CHAPTER 4: ARAVANI MOVEMENT, JAMAAT, AND THE STATE

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I discuss response of state/ nature of the state, and issues related to parallel existence of the aravani jamaat alongside the state’s welfare reforms. The increasing control of state over transgenders within the state-citizen framework, and decreasing of control of aravani jamaat over its members are also explained.

Furthermore issues related to leadership within aravani jamaat and its effect on membership within the transgender movement is highlighted. Liberal perspective of movement members towards transgender emancipation is also explained through examples of two federations viz: Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation; Challenge Federation.

4.2. Response of State/ Nature of the State

When THAA submitted memorandum demanding various transgender welfare schemes, DMK was the ruling party.61 The daughter of then Chief Minister (CM) Ms. Kanimozhi Karunanidhi played an important role in supporting transgender issues within the party and she openly advocated for transgender welfare in Tamil Nadu.62 Though all queries of transgenders were not accepted the state initiated few welfare schemes.

During a newspaper interview held at a transgender CBO meeting, Ms. Kanimozhi expressed her support to the transgender community and highlighted that transgenders should raise their voices for development. In her words “But the transgenders are deprived of housing and are shunned by the society. The country is known for family values but I doubt the same when I look at the condition of the transgenders…. your voice should echo in all fronts.” (The Hindu 2008). Ms. K.M. Ramathal, Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women was also present during the meeting.

State officials (mainly women) supported transgender welfare issues and played an important role in promoting transgender agenda. Ms. Sheela appreciates the support of a woman MP and many other cisgender women for supporting transgender cause. In her words “The CM’s

61 Interview with Mr. Prakash Raj.
62 Telephonic interview with Dr. Rakesh on December 8, 2010.
daughter Ms. Kanimozhi is also actively involved, former Women’s Commission Commissioner Ms. Ramathal is also involved…. Like that many women were involved in the entire process.”

The state in the past has responded to various movements led by marginalized population. Various welfare reforms had been introduced and implemented in the state of Tamil Nadu. Mr. Senthil highlights the response of DMK towards other marginalized population in Tamil Nadu:

Government realized that the time had come and there was lot of pressure on the government to recognize. The present government is sensitive towards the issues of marginalized community and they are addressing each and every group ranging from auto drivers, taxi drivers, barbers, Scheduled Caste (SC) and many other groups…. They openly acknowledged that there is a community need to be addressed. [...] Women Commission Chairperson took a lot of lead in this and acted as a liaising person for the community and government agency and she played a vital role in sensitizing the government and facilitated some form of stage to recognize the issue of transgender people. The Chairperson name is Ms. Ramathal.

Though the credit goes to DMK for transgender welfare reforms, ADMK was the ruling party in Tamil Nadu when the first theatre play of Sudar Foundation was launched. THAA submitted a memorandum during the DMKs rule. The seeds of transgender activism were sown much earlier, however the results were visible after some time. In the words of Prof. Sita:

It was because within both the parties ADMK or the DMK or the Dalit parties they were all very open to transgender issues. So it was in a way because of the Dravidian movement legacy…. I think Ms. Kanimozhi certainly has a very good role to play. She was always supportive and was involved in many activities. She took lead in many things.

It is still a question whether the transgender population is considered a vote bank in Tamil Nadu. According to the district wise state level transgender population count in the year 2009, there are only 2663 transgenders in Tamil Nadu. It is a very small number of people from a particular community and political parties look for large number of population as their vote banks. In the words of Ms. Shaheen “We are a minority group. Political party will recognize only the crowd, or if you have a propagating capability. It depends on both. So you have to be an actor or actress. Then only you can propagate people.”

Similarly V. Geetha too in a newspaper interview commented that the small number of transgender population might not be considered a vote bank, but since the Dravidian movement, Periyar movement advocated for women’s issue in Tamil Nadu, it was the right
place for emergence of transgender activism and hence she placed transgender activism within the context of social movement (Sitapati 2002).

4.2.1. Periyar ideology.

The state of Tamil Nadu has a history of various movements such as the non-Brahmin, dalit, tribal (adivasi), and women’s movement (Pillai 1982; Pandian 2000; George 2002, 2003). The state of Tamil Nadu has responded to these movements and has introduced and implemented various welfare reforms for these groups.

Widlund (1993) mentions that social and political conflict was central to non-Brahmin movement which largely abolished the Indian Vedic theory of four castes. Periyar the founder of Dravidian Movement (also known as Dravida Kazhagam [DK]) was against Brahmans and rejected religious ideologies. He was against Aryans/ North India and advocated for creation of a separate Dravidian state free from Brahman domination. The Dravidian movement expressed opposition to British rule. It followed the concept of Tamil nationality/ Tamilness.

Periyar highly advocated for women’s equality by promoting their education, paid work, widow remarriage, divorce, abortion, equal rights, argued against caste-based arranged marriages, and women’s control over reproductive process (George 2003; Dhara 2006). He also advocated abolishing age old traditional practices especially pertaining to women which was a result of colonial oppression, Brahmin and Hindu dominance, religious, caste and linguistic difference (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993a; Geetha 1998).

Parties such as DMK and the ADMK are followers of Periyar teaching (Pillai 1982; Dhara 2006). According to Ms. Sheela, some political parties follow Periyar’s teaching of inclusion and welfare for marginalized and vulnerable population within the government schemes. In her words:

We follow the teachings of Periyar and many are his followers, they also follow Anna. During Periyar and Anna period many things happened for e.g. response to widows, scheme for aged people, free food for children in schools. So that is why we are able to do everything smoothly in Tamil Nadu.

Similarly many respondents during the interview mentioned the Periyar-DMK link. According to them the liberal ideology of Periyar towards marginalized population and especially towards women is an important factor for response of the state to transgender
collectives. In the words of Ms. Shilpa “If you take Tamil Nadu state we have a great history of movements, Periyar movement, anti-Brahmin movement and all that. […] The ruling party is follower of the teachings of Periyar, Anna etc. They had a very forward thinking like widow marriage, against child marriage etc.”

Periyar was against many traditional and cultural values that led to women’s oppression. Periyar strongly ridiculed the notion of women to be ‘chaste’ and condemned the ideas of portraying women as ‘fragile’ and ‘gentle’. He encouraged women to defend themselves against their husbands by using broomsticks. Moreover the Self-Respect movement initiated by Periyar organized Self-Respect marriages in which rituals and symbols of women’s enslavement to men like wearing the mangalsutra (a yellow colored thread worn by married woman) was also rejected (Dhara 2006). Periyar’s anti-traditional and anti-cultural ideology enhanced women’s freedom and empowerment.

Though DMK is follower of Periyar’s teachings, Widlund (1993) throws light on the formation of DMK by Annadurai. Annadurai was with the DK and after his split from the DK he formed his own party DMK in the year 1949. The DMK had goals and principles similar to the DK. The concept of manaam (honour) was central to DMK’s political discourse. The concept of Tamil vs. Hindi was also one of the most important agenda of the DMK. Hindi was replaced with English language. After Annadurai’s death, Mr. Karunanidhi became DMK’s leader and since then he has been the party’s supremo (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993b).

DMK’s ideologies such as anti-North India, anti-Hindi, anti-traditional and cultural values etc. too reflect in the case of transgender emancipation in Tamil Nadu. It is no surprise why traditional-cultural hijra jamaat norms and values which is largely dominant in the Western-and-North Indian states did not penetrate deep within the lives of the aravani population in Tamil Nadu.

The aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu follows traditional and cultural values which are highly derived from their counterparts from the Western-and-North Indian states. The jamaat puts restrictions on its members and it leads to oppression. However liberal transgender activists in Tamil Nadu do not give importance to traditional jamaat practices.

Also the welfare schemes introduced by the state for transgenders in Tamil Nadu do not give importance to aravani jamaat practices. Contrary it gives an opportunity to transgenders to blend into the mainstream society by adapting the state’s welfare schemes and exercise
fundamental rights granted to Indian citizens. Older jamaat members including nayaks utilize state’s welfare schemes. Thus the state exists as a service provider and the aravani jamaat remains service utilizers.

Other than the state-citizenship relation, respondents are also of the view that the state is sensitive to people from minority and marginalized communities. In the words of Mr. Gurumurthy:

I think the present government is sensitive to the people who are unable to access, it is not only with transgenders, even in this case also, it is a minority thing they have been working with and more than that, some of the key leaders of transgender people have gone to the government, to the important officials and spoken about their needs and they have found a strategy to speak and got them to this agenda.

According to transgender respondents the state is sensitive towards transgender issues in Tamil Nadu and the state has had a very good response to the transgender movement. Terms such as ‘good’, ‘soft’, and ‘positive’ were used by many primary respondents to explain the response/ approach of the state towards transgender issues. Few quotes are given below:

Ms. Nikhila “The State’s approach is soft and positive.”

Ms. Ramya “The Tamil Nadu government is having a soft motherly care attitude towards the community.”

Ms. Sumitra63 “The state’s approach towards the movement has been very positive.”

Ms. Sheela “They are very soft.”

Ms. Renuka64 “Yes they have a very soft approach.”

Ms. Gayatri “The government has a very soft approach towards aravani movement.”

Ms. Rosemary “The government has a very soft approach towards transgender movement.”

Ms. Madhu “The response is very good.”

Ms. Reshma “The government is very good.”

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63 Interview with Ms. Sumitra on November 17, 2010 in Chennai.
64 Interview with Ms. Renuka on November 25, 2010 in Madurai town.
Ms. Jaya\textsuperscript{65} said, “The government has a very good response to the movement.”

A ‘soft state’ (or ‘weak state’) is always seen in contrast to a ‘hard state’ (or ‘strong state’) (Waylen 1996; Naidoo 2001; Fakir 2007). Economic stability and social development are the two main agendas of a hard state. A ‘hard’ or ‘strong’ state is also known as a ‘developmental state’. Developmental states strive to remove poverty, oppression, social deprivation etc.

However a soft state is critiqued for not having the administrative capacity and economic resources to address its various developmental agenda. The concept of soft state is used to analyze poverty within a state. A soft state is also one which is ineffective in implementing its legal systems.

The state of Tamil Nadu is appreciated for taking progressive steps to solve transgender issues. However the softness of the state does not lay in its developmental agenda, but its consideration that fundamental rights cannot be denied to \textit{aravani} citizens only because of their ambiguous sex/gender. Thus in the case of transgenders in Tamil Nadu the state through transgender welfare reforms address social, economic, political, and health issues of the transgender population.

Though initially there was no specific agenda for transgender welfare reforms in Tamil Nadu, the state has played an important role in reducing stigma and discrimination attached with trans(gender) identities from a Human Rights perspective and within the state-citizen framework. However in terms of transgender welfare and development the state of Tamil Nadu is turned out to be a ‘strong state’ in the sense that it has a developmental agenda for transgender population.

It is the softness of the state towards transgender issues that make transgenders at the grassroots level to place the state within the ‘soft’ category. However when complex transgender issues will be raised in the future, then it will enhance further discussion on the soft/hard nature of the state.

\textsuperscript{65} Interview with Ms. Jaya on November 24, 2010 in Salem town.
Thus the role/ nature of the state is largely derived from ideologies that abolished the British rule, Aryanism (especially North Indian practices), caste system, non-use of Hindi language, denouncement of traditional-cultural practices, sense of Tamilness, honour etc.

As of now the non-heteronormative citizenship model for transgenders in Tamil Nadu is unique and can be adapted by other states in India and also by various other countries across the globe to solve trans(gender) identities crisis and issues related to transgender sex/ gender definitions.

Some of the Western-and-North Indian states also have a history of various liberal movements such as Dalit Buddhist Movement supported by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Satya Shodhak Samaj (society of seekers of truth) movement founded by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra supported by various social reformers, saint-poets etc. These movements advocated for upliftment of dalits, women, people from lower caste, and the downtrodden population. Various issues such as prevention of exploitation mainly by upper caste Brahmans, abolishing the practice of sati, female infanticide, revolt against caste system, education of women from lower caste, emancipation of women etc. was addressed by these movements (Ragi and Bammanand 2011).

Though some of the Western-and-North Indian states have liberatory movements which had ideologies somewhat similar to Periyar, hijra situation in these states has not changed as compared to their counterparts in Tamil Nadu. One of the major reasons is existence of a strong jamaat system, which is a closed community. There are fewer opportunities for legal intervention as much of the hijra community affairs are handled by jamaat leaders within the jamaat. Secondly outside the jamaat, there is stigma and discrimination, and transgenders are not easily accepted a part of the mainstream society. They are unable to blend into the mainstream society for various reasons ranging from ambiguous sex/ gender status, transphobia, lack of documents/ credentials in the preferred gender, lack of knowledge about transgender among gender public etc.

If any hijra is outcasted from the jamaat in the Western-and-North Indian states, it is not easy for her to lead a normal and mainstream life. However this situation is not similar in Tamil Nadu. Transgenders in Tamil Nadu have better choices outside the jamaat setting. Issues related to the Western-and-North Indian states and the aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu is discussed in the next section.
4.3. Leadership vis-à-vis Aravani Jamaat

Movements are launched and led by a leader (Singh 2000) and leaderships play an important role within a movement (Shah 2002, 2004). There are leadership issues within various transgender collectives in Tamil Nadu too.

Traditionally within the hijra jamaat in the Western-and-North Indian states (and the aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu), the nayak is head of gharana/s who leads the community members. The hijra jamaat in the Western-and-North Indian states is a top-down power-control hierarchical structure, while the aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu, a mirror image of the hijra jamaat system, lacks power-control hierarchy. Though there is a jamaat system in Tamil Nadu, it is not effective as compared to its counterparts in the Western-and-North Indian states.

In the words of Ms. Asha 66 “There is no jamaat system in Chennai. Aravanis lead free life, there is no strict community rules in Chennai. Gurus also don’t have control over their chelas.”

Aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu does not have direct and stricter control over its community members. Aravani jamaat norms are not stringent in Tamil Nadu and gurus do not have direct control over their chelas. This gives an opportunity to community members to lead an individual and independent life.

Traditionally, control of chelas within the hijra jamaat system has an economic dimension. Transaction of money between the guru-chela (which is mostly from chela to her guru) is an important economic feature of the hijra jamaat system. The tradition of chelas giving their full or partial earnings to their gurus within the hijra jamaat is an age old tradition. This kind of gurukul system within the hijra jamaat system is an institutionalized structure where power-money-control is a predominant feature.

The jamaat mimics a family system which provides social security to its members. Within the jamaat members feel secure. In the absence of proper support from general public and the state in the Western-and-North Indian states, jamaat members support each other through their hierarchical structure (mainly guru-chela relation) and through the economic flow

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66 Telephonic interview with Ms. Asha on November 28, 2010.
mainly from *chelas* to their gurus and to other older *jamaat* members. Younger members contribute to the economy of the house.

Sen (1987) uses the concept of ‘cooperative conflict’ to explain the concept of financial dependency of women within the family and also their economic contribution if they work outside. Traditionally women are expected to do household work (division of work), but those who work outside and bring economy to the family are in a better bargaining position within the family as they contribute to the family’s income. Though there is conflict, there is also cooperation as both men and women live under the same roof. Women’s economic contribution within her family increases her bargaining power.

Agarwal (2008: 159) cites Amartya Sen\(^{67}\) and explains family ‘… as a bargaining unit in which interactions between family members are characterized by both cooperation and conflict.’ Based on the person’s contribution to the family a woman has bargaining power and it reflects gender relations/ inequality within the family. The family is not only a unity of cooperation and conflict, but also of sharing and selfishness.

This is one of the major distinctions between the Western-and-North Indian and Tamil Nadu *jamaat* system. Outer support mainly from the state in the form of various welfare schemes results in mainstreaming of transgender population within the larger society. As a result there is no dependency on the *jamaat*. *Chelas* thus get an opportunity to lead an individual life.

*Aravanis* in Tamil Nadu do not compulsorily share their earnings with their guru. *Aravanis* have a right to say ‘no’ when it comes to sharing of income, and especially when the earning is not earned from the traditional occupation such as begging and dancing.

The *jamaat* is not only a power-control structure but is also a safe haven for community members. Members feel secure within the community system. It is a familial structure which also has emotional bonding that transgenders require when they are out of their biological family. The *nayak* is head of *gharana*s and various kinship bonding exist within the *jamaat* system which is non-heteronormative (Reddy 2006). For e.g. relations like guru-bhai (*chela* of same guru or in other words brother), *dudh beti* (milk daughter), and *dudh behan* (milk sister). *Hijras* have daughters and sisters within the community who are also *hijras*. The process of becoming a *chela* and becoming *beti* and *behan* is different. Masculine relationships are not followed within the community. There are grandmothers, mothers,
sisters, niece, granddaughter etc. within the hijra community. All these relationships are based on the pyar ke riste i.e. relationships of love. Much of these relations are based on rituals within the hijra jamaat which is non-heteronormative kinship (Reddy ibid.).

Kinship ties among aravanis are not strong in Tamil Nadu. Though there are community rituals and there is bonding among jamaat members, there is no strong jamaat that keeps them tied within a closed community structure.

In the absence of a strong jamaat system and lack of control over its members, aravanis and MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu have had organized themselves and have raised their voices for transgender rights through various collectives. In the absence of jamaat control, aravani and MtF transgender activists collectively with the support of various actors/stakeholders (in this case non-transgender advocates), are able to raise transgender rights issues and demand various welfare schemes from the state government to lead an independent and individualistic life.

In the absence of power-control, domination is less or reduced by the traditional jamaat system. Transgender welfare and development in Tamil Nadu reflect a model in which hierarchical, and fixed power relationships are reduced and are also brought under control by the state’s intervention through various welfare reforms. Under the state’s rule community members irrespective of their identity/identities, culture, background etc. are its subjects and they adhere to state’s welfare reforms.

Many older aravani jamaat leaders in Tamil Nadu have lived in the Western-and-North Indian states for some time in their lives. They migrated back to their native place and stayed back. They brought with them the hijra culture and their experiences of the hijra jamaat system. However at present many aravanis do not migrate to other states for gender transition due to which there is decrease in transgender trafficking cases and exploitation of transgender rights within the aravani jamaat system in Tamil Nadu.

Ms. Kanamma from Tiruchirappalli is a typical example who lived and earned in Mumbai. She came back to her native and at present she is nayak of the aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu. Furthermore she spearheads a CBO, and is actively engaged in transgender activism. One more interesting observation about Ms. Kanamma is that she was married to a cisgender man.

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68 Interview with Ms. Kanamma and my own experiences of working in her CBO in Tiruchirappalli.
(now she is a widow, her husband passed away a couple of years ago), and had adopted kids and lived with her husband just like any other family within the mainstream society.

Older *jamaat* leaders try to make their presence felt both in the *jamaat* and also during various events of the movement and try to dominate movement members because of their supremacy. However *jamaat* leaders are aware that they cannot control their *chelas* as they can easily approach the police or take their biological family’s support to take legal action. Nevertheless older gurus try to claim seniority. Ms. Sumitra narrates one such example:

There is always a fight between elderly *aravanis* and young *aravanis*. The *jamaat* has been and is a very positive family system that prevails but at the same time there are old people who want to stick to the old *jamaat* rules, who are not allowing transgenders to be in the mainstream society, who also force transgenders to go for begging and sex work. This is one major problem in the transgender community. I think whoever comes forward to work on transgender issue is a leader.

There is no consensus within the transgender movement to elect/ select a leader regardless of the dominant nature of *aravani jamaat* leaders and their preference for leadership within the transgender movement. There is no single leader leading the transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. There is no role model leader. Generally the image of a leader is to lead the followers and set a role model through selfless work. Prof. Sita shares her insights on leadership within the transgender movement:

Sure there are leadership politics within the transgender movement…. I keep telling people that there is nothing like a born leader, the leader has to learn. […] I don’t want to call them leaders, they are activists. […] I am yet to find a charismatic leader from the movement. […] You need something more to become a public leader, especially for the movement, it is a very demanding kind of thing and you need passion, commitment and dedicated effort, you can be selfish, but that selfishness should be about getting things for everyone. Not about getting things for oneself…. There are four people here and there are 40 divisions among them. Even in the women’s movement there are lots of splits. I see it as a positive thing because there is no one over-arching leadership. There are different people who have differences of opinion they voice it, but they do something. And when you do something you respect that. I may not agree with it completely but I may respect that. That is what one should expect in the transgender movement.

Ms. Gayatri too comments that it is difficult to make older *aravanis* understand the importance of welfare and development as their mindset still lingers within the *aravani* subculture. Because of this attitude of senior *jamaat* members she leads her CBO without making much publicity of her work and tries to maintain the balance between the *jamaat* and her organization:

*Jamaat* leaders do not accept few issues. The say that they are senior and everybody should listen to them. According to nayaks, what they say is a rule. Leadership problem is with them. Through Transgender Welfare Board some activity is happening and hence they are listening to me now. That is why I do not publicize my work within the *jamaat* setting. I silently lead the organization. Older *jamaat* leaders still have old mindset.
Aravani subculture is deeply rooted in the minds of older aravanis and jamaat leaders. Though the state government has introduced various transgender welfare schemes, and there are various transgender CBOs headed by younger educated transgenders, jamaat leaders try to show their importance.

Older jamaat leaders understand importance of transgender welfare and development if they are well informed and if everything is explained to them properly. Mr. Senthil thinks that older leaders should be explained the importance of community welfare and development. In his words:

Organizational leaders who are leading the team and the jamaat leaders should be briefed on the activities. Even with Female Sex Workers (FSWs) project they are not convinced. FSW says that we are in the field from so many years nobody came and now you are telling us to come and attend meetings. You have some benefits and for that you come and convince us. They are not able to understand why we are trying to do development work. This is the same model of convincing the group leaders. Inspite of looking at them as offenders or someone against your programme, I think you need to convince and bring them into your team so that you can achieve what you want to do.

Though the aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu is a sub-cultural entity, it is not a closed community. Jamaat members are ready to avail government schemes. Aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu does not counter the state’s welfare reforms. It is interesting to see parallel existence of state’s welfare activities and jamaat system in Tamil Nadu. Though the aravani jamaat is in existence, jamaat leaders too adhere to the state’s decision. So far nothing has been challenged by the jamaat. Ms. Kanamma who is a member in the Transgender Welfare Board is also nayak of the aravani jamaat in 30 districts in Tamil Nadu. Her participation in Transgender Welfare Board as one of its member, and her active role in other government activities is an example of a jamaat leader participation without questioning/interference of the state with its welfare activities. Moreover as a jamaat leader representative, she actively gives her suggestions and participates in the Board’s meetings.

Ultimately everything comes down to leadership issue and Ms. Shilpa expresses her views on leaders within the transgender movement “Leadership has to come within the movement. Leader is a person who has a vision to lead the community. It has to come from within the movement.”

Leadership within various transgender collectives has a class-cultural context. There are two groups that exist in Tamil Nadu viz: advantaged group; disadvantaged group (refer Table 3). Transgender groups are usually formed on the basis of shared identity. There are various trans(gender) identities that exists in Tamil Nadu. More discussion on various trans(gender)
identities are discussed in Chapter 5. Trans(gender) identities are broadly classified in the following two categories:

1. *Aravanis*
2. MtF transgenders/ transsexuals (and also those who prefer to be identified as a woman)

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transgender Embodiment</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Class-Culture</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Aravani</em> and MtF transgender/ transsexual</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Liberal, individualistic, and independent (Advantaged group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Aravani</em> and MtF transgender/ transsexual</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td><em>Aravani jamaat</em> affiliation (optional) (Disadvantaged group)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Embodiment is derived from the concept of habitus. Habitus is a lived experience (of the body) which includes intersectionality of class, capital, culture, personal, social and historical trajectories of the body (Thapan 2009: xv, xvii, xx, 8). Thapan (ibid.) mentions that the paradigm of embodiment is central to understand women’s lives as well as of Indian womanhood through their lived experiences. The same is in the case of Transgender Theory which exerts its focus on transgender embodiment through the lived experiences of transgenders/ transsexuals (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010).

In Tamil Nadu, location is classified within two context, urban (city and big towns) and rural (small towns and villages) areas. Class-culture of these two groups are viewed within two contexts, one those who have done schooling/ college, engaged in transgender activism, engaged or not engaged in alternative sources of livelihood e.g. working in NGO or CBO, having Income Generation Programmes (IGPs) etc. have a liberalist, individualistic, and independent perspective towards transgender welfare and development (at some places I refer to this group as advantaged). The second group refers to those who may or may have not done schooling/ college, may have an affiliation with the *aravani jamaat*, may or may not be engaged in traditional *aravani* occupation such as begging and sex work, engaged or not engaged in IGPs or work in NGOs/ CBOs, and may also be engaged in transgender activism (at some places I refer this group as disadvantaged).

In rural areas the *jamaat* is pro-active and in urban areas importance is given to transgender welfare and development. Older *jamaat* leaders (i.e. the disadvantaged groups) mostly from a rural background are aware of transgender activism. They participate in various events, some are engaged in transgender activism, and few have also formed CBOs. They desire leadership
both within the *jamaat* and also within the movement because of their seniority. But younger and educated transgenders (i.e. the advantaged) with a liberal and individualistic thinking make it clear that the *jamaat* and transgender welfare are two different entities. Transgender activism is mostly undertaken by educated transgenders mostly from urban areas (such as city and bigger towns).

*Jamaat* leaders stick to their traditional *jamaat* norms while young educated *aravani* and MtF transgender/ transsexual activists have a liberal attitude and they spearhead various events. *Jamaat* leaders are conservative (though with some liberal thinking) and leading transgender activists from various organizational (CBO) settings, federations, *sangams*, groups etc. have a liberal perspective towards transgender emancipation.

Within the *jamaat* setting a *jamaat* leader will follow sub-cultural practices, however when she is engaged in activism or CBO related work, she does not follow the *jamaat* practices. For e.g. a *jamaat* leader cannot ask for a share in her *chelas* salary who is working in a CBO. The money earned by her *chela* in a CBO does not fall within the traditional occupation such as begging or *badhai*, and hence *jamaat* leaders cannot claim a share in her salary.

Transgender activism in Tamil Nadu thus has a class-cultural context. The advantaged are in a better position to lead various groups as compared to the *jamaat* leaders who rely on these activists to avail government schemes and services.

Class-cultural differences in Tamil Nadu highlight that the *jamaat* as sub-cultural entity exist parallel along with government welfare schemes. Decreasing *jamaat* control over its members, and freedom to raise transgender rights issues by liberal perspective transgenders activists’ demonstrate that transgenders get an opportunity to raise voices collectively for their welfare and development. Community culture and rituals cease their importance as community members climb the class ladder by availing educational schemes, engage in state supported income generation programmes and lead an independent life. Though the process is slow, it has already begun.

Though there are class-cultural issues within various transgender collectives, caste is not an issue within the transgender movement. The *hijra* and *aravani jamaat* is a secular community. Though preference is given to conversion to Islam within the *hijra jamaat* because of *hijras* origin in Hyderabad, it is not mandatory. Members have freedom to follow their birth religion. Similarly there is no discrimination on the basis of caste within the
aravani jamaat. The hijra aravani jamaat is a caste-less community. There is no hierarchy within the aravani jamaat on the basis of caste.

For e.g. Ms. Kanamma has a dalit background and is actively engaged in various dalit movements and federations. She exists as nayak of all districts in Tamil Nadu. Here religion and caste is not a criterion for her selection as a nayak by the community members. Within the aravani jamaat, members do not give importance to caste background.

4.3.1. Aravani jamaat vs. organizational work.

There is also a difference between the jamaat setting and transgenders working in organizations. Within a jamaat setting a guru has control over her chela, but when both guru and chela work in the same organization (NGO/ CBO) they work on equal status. Guru-chela relation is not strictly followed within an organizational or office setting in Tamil Nadu.

Aravani jamaat and organizational (CBO) work are considered two separate entities. However few older aravani jamaat leaders or gurus are keen to retain jamaat norms in the office. They expect younger aravanis to respect them everywhere, but these are not rigid and not rampant. Like in the words of Ms. Sheela “We have a jamaat system here but we do not follow it so strongly like that of Mumbai.”

Ms. Jaya too shares her views on the difference between jamaat and organization and asserts that jamaat rules should be confined only within a jamaat setting. It is a conscious decision taken by those who work in organizations. What is interesting is that the gurus also adhere to this decision:

We have a very strong rule in the office that jamaat rules should not be applied in the office. Inside the office we all are individuals. We don’t follow the mother, daughter or other aravani community relations in the office. We have certain rules in the office. We also do not follow the jamaat hierarchy in the office. We do not include aravani culture in the sangam. We do not mix up issues. So we create awareness not only within the sangam but also within the jamaat that these two issues are separate.

Transgenders in Tamil Nadu clearly distinguish the role of jamaat leaders and their role within the movement and within an organizational setting. Within an organizational (CBO) setting, discussion is basically on transgender welfare and development activities and organization related activities. Aravani jamaat norms are not followed in many transgender CBOs.
Jamaat customs and traditions like saying *paon-padti* (touching the feet) or *Salaam* are also not followed in an office setting. Moreover *aravanis* prefer to greet each other and their elders by saying good morning or by using other English greeting terms in the office. This reflects that *jamaat* cultural practices are not given importance in the office. If the same situation was in the Western-and-North Indian states, then they would be fined, or even verbally assaulted for breaking age-old *jamaat* tradition.

However in Tamil Nadu a guru and *chela* work together in the same organization or work in different organizations. Ms. Sheela gives an example of guru and *chela* working as leaders in different organizations and explains how their guru-*chela* relationship is not affected:

Sangeeta *amma* (name changed) in Villupuram is a very senior aravani and Gayatri (name changed) is her *chela*. Both guru and *chela* work in two different organizations without interfering in each other’s work. There is a guru-*chela* relation here also. There is no *jamaat* problem and we don’t bring that in our work. Here we don’t have to say *paon-padti* when we get up in the morning. But here we are free to do whatever we want. I can write my books, I can make a documentary film and the guru and the *jamaat* cannot put any restrictions on me.

In few organizations a guru works in a junior position under her *chela*. It gives an opportunity to both guru and *chela* to treat each other equally, whereas in the *jamaat* setting a *chela* has to work compulsorily under the instructions of her guru. Not only working equally, but also a guru will work under her *chela* if the *chela* is in a senior position in the organization. It creates a reverse model. One reason could be because the guru is not educated enough to manage organizational activities and in this situation if her educated *chela* heads the organization, then the *chela* is an authoritative situation.

Other than equality, working together with the guru and other elders from the community, transgenders are also of the view that their first preference is to avail a job in the mainstream society, *jamaat* is secondary to them. *Aravanis* are also ready to ignore *jamaat* rituals and practices if they get a job in the mainstream society. As Ms. Latha shared69:

If I get a government job, I’ll go to the work and come back and maintain some distance with community people. No I’ll not follow the *jamaat* rules. The *jamaat* may sometimes call me during my office hours and I can’t leave my job and go there. And also if I get a good name in the office I am working then it will be good name for other *aravanis* also. The government will not listen to me, if I say that my *jamaat* is calling and I have to go. So if such situation arises then we’ll come to the *jamaat* only when we get a holiday or a leave at our workplace. We will delightfully say that we have got a very good government work.

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69 Group discussion held on November 23, 2010 in Vengur, Tiruchirappalli district.
Aravanis clearly make distinction between the functions of jamaat and organizational work. Young aravanis are also counseled by NGO/ CBO staff to live with their family and to not run away and live in the jamaat. Ms. Jaya expresses strongly “I don’t like aravanis going to Mumbai. I wanted them to live here, study and become an aravani. I used to counsel few aravanis, because I did not want them to undergo the hardships that I underwent in the jamaat.”

Transgender activists feel that by doing so, violation of transgender rights and exploitation under a guru is avoided. Many CBOs also counsel biological parents of aravanis to reintegrate them back in their family. This also avoids trafficking.

Non-transgender advocates working with transgenders at the grassroots level too appreciate the differentiation made between jamaat and organizational work. Mr. Balaji too expresses that transgender CBOs have very clearly differentiated between jamaat and their work:

When I started my work 10 years back and now when I see the same aspect I see a difference there. The role of jamaat which was there among the transgender community and its influence on the MSM community was very strong at that time, but now I think people are able to draw a line because the jamaat was a social structure at that time but now they have a different social structure which is a CBO or a sangam that also offers social support. That also offers some sort of social security. There are two structures now. People were mixing jamaat and CBO structure together and now they are able to highlight the difference between both. CBO is a structure where people are equal and it’s a very formal structure. Jamaat is a structure which is very strong and there is hierarchy and those hierarchies come in terms of relationship, familial relationship etc. People are able to differentiate that. And they also strongly feel that these two relationships should not be mixed. When you come to the CBO you should not mix the jamaat relationship with that. Similarly when you come to the jamaat you should not mix the CBO with that. I feel that the jamaat was very strong and enforcing many things on people but now I also see an attitude change in that.

Thus the aravani jamaat, transgender CBOs (and other forms of association) exists as separate entities in Tamil Nadu. Both the aravani jamaat and transgender CBOs exist parallel without interfering in each other’s functions. This is not a common phenomenon in the Western-and-North Indian states and that is what is unique about transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu. Moreover the state plays an important role in mainstreaming transgender population through its welfare reforms.

4.4. Transgender Sexuality: Significant Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Though there is leadership issue and also difference between the aravani jamaat and organizational work in Tamil Nadu, there are also issues related to trans(gender) identities and transgender sexuality within various transgender collectives. There are federations
exclusively for transgenders (with a heteronormative mindset) and those without any *aravani jamaat* affiliation, and there are federations/ *sangams* for mixed groups of transgenders. Two issues arise of these, one is inclusion/ exclusion on the basis of multiple sexualities, and second is inclusion/ exclusion on the basis of *aravani jamaat* affiliation. Transgender sexuality and *aravani jamaat* affiliation are two important criterions for inclusion or exclusion.

Example of two federations in Tamil Nadu to explain the variations in the formation of collectives and mobilization is presented here. One is Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation and second is Challenge Federation.70

Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation is an amalgamation of transgender CBOs from 18 districts in Tamil Nadu. The main objective of Federation is to focus on transgender welfare and development and also to mobilize funds for transgender CBOs. Many transgender HIV/ AIDS based projects/ funding was sanctioned to mainstream NGOs and hence it was decided in a meeting by few transgender activists and heads of various transgender CBOs to form a federation exclusively for transgenders. It was also decided that all the schemes introduced by the state government should be implemented through the Federation.

Ms. Madhu highlights the purpose for forming the Federation among which funding is an important agenda. In her words “Federation includes CBOs from 18 districts. Many mainstream NGOs are working on transgender issues and as a result *aravani* CBOs don’t get that funding. These NGOs employ community people and earn money through the projects. So the community members decided to take our work in our own hands.”

The other focus of Federation was also to address transgender rights, livelihood, education, and access to transgender health care services, job opportunities, and overall transgender development. In the words of Ms. Sumitra “I think the Federation is a group of community based independent private organizations, non-profit organizations which have come together to work on certain goals and aims as a common objective like legal rights, livelihood, education, health care, and job opportunities.”

Transgenders with multiple sexualities and *jamaat* affiliation were not included in the Federation. The Federation is only for transgender CBOs and membership is open only for

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70 Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation discussed during the interview with Ms. Sheela on October 19, 2010 in Chennai. Challenge Foundation discussed during the interview with Ms. Jaya on November 24, 2010 in Salem town.
transgenders with heteronormative sexuality. Transgender-lesbian/ transgender-bisexual, and transgenders affiliated with the *aravani jamaat* are not included in the Federation. Membership is also not open to older *jamaat* leaders who are very pro-*aravani jamaat* system, pro third gender, and also to those who were married (to cisgender women) before their gender transition and have children out of that marriage. Those who have relationship only with cisgender men do not consider those who were married to women and had children in their pre gender transition stage real transgenders. This reflects a heteronormative view towards MtF transgender sexuality.

Within Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation the advantaged groups hold the view that if *jamaat* leaders and supporters of *jamaat* subculture are included in the federation then they will bring in *jamaat*-control politics. Thus the Federation members support transgender groups with liberal perspective who do not subscribe to the *aravani jamaat* and have the notion that MtF transgenders can have relationship only with cisgender men.

Challenge Federation was formed by mainstream NGOs and transgender CBOs working on MSM and transgender issues respectively. Formation of Challenge Federation was facilitated by a Nodal agency ABC (name changed) for their HIV/ AIDS intervention programme and issues around MSM and transgender rights. ABC was actively involved in formation of *sangams* working for transgender and MSM welfare. The activities of Challenge Federation are mainly centered on HIV/ AIDS but issues such as campaign against Section 377, and transgender rights violation are also addressed by these *sangams*. However membership is not open to *jamaat* leaders with pro-*aravani jamaat* culture mindset. Unlike, the Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation, this Federation has mixed group of MSM, *aravanis*, and transgenders with multiple sexualities.

As Challenge Federation was facilitated by non-transgender advocates, it has diversity. They are open to members with multiple transgender sexualities. Transgender groups who support multiple sexualities are not excluded. But just like the Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation, *jamaat* affiliation is not encouraged in Challenge Federation. Thus it is the *aravani jamaat* politics that is purposely avoided in various transgender collectives.

Thus within the Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation, transgender community members themselves have set the criteria for inclusion/ exclusion. Whereas Challenge Federation facilitated by a mainstream Nodal agency assimilate various groups, mainly MSM and transgenders.
Thus federations formed by community members themselves are largely heteronormative without *jamaat* affiliation, and federations formed by community members with the support of mainstream NGOs/ Nodal agencies is non-heteromative. However the *jamaat* system is abolished by both federations.

Examples of Tamil Nadu Transgender Federation and Challenge Federation exhibit existence of various transgender collectives in Tamil Nadu. There is restriction on membership due to which transgenders are literally not made part of the federation. Membership is given/restricted on the basis of sexuality and *aravani jamaat* affiliation.

Inclusion and exclusion of certain members in various transgender collectives on the basis of *aravani jamaat* affiliation and sexuality lead to fragmentation of various groups within the emerging transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. Due to this fragmentation there is no overarching transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. There is unity amidst diversity, which is not of permanent nature. The groups assemble and disperse as and when the issues are addressed. This kind of temporary nature of groups is also a feature of social movement in which members of the groups gather and disperse as the issues are addressed (Mohanty 2004).

### 4.5. Conclusion

The state has played an important role as a service provider by introducing various transgender welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu. Though political parties have Periyar driven ideologies such as anti-religion, anti-caste, anti-traditional and cultural values, anti-North India, anti-Hindi language etc. these ideologies reflect within various transgender welfare reforms which urge the transgender community members to blend into the mainstream society. By utilizing state’s welfare schemes, transgenders lead an individual and liberal life. They have a support system outside the *jamaat* setting. By doing so the traditional-cultural values of the *aravani jamaat* are reduced.

Also the decreasing control of *aravani jamaat* over its members is an important factor that gives an opportunity to community members to reach out to the state without any fear of being outcasted from the *jamaat*. The advantaged groups are in a position to bargain their position as compared to the disadvantaged groups who still rely on NGOs, transgender CBOs, and the advantaged activists to avail various government schemes.

There are three entities in Tamil Nadu, one is the *aravani jamaat* with lesser control over its members, second are various transgender collectives that raise transgender issues collectively,
and third is the state which as a responsible state has introduced various welfare reforms for the marginalized transgender population.

Transgender emancipation in Tamil Nadu explains that the hierarchial Jamaat structure ceases its importance when secular ‘modern’ organizations (NGOs, CBOs etc.) strive for transgender welfare and development. Moreover strong state welfare policies and growing funding for NGO/ CBO among MSM and transgender have played an important role in bringing about these changes.

However the Jamaat and organization are considered two different entities in Tamil Nadu. Transgender sexuality is heteronormative. It forms the basis for inclusion/exclusion of members from various transgender collectives. Multiple transgender sexualities and affiliation with the Jamaat form basis of inclusion/exclusion.

The next chapter highlights some issues related to various trans(gender) identities and multiple transgender sexualities which lead to multiple positionality both within the Aravani Jamaat and mainstream society.