Professional Association for Transgender Health [WPATH] 2011: 69).
There is lack of clarity of transgender sex/ gender at the bureaucratic level and it is clearly visible on various documents issued to transgenders in Tamil Nadu. There is no uniformity in giving a proper sex/ gender identity definition to transgenders in Tamil Nadu. Complete SRS does not have an effect on sex/ gender definitions of MtF transsexuals. Dr. Jayaraman comments:

After surgery they are given the certificate that they are been operated they were earlier like this they are called after the surgery like this physically a female. […] Originally they are called by this name and they are being converted into male-to-female and now they are being called by this name.

Much of MtF transgender identity within an Indian context comes from the religious-cultural hijra background. There is acceptance of bodies outside the sex/ gender binary. These bodies are a part of the mythological discourse and enjoy a legitimate space within the larger society (for e.g. entertainers, beggars etc.) in many Western-and-North Indian states.

Prof. Sita narrates experiences of her theatre play ‘Paniti’. She mentions existence of FtM within the mythological background:

Shikhandi kills Bhisma in the battlefield, Bhisma is not dead he is in the bed of arrows and at that time he says these arrows are Arjun’s and not Shikhandi’s. The story begins with that and it talks about how Shikhandi has put in so much work to reach wherever he is and starts sharing the story about abduction of Amba and how they were forcefully asked to be married to Bhisma’s brother…. When Amba exchange the body of Shikhandi how she had to learn the warfare and with great difficulty to be a man. In a way it is the first FtM story. Amba is born a woman and there is the line in Mahabharata where Amba does the penance and she curse Ganga (Bhisma’s mother), that half of you will be reborn as a woman who will become a man at some point and half of you will become a wild river…. But the other half is born as a woman who will become a man but still live with a woman’s heart. Either you can read it as a MtF or during Shikhandi’s period it is a kothi’s (effeminate male) life. He lives the life of a man with a female heart. So it is a real mixture of lot of challenges both in terms of gender and sexuality.

Description of bodies outside the sex/ gender binary in India within the religious-cultural discourse gives an opportunity to highlight the non-sex/ non-gender existence of bodies. Though colonization in India had put restrictions on hijra bodies because of their otherness (discussed in Chapter 1), within the Human Rights framework (UN 2011a, 2011b) bodies have right to express their gender identity and freedom for their choice of sexual orientation (An Activist’s Guide to The Yogyakarta Principles 2010). LGBT rights from a Human Rights perspective is an emerging area of discussion and hence gender identity and sexuality issues cannot be ignored because of their otherness or non-heteronormative nature.

Within the Tamil Nadu context, the state is unable to arrive at proper transgender sex/ gender definition. It also does not thrust binaries on transgender bodies. Sex/ gender status of
transgenders in Tamil Nadu is ambiguous. According to primary respondents, the state has not disrupted the ‘otherness’ or ‘third gender’ identity. However from a sex/ gender binary perspective it is important to discuss state’s perspective towards transgender bodies.

According to Ms. Sheela, the state does not thrust a particular sex/ gender binary on aravani people and also has not placed them under a particular or either binary. The state has given liberty to transgenders to choose their sex (for e.g. the option to select male/ female on the voter id). Also non-sex/ non-gender binary terms such as aravani and transgender appear on the G.O.s. In her words “The state understands that aravani people are transgender people. The state does not look at differences. They put all aravani under the transgender term. In the identity card it is mentioned as aravani, they have given us the liberty to use female in the voting card.”

Even Mr. Senthil shares that issues related to transgender sex/ gender were raised by members in the Transgender Welfare Board meetings:

That has even come out in the Board. They want to put it as T i.e. transgender. There are some people who say T and some want to be recognized as a female. So there is Male, Female and T. It is up to the community to decide what they want.

While according to Mr. Gurumurthy the state is giving what is demanded by community members “They are not clear about this. They just want to help people and whatever they are asking they are giving them. They don’t want to understand it. Their only task is to do welfare for people from the minority community.”

Non-sex/ non-gender terms on G.O.s and on various legal documents in Tamil Nadu, fall outside the definition of sex and gender binaries. However it is unsolved whether the state views transgender identity as a challenge to the sex/ gender binaries. For e.g. Ms. Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, Member of Parliament (MP) during a newspaper interview mentioned “This is probably the first instance where a third gender category was created for giving admission to transgenders in government colleges.” (The Hindu 2008), highlight that the ‘otherness’ or ‘thirdness’ is acceptable by the state. In spite of this otherness and thirdness the state addresses transgender issues and considers it as one of its subject.

The term aravani is also used on government official documents. Some aravanis have managed to legally change their name in the Tamil Nadu Government Gazette. For e.g. the

change of name appeared on the gazette paper as “I, Aravani, daughter of Thiru Pitchai Manickam, born on 14th December 1983 (native district: Kanyakumari), residing at No. 13/54, Devaraj Nagar, Selaiyur Post, Chennai-600 104, shall henceforth be known as M. VANI.” (Tamil Nadu Government Gazette 2011: 188) (refer Appendix 8). The other sex/gender categories found on the gazette document were son, daughter, wife etc. However in the case mentioned here, ‘aravani’ was the sex/gender marked in the document and it gets legally and officially recognized and accepted as a ‘third gender’ category in a government official document (which falls outside the sex/gender binary definition).

Thus it can be asserted that gender identities outside sex/gender binary assimilate in our society because of their religious-cultural background and also when they are previewed within the context of state-subject-citizen context. It does not create sex/gender hegemony by itself. Thus transgender citizenship in Tamil Nadu is non-gendered. There are options available to chose the sex (e.g. voting card and passport) and also there are various documents which use non-gender/non-sex terms (ration card, transgender ID etc.). This can be an unsolved temporary situation as the government does not discuss anything related to transgender sex/gender definition. However such non-genderization model of citizenship reduces stigma and discrimination attached with trans(gender) identities.

Traditionally citizenship is heteronormative with a male as head of the household (Johnson 2002). In the case of aravanis and MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu, the state forms a (non) heteronormative citizenship model by introducing non-sex/non-gender terms in the G.O.s, government official documents, various documents issued to transgenders, and also while publicly addressing the transgender population.

Though fundamental rights cannot be denied to transgenders because of their otherness, transgender bodies are in question while participating in political process like contesting in election. In this case the biological male body of the transgender is in question with the gender identity ‘woman’. For e.g. when Kamla Jaan was elected as the first eunuch mayor of Katni, Madhya Pradesh in the year 2000 and she gave up her post in 2003, the main reason highlighted by the opposition was that she lied about her gender. Though previously hijras have contested and won elections in few north India states, it was their gender that was always questioned. Those contested in elections in the woman category were turned down on the basis that they were not biological females. As Suresh (2011: 379) highlights “The argument was that Kamla was a hijra, i.e., only a ‘castrated man’ and therefore not legally a woman”.

65
Leading transgender activists in Tamil Nadu have plans to contest in elections and they approach various political parties to get a ticket in the party (Menon 2011). Also many *aravanis* and MtF transgenders are members in political parties. Political parties like the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Vidulagai Chiltaigal have given membership to *aravanis* and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals. *Aravanis* and MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu have the liberty to join political party of their choice and there is no restriction on joining any political party.

The political parties do not have any specific transgender agenda. Leading transgender activists in Tamil Nadu interact with leaders of political parties and request inclusion of transgender issues in election manifesto. Like in the words of Ms. Nikhila “Even the new political parties are seeking the support of transsexuals by including them in the parties and by having transgender rights as part of their political agenda.”

### 3.5. Conclusion

Discussion in this chapter commenced with understanding transgenders situation within their family and their non-acceptance by biological parents and family members. In the absence of family support and non-acceptance, transgenders leave or run away from their family and join the *hijra* / *aravani* community, or live alone for gender transition. Some migrate or some are trafficked to the Western-and-North Indian states.

While away from their biological family, within the mainstream society, they face violence and harassment mainly from police and hoodlums/ extortionists, and are discriminated. Their rights are violated. Mainstream NGOs in Tamil Nadu have played a vital role by recruiting transgenders as staff to reach the inaccessible transgender population. Not only that, HIV/ AIDS programme events such as beauty contest by these mainstream NGOs during the Koovagam festival became a platform for raising transgender rights issues.

The efforts of individual transgender activists for addressing transgender rights issues through activism and various collectives are appreciateable. Various groups exist in the form of transgender CBOs, various autonomous groups (registered and non-registered), *sangams*, and federations. All have contributed towards transgender welfare and development in Tamil Nadu.
With the support and cooperation from various actors/ stakeholders (non-transgender advocates), transgenders have collectively raised their issues. Transgender activism is also on rise and is gaining momentum.

Transgender activism and collectivization has some features of a movement. However there is no central ideology within the emerging transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. Transgender rights are the guiding principles for community mobilization. Issues are addressed as and when they arise.

The state through its response to transgender voices has introduced transgender welfare reforms and has implemented various transgender welfare schemes across Tamil Nadu. However they are not absolute. Welfare schemes introduced by the state government fall in line with fundamental rights granted in the constitution. As citizens of India, transgenders cannot be refused fundamental rights. Initiative such as Right to Vote given to aravanis, and the freedom to choose male/ female sex on the voter id exhibit that when challenged the state too respects fundamental rights of a citizen.